

6. The Culture of Wearing and Keeping on Facemasks in Korea: Beyond Confucianism

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Abstract

Much has been written about regional strategies in confronting COVID-19 and the narrative about regional differences and similarities which is predominant in the media and in essays by experts is comparative in nature. Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that competitive discourses are hidden between the lines in these descriptions of regional specificities (Chekar, Kim 2022). From a cultural point of view, the literature focuses on comparativeness by positing a dichotomy between a collectivist approach (namely, Asian values) in antithesis to those of individualist (namely, Western values) societies as distinguishing key elements in dealing with the pandemic in both the East and West. This article sheds light on how the Korean population responded to the pandemic and the government's face-mask mandates. It begins with the fact that the Korean government announced that from 1 May 2022, wearing masks outdoors would no longer be required; nevertheless, in August, most Koreans are continuing to wear masks outdoors up to the time of writing. This behaviour raises questions, including why Koreans have difficulties in taking off their facemasks. This article then argues that facemasks are nonetheless reservoirs of meaning according to how, who, where, and when they are worn, and that they are open to future signification in a continuous bricolage, re-semantization, and translation. It aims to suggest that besides 'Confucian' values, lookism and social pressure have not been carefully considered as determinant parts of Korean culture in the use of facemasks. To support this argument, I

analyse the results of a survey that we conducted in 2021.¹ Between the results of this survey and an examination of the media's narratives, the figurative dimension of meanings lies at the heart of these dynamics, transforming the idea that there is an ideology based on collectivism and Confucianism into discovering the crucial role of individual self-care during COVID-19.

Keywords: Mask; Lookism; East; West; Semiotics.

6.1. West vs East

If we divide the globe according to the ways COVID-19 was and is managed, the general but simplistic picture we get from most media is that of two methods, one of which are the 'draconian' policies practiced by paternalistic and authoritarian governments in East Asia (South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), and the other being the policies of 'democratic' governments in the West (the United States and Europe). Such characterisations of government policy are rejected by Ho Hang Kei, who prefers to distinguish between "using an ideology to solve a medical problem: East Asian Scientific State vs. Western Democracy" (Ho 2020). These narratives are comparative in nature, but are not free from hidden competitive discourses in describing regional specificities (Chekar, Kim 2022). From this point of view, specificities or diversities in management and results become a political type of ideological propaganda and rough judgments that reinforce the boundaries between East and West. One of the consequences of this is that more attention has been given to diversity and less to similarities. According to most scholars in studies pertaining to this area, the former has been summarily de-emphasised for being too specific. Comparison between Eastern and Western approaches could and would in fact provide a further basis for mutual enrichment in improving strategy to face the pandemic. The main common and salient aspects of policy which led to East Asia being judged as having better managed COVID-19 than the West are summarized below.

First, the governments of East Asian countries such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and China have been praised for having taken a scientific approach in the management of COVID-19 (Cowling et al. 2020).

¹ The present paper uses the McCune-Reischauer romanization system to transliterate Korean words into Latin script.

In the case of Hong Kong, the low number of deaths is significant, as it has the third-highest population density in the world (7,140 per km²). Hong Kong and South Korea managed to reduce and control the spread of COVID-19 without lockdowns by instead influencing public behaviour, putting tracing strategies in place, and encouraging the proper wearing of facemasks (Lee, Lee 2020).

Second, public behaviour is another important distinguishing factor concerning the management of COVID-19 which calls attention to how individuals react to COVID-19 and how this in turn impacts its spread among the population, as I will discuss later in this paper.

6.2. South Korean Case

South Korea's 'success' is a good example that demonstrates yet another understanding of the Other in Western media, going from initial curiosity to a superficial and sometimes mistaken reading of events. In other words, in attempting to keep their analyses more objective, such narratives have been interpreted by observers of the Asian Other as a means of measuring a different approach that cannot be applied in the West because of its democratic values. The sharp demarcation between the West and East Asia (specifically South Korea, henceforth Korea) is reified in terms of the type of governance applied in the management of COVID-19; specifically, between the Other's authoritarian and paternalistic governance and that of Western governance, being the cradle of originator of democracy. Neither can it be ignored that even in Korea itself, most of the narratives about the reasons for their success fall into the trap of particularism and nationalism, however.

