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# Mask Culture

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## Cover Page Footnote

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### ABSTRACT

This paper defines care in a college context as well as discusses the topic of mask usage in the same setting. It addresses how people have adapted to the implementation of masks and how society has changed their daily routines in order to guarantee that their masks were now a part of it. It consists of various feedback from college students surrounding the topic of masks, as well as how they, as individuals, deal with the guidelines executed across the SUNY Geneseo campus. An ethnographic research process was used to understand the usage of masks in today's society and if/how they have been implemented. Through field notes, interviews, and a coding and memoing process, it was found that the usage of masks had shifted people's perceptions of others throughout the year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees expressed that they felt anger and frustration towards those who did not wear a mask in public. It was also found that people did not find the implementation of masks as much of an inconvenience as I expected they would before going into this research process. As well as people realizing that masks were no longer a temporary objective and more of a permanent one. After examination of all the findings, it was concluded that masks have played a vital role in society today, as well as becoming a permanent objective, more importantly throughout people's daily lives.

A year ago, people would hear the word masks and think of superheroes and their colorful disguises or doctors in hospitals wearing their simplistic plain blue masks. It was a time when we never second-guessed the role they played or didn't play throughout society. People wouldn't give them a second thought if they saw a doctor wearing one in their natural setting, but nowadays, we do not give masks a second thought when we see them in public spaces or even classroom settings. Who would have thought that just over a year later, masks would have a completely different, integral, role in society? We as a country have adapted to the use and implementation of masks as a whole. They have become a part of our everyday lives, just like a piece of clothing or even an accessory to make an outfit "complete."

By examining the use of masks in a college setting, we can begin to understand how something as simple as masks plays a vital role in the daily lives of students, both on and off-campus. This specific study can also shed light on how the pandemic has affected the lives of students not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. My research is centered around the evolution of masks and how they began in a medicinal setting

and have now become a crucial staple in our society. I also looked into how people view masks. Do they still see them as an inconvenience or have they adjusted to wearing a mask for over a year now. My questions are evaluating how people have adapted to masks as a way of life but also how they view others' adaptations to masks. Does someone get angry when they see somebody else not wearing a mask? Are they so accustomed to seeing masks, they don't realize when there is not a mask being worn? This is fascinating when it is looked into since a majority of us tend to not think about it in this sense, but just overlook it and move on with our day. However, do people still have a hard time adjusting to masks even though it has been over a year? Is it a habit to grab a mask when going in public or do you still have to remind yourself to reach for that small piece of fabric in its own newly-made space?

During my research, I looked at the term 'care' as an act that someone does for someone else, as well as themselves. Wearing a mask not only benefits you in the long run, but also the people around you whether they are family, friends, or even strangers. I saw care as a means of adapting the newly-introduced lifestyle of incorporating masks into our every move. In terms of mask evolution, I viewed the word 'evolution' as both an adaptation to masks as well as how they have changed from a medicinal use to ways of self-expression. Evolution can be defined as, "…the change in the characteristics of a species over several generations…all species are related and gradually change over time" (Yourgenome, 2017). Regarding this terminology, I do not mean that future generations will be born with masking on their faces or a better filtration system within them, but more so that the younger and future generations will grow up wearing masks during cold/flu seasons or may have to wear them all year round, depending on how they are raised. Evolution in this sense relates to how people have adapted to the mask mandates and having to wear these pieces of fabrics over our noses and mouths in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We as a society have the mutual understanding that you are to leave the house with a mask and not be without one until told otherwise. Although it seemed hard to adjust to in the beginning, we now understand the benefits of the mandates.

Throughout my research, I realized that we have adjusted to the use of masks in ways other than just wearing them. We have given masks a place in our homes that makes them easily accessible when leaving for the public. The term I find best suits this evolutionary change is "cultural invention." According to anthropologist H. G. Barnett (1942), "a significant relation exists between one aspect of the acceptance of newly introduced traits and the phenomenon of invention" (p. 14), ultimately defining the relationship between mask implementation and society's reaction and acceptance of them. Throughout the study, I realized that many of us have some sort of hook device near our main doors that is primarily for our masks (see *Figure 1*). This is so we do not forget them when leaving our houses and can keep them near important exit points that are easily accessible. Obviously, this device was not discussed amongst the people who include them in their homes. However, as a society, we saw that we had to implement masks and decided that this was the best and most functional way of doing so without completely changing our way of life. Some people may have already had these hooks near the door for either a sweatshirt/jacket, or their car keys; this demonstrates "the possibility of utilizing two