Most of the narratives have pointed to a combination of social and cultural factors behind Asia's 'success' in dealing with the pandemic. With a more emic approach, the research tends to stress how one of the reasons for this 'success' lies in the Korean government's making good use of the experience of SARS and MERS, when it entrusted the responses direction to professors of medicine, and it also enjoyed an advantage in enacting social control measures, such as mandating the use of facemasks and issuing instructions on hygienic behaviour to the population.

On the other hand, the narratives of Asian 'Otherness' betray a wide and diffuse assumption that East Asian populations are oriented towards a Confucian approach, culturally speaking, with their societies supposedly being undemocratic and hierarchical, meaning that

the people tend to be more obedient to rules. This is a common evaluation of Korea as well.

Once again we are faced with a method of thinking in terms of a dichotomy that divides rather than unites, whether we are speaking of geopolitical or socio-cultural perspectives. The opposing of 'collectivist' to 'individualist' societies is a rigid theoretical scheme which interprets nations as if they were a stable body, immobile and rigid, unchanged by the dynamics of globalization and of contact with other cultures. Defining and analysing a society as either 'collectivist' or 'individualistic' ignores the fact that a society is composed of 'fluid' individuals who may more or less fit into one or both categories to some extent, but who also may change according to context and the times. The same goes for applying the conceptual definition of Confucian society, which incorporates many countries in Asia while underestimating the extent to which each region has adopted Confucian values and ethics differently, moulding them to local religious and ideological beliefs over centuries. Much emphasis is placed on the significance of communities (respect for family and society) (Tu 1996) in Confucianism, stressing the subordination of the individual good to a feeling of belonging and solidarity with the local community, and then society.

Nevertheless, the 'heavy' weight placed on the 'cultural' explanation for the 'successful' response to COVID-19 in South Korea is challenged by Chekar and Kim (2022). They identify the Koreans' 'success' in terms of the three distinctive elements of pandemic preparedness: 1) the Korean "culture" that has normalized face-covering, 2) Korean citizens' consensus that public health should be prioritized over privacy, and 3) Korea's IT infrastructure, which enables efficient digital contact tracing.

These three 'strengths' are defined as 'myths' by the authors, and they demystify them by pointing to their contradictions and weaknesses, and especially to the inordinate importance attached to culture seen as a static and perennial thing rather than as something in a state of continuous transformation.

6.3. Face-Masking and Face Un-Masking: East vs West

The conflict about wearing facemasks was another division between East and West, becoming one of the most prominent, contentious, and deeply divided issues. The whole world has experienced

issues related to misinformation concerning the benefits and risks of mask-wearing, as in for example how in the early stage of COVID-19 information on which type of masks to wear, who had to wear them and how, and where to wear and not wear them was conflicting and confusing. Then difficulties arose due to a shortage of masks during the pandemic's peak, as well as their rising prices. Apart from these, there are nevertheless regional differences in people's response and attitude towards the mask as it became incorporated into their everyday discourses. A general scepticism dominated in the West, reflecting its particular cultural backgrounds. In the United States mask-wearing became a partisan issue: a question of personal freedoms and the violation of civil rights; the people felt that by wearing it they were submitting to authority, and some viewed it as infringing on their personal freedom (Duncan, 2020, quoted in Schneider, 2022, p. 98). "A facemask is a kind of facial covering", "a mandatory order to wearing medical faceguards violates individual freedom, as the face is part of an individual's body" (Liu, Chuang 2021).

In Italy, conflictual emotional and rational refrains were heard due to how masks were semiotically represented before COVID-19. Protective medical masks were only used by a special category of people (dentists, dental assistants, surgeons, and their staff) and in a specific context, in circumstances which were circumscribed by medical treatment, mostly in situations involving emergency medical intervention and invasive procedures. In other non-medical contexts, it was worn by workers in toxic environments, such as miners and construction workers. Therefore, as Leone (2021) suggests, the semiotics of the mask on one's face has contrarily communicated a sign that there is danger of contagion, presented by the environment in which the person wearing it is standing, and not as a sign that one's surrounding environment could potentially be contaminated by the person wearing the mask. As in Italy, we see that across the world, people's first reaction towards a person wearing a mask is to move away from that person. And in the case of a person who coughs while wearing a mask, the conscious or unconscious reaction tends towards further distancing.

The mask (including the rituals surrounding it and its meanings) is a device imbued with specific languages expressed semiotically which differ across countries. The modalities through which Italian or Koreans deal with them, and the sense they give to it in their daily practices,

determine the differences across the social and political domains in relation to the response to the spread of the virus.

In Korea, social distancing measures were completely lifted on 18 April 2022, and from 1 May 2022, wearing a mask outdoors was compulsory only for outdoor events involving 50 or more people. Nevertheless, most Koreans were continuing to wear it outdoors at the end of August, even in high temperatures. This behaviour raises questions about why Koreans have a problem in taking their facemasks off, what the biographical story of the facemask (in terms of social life) is, how its material meaning is subjected to transformation in relation to the immaterial (e.g., emotions, behaviour, lookism, social pressure) and other forms of materiality (e.g., dust, skin, body), and what is the intersemiotic procedure that the facemask undergoes in the process of dematerialization and re-materialization. How is the facemask – a non-human material – related to the body; specifically, part of the face?

6.4. The Face Mask's Biography: Its Social Role and Status

Sanitary masks were born in 1836 thanks to the development of what is known as the 'respirator' (Hyun 2022, pp. 181-220)². Its inventor was the British surgeon Julius Jeffreys. The respirator migrated to East Asia, and is first recorded in *Yŏnghwajajŏn* (1869), the first English-Chinese dictionary compiled by the German missionary, Wilhelm Lobscheid. It was introduced to the Oriental face by a Japanese-made respirator that first appeared in the 1870s and was ennobled to the status of 'hygienic modernity', becoming highly popular with Tokyo residents regardless of whether there was a quarantine or not (Ibid. 2022, pp. 71-72)³.

It migrated to Korea around 1919~1920, under Japanese colonialism: this was quite late in comparison to neighbouring countries. This colonialism can also be seen in the timing of the name's coinage, which reflects the power of knowledge. The term 'respirator', which had been introduced in Japanese and Chinese dictionaries from the 1860s and '70s, first appears in the Korean dictionary *Sŏnyŏngjajŏn*, published in 1928 by Kim Tongsŏng. In the 1934 *Shinŏ Dictionary*, published by

² The respirator was invented in 1836 by the British surgeon Julius Jeffreys to help patients with lung illness to breathe by adjusting the air temperature and humidity.

³ Other types of respirators were also known and used by intellectuals in the Qing Dynasty, as well as Meiji Japan. In particular, see Rogasaki et al. as quot. in Hyun (2002, p. 182).

Ch'öngnyöñjosönsa, the English word (*masük'ü*) 'mask' is introduced, transliterated into the Korean alphabet, and is defined as "something that covers part or all of the face". For the first time this provided a definition of its social function that was close to what we know today. It is by the winter of 1919, near the end of the Spanish influenza epidemic, that the facemask was used as a device for protecting from infectious diseases, and was worn in public whenever there was a respiratory-related disease pandemic, especially in the winter (Hyun 2022, pp. 191-192).