different principles, already acting through two different but familiar forms, to achieve the same function" (Barnett, 1942, p. 16). By simply adding a mask to the hook, it completely changes the way that we see masks as a part of our society; this minute action demonstrates that they are now a part of our everyday lives and have become part of our essential daily items such as car keys or a jacket. Someone may have a jacket hanging on that hook to take out with them in case they need it and put it right back when they return home. It is not that it is there to remind us to take it, but instead because we may need it whilst we are out in public, and not while we are in the comfort of our own homes. It is quite similar with masks. We may need the mask while we are out and about in public, but once we return home, we can leave it at that threshold and not have to think about it in the privacy of our homes.
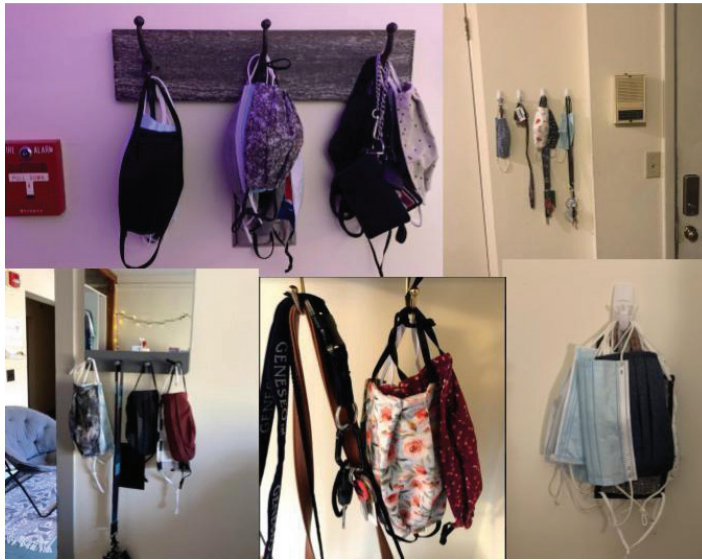


*Figure 1: Masks on hook device for accessibility*

The ethnographic research was conducted within students of the State University of New York at Geneseo (SUNY Geneseo) on and off-campus. SUNY Geneseo is a public liberal arts university with a large on-campus population, as well as students residing off-campus. The surrounding town is a very small, rural area made-up of mostly locals and families. It is not your typical "college town" where there are students everywhere, but during the school year, you are most likely to see students around the main strip and in the locally-owned businesses. Students acquire off-campus jobs in order to have an income while attending school, so it is a great way to interact with the local residents, as well as peers in an off-campus setting. A majority of businesses close to the campus are family-owned, so they were affected greatly when the COVID-19 pandemic began, resulting in some closing down.

The student body has done a great job in upholding the precautions and mandates implemented by the school's officials. A campus-wide mask mandate was announced by President Battles soon after New York's Governor, Andrew Cuomo, announced the mandate for the entire state. This information is easily accessible to students from the SUNY

Geneseo website under the "COVID-19 Information for Students" page. The face mask requirement by the school states, "Masking is still required by all members of the campus community on campus at all other times, including all indoor spaces, even when six-foot spacing exists—unless when alone in their private residential, office, or personal space; eating meals on-campus while seated and physically distant; or by themselves" (SUNY Geneseo, n.d.). This mandate limits the amount of COVID cases across campus, in turn keeping the student body safe and healthy during this pandemic. On top of the face mask precautions, the school also implemented a weekly testing procedure for all students and faculty, whether they are on or off-campus. Once identified, they can keep sick individuals away from healthy individuals and keep the cases to a minimum across campus. Weekly testing also allows for the school officials to minimize the oubreak and identify all those that may have been in contact with the sick individual. I do believe that SUNY Geneseo has done a great job in limiting the spread of the COVID-19 virus, as well as making sure their students and faculty are kept safe and healthy while still being able to enjoy the "college experience" that we all came here to have.