The mask's social life and function was enriched and transformed during those years beyond its medical or hygienic functions. Since forecasts of regarding fine dust and air pollution began in 2016, facemasks bearing the KF (Korean Filter) label, which have been approved by the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety since 2008, have been commercialized⁴. Years later, facemasks were subjected to further semiotic transformation in relation to the immaterial, as well as other forms of materiality. It is in this process of dematerialization and re-materialization that the facemask becomes more of a subject and less of an object, as part of the body and the human face. Leone quotes Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self*, 1959: "[...] had already spread the scholarly conviction that the face itself is indeed a sort of mask" (Leone 2020, p. 44). The transformation of the facemask into an actual part of the face to hide a person's identity, replacing and empowering it by identifying it with a social and political role, as well as becoming a political weapon, is observed during the political and labour union demonstrations from the 1970s onwards. To cite an example of a recent demonstration, they appeared in a women's rally in Gangnam in 2017 to protest the murders of women. In this context, it is quite functional, able to hide the wearer's identity, protect him or her from tear gas, and obscure one's gender. In the cases of those who have undergone facial plastic surgery, it can become a second facial skin to conceal surgical scars or even serve to protect against the sun, replacing sunblock for all those who continue to wear it despite the hot temperatures in summer.

⁴ According to a survey of 1,000 people nationwide (Korea Gallup 2019), 45% of 496 men and 61% of 504 women answered that they tend to wear a mask when the forecast says that fine will be at a high level. Interestingly, compared with the MERS outbreak in 2015, the rate of implementation of personal precautions to prevent COVID-19 infection has significantly improved. The mask-wearing rate was 15.5% during MERS, while it soared to 78.8% during COVID-19 (Jang et al. 2020).

It is in fact seen as such an indispensable accessory that it is considered to be an aesthetic cover for the face that is unchanging when compared to one's own face, which betrays emotions or physical imperfections.

Katie Yoon (2022, p. 7) informs us that before COVID-19, Korean female students were wearing masks to hide their physical imperfections. The trend to conceal one's face began among K-pop stars, who would wear "fashion masks" to the airport. This was done so that they could remain incognito, and also relieved them of the "constant obligation to look "presentable" at all times; when not wearing a cosmetic mask, apart from staying at home, wearing an actual mask was the next best alternative".

6.5. Survey

To understand the multiple layers of meanings hidden beneath the facemask, we conducted a survey consisting of 17 questions. This survey aimed to offer a quantitative overview of both emotional and rational perceptions and behaviours surrounding the use of the facemask. Its aim was to understand, as far as possible, the mask's communicative function among Koreans. We interviewed a total of 212 people ranging from ten to 70 years of age. To make the survey representative of the population as a whole, we took into account various metrics, including age, gender, place of residence, and job. 65.9% of those interviewed were women (137 subjects), while the remaining 34.1% were men (71). The most represented age group was 40-49 years at 35.8%, followed by those 30-39 with 27.4%; those aged 50-59 came in with 19.8%.

Among the survey questions, question 14 will be considered as highlighting the cultural and sociopolitical aspects related to the facemask's personal and social meanings in Korea. This question invites the respondents to narrate their own experiences. Among the 212 respondents, 141 replied to this. Below are the answers, grouped by topic according to the main argument provided by the respondents.

6.5.1. Communication and Emotions

Above all, the responders noted changes in the mode of communication as a result of wearing facemasks. "Wearing a mask and having a conversation is uncomfortable, and you have to talk in a loud voice, so conversation is somewhat reduced," one reported.

The responders stressed their need to find other verbal and non-verbal strategies to improve their communication, which depends heavily on the use of other senses: speaking loudly, talking with the eyes, saying each word clearly, using concise expressions, and only saying essential things. When interpersonal communication becomes less natural, the physical distance becomes a social distance: “His voice grew louder and he avoided people who didn’t wear masks,” one responder observed. The facemask also influences intelligibility in reciprocal understanding: “You often don’t understand what others are saying. You’ll speak in a louder voice because you couldn’t hear what someone else is saying, and would ask them many times to say it again”, said another respondent. The fear of closed space has also to be taken into account: “I was reluctant to speak in the elevator even when wearing a mask”.