The research methods used throughout this ethnography were very thorough and helpful when understanding the main points of the research itself. We based a lot of our research structure off of anthropologists Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie (2020). Their book laid every detail out step-by-step to encapsulate the importance of each moment of ethnographic fieldwork and research. We were able to understand how each step was to be carried out, but also what can happen when things don't go according to plan. This idea was prominent in chapter four of Blommaert and Jie's (2020) book when they suggest that "chaos is the normal state of things" (p. 25). I took this statement as anticipating that my interviewees and other participants would not be able to give me a multitude of opinions regarding masking due to the pandemic. I was hoping that since it was a new topic in our lifetimes, they would be able to give me a strong opinion when talking about masks. I tried to get various responses to my research questions by asking a multitude of different people. Blommaert and Jie (2020) were also able to give me a better understanding of what an ethnographic study truly is. They stated:

> Ethnography is perceived as a method for collecting particular types of data and thus as something that can be added…even in anthropology, ethnography is often seen as a synonym for description. In the field of language, ethnography is popularly perceived as a technique and a series of propositions by means of which something can be said about "context." (Blommaert & Jie, 2020, p. 6)

 I viewed this statement as a way in which we as researchers can observe and interact with the people around us, as well as those participating in the study within their real environment. There are no bells and whistles to the research process, all the information you need is right in front of you, you just have to go looking for it. I also believe that an ethnographic study was the best way to go about collecting this data because it allowed us to get a true understanding of the people around us, whether they be on or off-campus. I enjoyed this study as an ethnography because I was able to talk to people I know while

also being able to learn from people that I don't know. I also think it was a great way to get into the topic of fieldwork and fieldnotes because it gave me a chance to observe the way that people around me live and interact during a time like this. An ethnographic study made it possible for the researchers involved to become more involved than ever before and get a true first-hand experience of the world around us. I don't think I would have gotten the same results that I did if we conducted this study under different terms.

As previously mentioned, we conducted fieldwork in different areas of our lives and were able to turn those experiences into field notes. Those notes better assisted in understanding the environment around us and how people that we may or may not know function on a day-to-day basis. They also provided us with invaluable information about what an ethnographer saw and how they did so. Fieldnotes, in a sense, coincide with participant observation since you can focus on things that register as striking and occur throughout your daily life. I, personally, was able to get a lot more information into my field notes when I started looking at the less obvious, more shocking things that were going on around me. After conducting field notes, we as a team came together and were able to narrow down different topics to find what fits best in our study so we could later go out and find examples fitting to capture in a photo and share with the others. Photos provide support when making an archive and can become a part of the data to look at and think, 'wow this really is going on around me, I just have to go out and find it.' The photos were a big help when conducting this study because it gave a lot of information about various experiences that each one of us had. Although photos may change throughout the study, it was a great starting point to begin to understand the important role certain things have on society today. The last part of the research collection was conducting interviews. Each of the ethnographers interviewed at least one person either on or off campus and gather a multitude of information that helped each one of us when analyzing all the data collected. I thoroughly enjoyed the interview process since I was able to get a deeper understanding of my own research and decide if what I was worried about in the beginning would hold true or not.

After everyone finished the interview process and was able to provide a transcript, I dove straight into the coding and memoing process. This was probably the most interesting part of the entire study because I was able to look back on things that I had done earlier in the research process and had forgotten about or didn't fully understand how it coincided with my research overall. I was able to pick through all the compiled data collections and find the information I needed to complete my own study. I found a couple patterns within the interviews, one being that depending on how the interviewer asked the question, the interviewee would interpret it in different ways, ultimately leading to mixed responses. For example, my research involves the question of "when was the last time you remember not having to wear a mask in public settings?" Some interviewees took this as a recent recollection of not wearing a mask such as being in the park or on a simple walk during the pandemic, where others took it as the last day before news of the pandemic hit that you did not have to wear mask in *any* public setting. I think this is mainly due to the wording of how different researchers asked the question, but also if the interviewee even had a last memory of not wearing a mask in public. After completion of the coding

and memoing process, I had a much better understanding towards my research overall and how each small part that went into it, coincides with the other. It was fascinating to see it all come together before even completing the entirety of the study.

Once I finished the coding and memoing process, I was able to take a look at all of my compiled data and see how my initial research questions were answered throughout the entirety of the study. My first question was regarding the reaction people had when seeing others around them not wearing masks, whether it be improperly or not at all. I wanted to know more about this specific topic because I could not tell if it had shifted or stayed the same throughout the past year of the pandemic. I asked the question during my interview, "what do you think when you see someone in a public space without a mask on?" (LaMartina, personal communication, 2021). Although this question was pretty straight-forward in terms of coordinating to my research question, the interviewees took it in different directions. When it came to the person I interviewed, she responded with,

> I think there's like two different kinds of like two different ways to answer this question I guess. So like if I see someone like out in public that has a mask on but it's like here [gesturing to below nose, above mouth] like not covering their nose I'm like can you just pull up your mask like I don't get why you can wear it over your mouth and not over your nose like I almost think that's more stupid than not wearing a mask like I just don't—I can't understand that like you're halfway there, just pull it up. Um, and people I see like—I don't see a lot of people that don't wear masks unless it's outside which I'm like fine with but like sometimes people at Wegmans don't have a mask on and honestly I kind of don't notice it like in the beginning which is weird cause I said I notice on TV when they're not wearing it but I feel like we're used to people at Wegmans like not wearing a mask like before, but then I'm like I don't understand it like it's like proven that it protects you in some sort of way even if it's a little bit and like everyone else is around you and it's kind of like masks are more to protect others from you or something like that so…we're just trying to protect ourselves so I think it's more like I'm wearing a mask to protect you so you better your mask to protect me. (LaMartina, personal communication, 2021)

This answer, as in-depth as it was, gave me a wonderful understanding as to how people not wearing masks in a public setting truly affects those around them. Although it may not seem like a big deal, in the world we live in now, a piece of fabric can really change someone's entire thought process of somebody else whether they know them or they are just a stranger. The prime response from the interviewees was that they would feel anger, frustration, or even disappointment, but not do anything about it. This general feeling was primarily discussed in another interview. The interviewer asked the same question as myself ('what do you think when you see someone in a public space without a mask on?') and got the response of, "Just kinda like disappointment and exhaustion. I just think like 'wow here we go', but then I'm not the one to pick a fight with an anti-masker so… helplessness is a very good way to put it" (M, E., personal communication, 2021).

I found this response interesting because at the beginning of the pandemic, if someone saw somebody else not wearing a mask, they would try to get an answer as to why there was not one in sight. However, there is a continued pattern of answers consisting of people not intervening with the other person's choices and just letting them be since they don't think it is worth it. This raises the question of, did people think confronting others at the beginning of the pandemic regarding non-mask usage would help/change the situation, or was it just to show that they care for the people around them whereas the "anti-masker" may not? This idea of not wearing masks in public places also relates to taking them off when around people you know, even if there are people there you may not be particularly close with. I feel that the same idea comes into play of being disappointed or just tired of people not adhering to the mask mandate, even if they do find loopholes within it. In one field note excerpt, it was mentioned that a friend of a friend had come over to the table outside to stop by and say hi, "A few of C's friends approached our table so I stopped eating and quickly put my mask on to be considerate, however, they pulled their masks down to speak with C" (Iversen, personal communication, 2021). Being that this ethnographer included this interaction in their field note, it alludes to the idea that it the action of the "visitor" of the table pulling their mask down, peeved them. Although they were outside and had a mutual friend, the person that came up to the table to say hi, was not in the same "COVID bubble" as the ethnographer, making it an uncomfortable situation to be put in and ultimately disregarding the mask mandate of the school. Once again, we can see that the observer did not say anything to the person who had pulled their mask down, demonstrating that improper mask usage is not something that people pick a fight over nowadays, contrary to the beginning of the pandemic as earlier stated.

Another question I had that was answered throughout this research process was that of how people see masks as an inconvenience throughout their daily lives. On top of that, when they saw masks as a more permanent objective rather than temporary. One question I asked relating to this finding was, "describe for me how you were able to adjust to the mask mandate implemented last year." By asking this question, I was able to get an idea as to how easy or hard it was for different people to get used to the usage of masks, ultimately demonstrating how much of an inconvenience they were and maybe still are. My interviewee was able to give me a different perspective on adjusting to them since she mainly stayed home when the mandate came out but also works at her family-owned business where you have to wear a mask. She stated:

> …we were inside so I didn't really see people going from no mask to mask like when I went out I was kind of just like used to everyone wearing a mask…but I remember like working since I was home and I was like this is so difficult to work in a mask like I have to talk to people like all this stuff and like now I'm like ehh it's just a mask…I do think that adjusting did take some time but I also think it's because we didn't know a lot so we're like what is this mask doing and whatever. Uhm and now with the double mask like people know it's more important to wear a mask so I think that with more information comes more like adaptability and like willingness to wear the mask. (LaMartina, personal communication, 2021)