Emotions, especially feelings related to health, the body, and the mind are also influenced by masks. Some responders reported a sense of frustration when efforts at spoken communication were followed by long silences: “You will only say what you really need to say”; “It is impossible to grasp one’s meaning from the lips”; “not hearing will induce people to avoid talking”. Facemasks have both positive and negative effects on body: they contribute to skin dryness and other skin problems, and can hurt the ears. One respondent reported that it felt like the mask had simply become a part of ordinary life (many of these episodes are grouped under ‘behaviour’, and they describe how the mask is felt to be a part of one’s own body).

Facemasks alter cultural and social activities, such as dating: “From the first date, we wore a mask, but when he took it off, I felt awkward and strange”. There are also other factors related to wearing facemask: respondents reported wearing the mask to avoid feeling cold in their faces; others commented that it made dozing off while riding on public transportation less embarrassing.

6.5.2. Behavioural Changes and Social Distance

“Take off your mask and look for a place where no one is present, or for a remote place to breath or drink water, and then look at the reactions of the people around you. If you forget your mask and don’t wear it, you will feel and notice others’ gazes (*nunch’i*).” These are part of the social pressures that are strongly felt.

The following behavioural descriptions depict the mask as being seen as part of one's own body, and as belonging to one's personal private space and body (although it remains a sign of social and physical distance):

"I experience confusion in remembering whether or not to put on or to take off the mask; on one day when the air was fresh, I forgot to wear my mask and went out. I'm getting used to wearing the mask and it is more awkward to take it off. It feels weird if you don't use it for even a day. If you don't wear a mask, you feel like you've taken your clothes off. On many occasions I didn't take off my mask and put it on my chin. There are occasions when you're wearing a mask before going out and yet are looking for a mask somewhere, such as when you're on a call and looking for your phone. Sometimes you touch the mask to create a space between it and your face because you're afraid you'll forget it when going out. It's the same feeling of responsibility as taking care of your mobile".

Finally, the facemask produces both inconvenience and convenience, making it difficult to wipe a runny nose, causing itchiness around the mouth, and eliminating bad breath. It also produces the habit of sticking the mask to your nose, exploring a new mask style, cupping your ears when you don't hear the other person very well.

6.6. Analysis: Make-Up, Lookism

The surveys mentioned above present interesting insights that allow us to more deeply investigate Korean's social and cultural behaviours in being reluctant to remove their facemasks, which is one of the questions posed at the beginning of this article. Skincare and lookism are among the more common concerns expressed by our interviewees in the survey. People have become more concerned with makeup in general, but in particular with makeup in the area of the eyes.

89.1% of respondents report feeling safe while wearing a mask, while 75.9% don't feel pretty or handsome while wearing it. Nevertheless, 82% choose a mask according to their mood, and 31% said that they are concerned about the quality of their makeup and put more effort into mascara for their eyebrows. 72.1% chose a particular type of mask because they liked how it looked; 12.8% because the mask matches their face colour well and thus made it less visible; 7% according to

the colour of their clothes; 5.5% because of a low price; 5% because they found it visually appealing; 4% for a change of mood; and 3% because it they felt it revealed their uniqueness. Two respondents (1%) said that a coloured mask better blocks ultraviolet light as opposed to white ones, while two others (1%) said that they choose their masks for no particular reason.

We then tried to understand if wearing a mask every day caused the interviewees to become more concerned about their appearance (they were allowed to select multiple responses). 87.6% that it did not, 8.1% that they become more concerned about their eyes' expressions or makeup, 5.3% that they became more concerned about whether their mask and clothes matched, 0.5% that they became more concerned about makeup, and another 0.5% simply answered "yes". To understand what facemasks meant before COVID-19, 46.4% said that they had used one before COVID-19; 27% reported doing so when they had caught a cold or for other medical purposes, 10% to keep themselves warm, 4.7% because a mask was required to perform their job, 4.3% simply to cover the face, and finally, 0.9% to protect from the sun (this last response is quite interesting when comparing it to the percentage of people who continued to wear one as an alternative to sun cream).