This answer gave me great insight into how people are able to adjust to the masks over time and may not see them as much of an inconvenience now as they once did. I do understand that this may not be the case for everyone, but as long as a majority of people don't see them as an inconvenience, there might be a chance that once the mandate is lifted, people will continue to wear masks at least for their own protection. Another question I asked to better understand the implementation of masks into people's daily lives was, "when did you realize that the use of masks were not going to be a temporary objective?" An answer to this question that I found to be most informative was from a fellow ethnographer's interview. Their interviewee responded with:

> …we started getting the vaccines, um, distribute, and I got both doses and we still had to wear masks…So i feel like that was the time where I was like oh okay, this is not gonna, like, end soon. This is gonna be for the long run… probably at the beginning of the semester. Yeah more like—yeah. I say more recently. As everything is getting better still. (Alisa, personal communication, 2021)

I found this response most interesting because it mentions that the interviewee did not see masks as a permanent objective until most recently. This differs from a majority of other answers I saw during my coding and memoing stage because people had seen masks as a permanent thing towards the beginning/middle of the pandemic. It was also mentioned that once the mandate was in effect early on, a lot of people realized that masks were not going away any time soon.

I believe that masks were seen as an inconvenience to people right at the beginning of the pandemic. As soon as the state-wide mandate was announced, it set in for people that they would have to learn to adjust to them and see them as a way of life instead of an inconvenience. During my memoing process, I also found that other researchers were asking questions that helped both my research and their own. Such as, "Describe to me in as much detail as possible what it is like to have to wear a mask when being physically active" helps me understand how much of inconvenience masks are for certain people. Although this question is not directly related to my overall research questions, it still helps since it alludes to the daily use of masks. Another ethnographer asked her interviewee this question and I found that their answer helped me understand the inconvenience of masks for different types of people. Once asked the question she responded with:

> Um, I would say it's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Because, you know, when you're out of breath, all you want to do is catch your breath. And you can't when you have, you know…literally the only two places that you can breathe. A lot of the times we find ourselves like pulling on masks down. No, like they get so wet. It's just, it gets really gross. It's really tough. (Benedict, personal communication, 2021)

Seeing that masks are this much of an inconvenience for not only athletes but people who are physically active in general, makes me wonder how fast the mask mandate will be lifted for those in sports or other highly physical activities. I enjoyed seeing the overlap

between another ethnographer's research question and my own since it gave me a completely different view of masks being a possible inconvenience throughout our daily lives.

After a complete examination of my findings and various responses to my questions, I found that masks have, obviously, played a vital role throughout society's daily life, as well as being somewhat of an inconvenience during it. I believe that this is an important observation throughout my research because it shows that although we as a society may find masks inconvenient, we will not put our health at risk. We have adapted to the implementation of them over the course of the past year and made them something we could fit into our daily lives by hanging them up with our car keys or even making them an accessory to our outfits. I think that masks have changed who we are as people because we see things in a much different light now. Before, many people saw our health as something we could control but when the pandemic hit, we felt a sense of hopelessness. I see masks as a way of getting that control back into our lives and being able to dictate how we feel not only physically, but emotionally as well. Masks are a new way of caring for yourself in times like this. If you don't wear a mask in public, people see you as careless for not only yourself but the people around you as well. This type of care through masking is one that nobody has ever had to experience before, so adapting to this as a country makes it that much easier since you're not necessarily "alone in the fight." Care through masking is, I believe, going to be something that sticks around for a while with or without a mask mandate in place. It allows us to be in control of our health now more than ever before since we are not exposing ourselves to all the germs on every surface we touch daily. Masks truly have changed the way that each of us cares about ourselves and for the people around us.

In terms of mask usage, I think that people will continue to use masks when close to other people since they have seen the positive effects they can have during certain periods of mass infection and have helped keep the non-COVID-19 sicknesses to a minimum. An action item that may follow this specific research study would be the continuation of mask usage, but not thinking less of people who do otherwise. The issue that society still has a year later is shaming people for not wearing masks in public settings, whether the person has health complications or they just don't see the upside to wearing them. Regardless of the reason behind not wearing a mask, we should not be the ones to judge them and see/make them lesser than ourselves. Care practices that I found to be valuable were when we recognized that masks were/are an inconvenience, but that didn't deter society as a whole from wearing them either in crowded public settings or even around close friends. We continue to wear them despite their annoyances during physical activity or other strenuous actions. I believe that this goes to show how determined we as a country are to get over the entirety of the pandemic and return to a more "normal" life once again. By continuing to wear masks and following mandates, I believe this will end shortly, especially since we have yet to let these precautions affect us negatively.

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