Responses concerning the facemask in relation to skin and make-up were as follows: "I've had skin problems and have been to dermatologists; I rarely put on makeup while wearing a facemask; lipstick is very inconvenient; there is dryness of the mouth and skin; skin troubles become more frequent; the skin becomes sensitive; the cost of cosmetics such as foundations and lipsticks has decreased; I am more concerned about good skin; I put a facemask in each bag; it's useful for hiding facial wrinkles; it's useful for hiding my facial expressions when they reflect my internal feelings; I choose makeup which is rather darker and more decisive; the skin in the area where the mask comes into contact with my skin has deteriorated; I have frequent skin troubles; I must frequently use greasy paper; I get dirty skin; I put on less makeup when you go out, you pay less attention to your appearance".

Concern about K-beauty is not only repeatedly expressed by interviewees in the survey or in the media, but it is also one of the topics most studied by scholars working in the cosmetics industry, specifically on the individuation of skin symptoms during COVID-19 and in identifying marketing strategies for new products in the cosmetic market (Lee, Kwon 2022a, pp. 1-11).

Their study indicates that the changing behaviour in relation to women's use of cosmetics is due to environmental problems, infectious diseases, or use of facemasks. These changes also include the medium through which cosmetics are purchased. One of these is the increase in mobile shopping, i.e., the recent rise of the service known as 'untact'. The word means 'no contact' and is a combination of 'un' and 'contact'. It is not English, however, but rather Konglish. It refers to a service that provides information in a virtual format that minimises human contact (Kim et al. 2017, mentioned by Lee, Kwon 2022a, p. 2). Some examples are live commerce, an online channel that sells products through real-time video streaming. Its main target customers are digital natives: the so-called Millennials and Generation Z (Generation MZ). Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2010) are the 'digital generation' who have a preference for consuming video and media content.

The questions posed above nevertheless demand more attention. In my opinion, much has been written about lookism in general, but not much about the relationship between lookism (looking good, both aesthetically and in relation to health) and the cultural phenomenon of K-wave, *hallyu*, during COVID-19. These two elements, which have been well assimilated and consolidated over the course of several years, are closely connected to the development of 'new' cultural patterns that have found new niches as elements of self-expression during COVID-19 and mask-wearing (Lee, Kwon 2022b).

It appears from the literature that lookism is a cultural and social phenomenon that incites women to change their outward appearance (being slim and beautiful), responding to the patriarchal ideology of the virtuous woman of the pre-modern period (Park 2007). Others have analysed South Korea's transformation of South Korea into a mecca of plastic surgery (Park 2015); still other sociological medical research focused on extreme diets, which are one of the causes of anorexia and obesity among young people (Lee 2021, pp. 167-177), and on how lookism manifests in social life (e.g., in job interviews and modes of socialization such as dating and marriage).

One had to face new challenges and obstacles during the COVID-19 period as a result of facemasks, becoming more conscious of one's own health and aesthetics in order to preserve oneself in the best possible way. Thus, *hallyu* has greatly contributed towards positively improving Koreans' self-perception, both individually and collectively, thanks

to the well-known success achieved internationally and its affirmation as an integral part of Korean identity. On the basis of this inheritance, a new model not only of the nation's self-image but also that of the Korean people took shape during COVID-19: a commitment to take care of oneself and others by wearing the facemask led people to develop a concern for their facial skin, as shown in searches on how to work toward "eternal youth" and to improve one's physical and health condition. This came to be seen as a demonstration of one's own capacity for endurance, self-control, and ability to work on oneself. As part of this, the cosmetics industries engaged in inventing new products that were certainly useful in evolving a 'new' consciousness of one's well-being. The survey's emphasis on skin care reflects the respondents' social concerns and points to a long chain of social and emotional factors that failing to take care of one's skin entails: more time and money spent on caring for damaged skin, as well as a decrease in self-esteem, just to mention a few.

Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lookism worked in tandem with social and medical pressures in another way as well. Lookism is bypassed via the facemask: it allowed for the preservation of the wearer's 'anonymity', causing the act of taking off the mask to be considered rather inconvenient. If lookism means to be evaluated either positively or negatively, then the Korean people have exhibited a high cultural preference for anonymity, because they are burdened by other people's gazes, with a subsequent judgment inherent in the concept of *nunch'i*. Thus, wearing a mask becomes a comfortable contrivance to avoid expressing one's emotions, allowing one to choose between hiding or revealing them.

6.7. Social Pressure

The survey indicates how and what kind of social pressures are behind wearing or not wearing a facemask. To the question of how the interviewees feel when they are not wearing a mask outdoors (they were allowed to select multiple choices), 39 of them (42.8%) answered that they feel comfortable, 28 (31.5%) said that they feel anxious, 22 (24.7%) said that they are afraid someone else will show up, 11 (12.4%) said that they feel afraid that someone else might see them, 9 (10.1%) said they feel good, 6 (6.7%) said they feel guilty, and 4 (4.5%) said that

they don't have any particular feelings about it. In brief, the majority experience negative emotions when not wearing a facemask outdoors.

After that, we asked the interviewees about their mask-wearing habits on a daily basis (they were allowed to select multiple choices), and 96 (45.5%) said that if they see someone who is not wearing a mask, they quickly try to avoid them; 82 (38.9%) said they frequently touch the mask to keep it close to their face; 68 (32.2%) answered by saying they had not developed any particular habits; 21 (10%) said that they touch the mask when they don't have something to say or during the awkward moments in a conversation; and two (1%) said they don't use makeup as a result. In this case as well, the majority have developed new behaviours related to their fear of the virus.

"Social pressure" is defined as a binding force that compels individuals not to deviate from a group's behaviour. What we notice in the survey is that social pressure in Korea is more of an invisible phenomenon that people feel which results from a fear of the virus, but also a fear of being judged for not behaving within social norms. Social pressure to continue wearing a facemask outdoors works in two ways. First, wearing a facemask outdoors has received social consensus, and thus the person who continues wearing it is communicating to others that he or she is behaving correctly by showing that he or she is afraid of infectious diseases and does not want 'to harm others'. In other words, such a person follows the rules dictated by social norms, displaying moral virtue. Second, the fear of taking the face mask off results not only from the risk of infection, but from being judged as someone who is not conforming to the group's norms or is not capable to aligning his or her own behaviours with those of the people around them.

Social norms during COVID-19 required that people conform to certain expected behaviours, including wearing a facemask. In the case of Koreans, the wish to be seen as virtuous and to be appreciated and positively evaluated may be stronger factors than the above-mentioned aspects of social pressure. The individual-personal evaluation of one's self, desiring to be appreciated as an informed and civic-minded person, adds a deeper meaning to the more 'collectivistic' attitude which is manifested in feelings like a fear of being judged as not a part of a group, and to undergo the psychological mechanism that induces one to conform his or her own behaviour to that of others, and to sympathize with others by noticing their actions.

6.8. Media

Internet news reports have published comments such as that “it’s embarrassing to take it off,” or that “it’s uncomfortable to wear it and then take it off”. A “strong sense of public responsibility” among the people wearing it has also been mentioned⁵.

Searching Korean Internet news sites from the last days of April 2022 until the early days of July 2022 indicate that Koreans’ perception of COVID-19 is reflected in the multiple meanings expressed in their attitude toward masks. In April, the content of most Internet news sites was similar enough: announcing the imminent freedom from having to wear the mask outdoors; offering detailed instructions of when and where to use or not use the mask; and warning of the continuing danger from the virus. But optimism was soon mostly replaced by pessimism, which in many cases had become synonymous with wisdom, social consciousness, civic feeling, etc.

Internet news surveys from the end of April through the beginning of June indicate that 70% of Koreans were saying that they would continue to wear the mask after May 1 versus 30% who said they would not⁶. On June 28, “Business Post” published an interesting survey conducted by Lotte Card on whether Koreans would continue to wear masks outdoors and travel abroad; 72.1% answered that they would still wear masks outdoors⁷. The daily routines adopted during the period of social distancing measures seem to have continued as well. Regarding the question of whether they would continue to return home before 10 p.m., 47.4% of respondents said that they would. Among those in their 50s and older, 57.5% said they would continue to return home by 10 p.m., accounting for more than half. I noticed this myself during my visit to Korea in mid-May. With surprise, I noted that my colleagues would start to talk about needing to return home at around 10 p.m.,

⁵ For further references see P’ihae chugi shilt’a” masük’ü an pönnün iyu kügön ttaemunmanün anida? (“I don’t want to hurt you” Is the reason for not taking off the mask not only because of this?), available at: <<https://m.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022050913450004616>> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

⁶ For further references see Masük’ü haeje 3chuch’aedo kyesong ssündat’ttongsöyang inshing ch’ainün? (“I continue to use it even after the 3rd week of mask removal... What is the difference between Eastern and Western perceptions?”), available at: <<https://kormedi.com/1398463/>> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

⁷ For further references see <https://www.businesspost.co.kr/BP?command=article_view&num=285194> (last accessed 15 July 2023).

which was quite different from before COVID-19, when these same colleagues would stay out until later. On July 2, *KBS News* reported people enjoying the beach at Pusan and Chejudo, and you could see many of them wearing masks even there. In other news reports recorded in cities during the sweltering summer heat, you could see everyone wearing a mask, even in workers' demonstrations and among the police.

In brief, it appears that masks have established a strong and deep bond with the individual in Korea to the point that it has become particularly difficult for people to take it off outdoors. New social behaviours have developed, reinforced by the long tradition of mask-wearing that was present from the outset.

6.9. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the survey confirms that the mask is a device imbued with specific language codes that are expressed differently across cultures and countries. Moreover, the mask as a communicative tool embodies meanings that vary according to countries, cultures, and political contexts.

During COVID-19, when the facemask was obligatory, people's behaviour in relation to it was part of everyday rituals that became enriched with new meanings and a powerful communicative symbol. This survey and the media narratives indicate that the social life of the facemask – its functional meaning and transformation from the material (object) to the immaterial (emotions, behaviour) – assume new meanings in relation to the human body and to political and cultural significances. The survey confirms that there are multiple semantics hidden in 'distancing' from others when the facemask is involved. Wearing it communicates social cohesion (a sense of solidarity, and of a group sharing the same thoughts and feelings), but also 'social distance (avoiding gatherings and the celebration of holidays) and 'physical distance (which implies concepts of space); it is not necessarily only a 'medical, sanitary distance ("a measure to protect myself and others from infection"). Nevertheless, the act of wearing it can produce the paradox of a sense of 'false protection', or even a desire to maintain distance from people wearing it who are thus perceived as 'dangerous', therefore transforming physical distance into subversion or the deconstructing of social ties. In brief, in Korea's case, the survey suggests that Koreans are under social pressures to keep wearing the facemask outdoors.

Similar to other narratives regarding the effects of facemask mandates around the world, the survey suggests that for these interviewees, wearing a mask every day and for long periods unconsciously alters the senses, not only of the mouth (sound, silence, speech), ears (louder speaking, greater attentiveness in listening and hearing), and eyes (serving as a substitute for expressing the emotions), but also leads to the development of the sense of sight. Moreover, the facemask has its own biography that COVID-19 in turn moulded into becoming a semi-permanent accessory of our face; in effect, an alter ego.

In the case of Korea, I suggest that behind the wearing of and refusal to take off the facemask, there is 1) lookism culture (*nunch'i*; other people's criticisms in non-verbal language); and 2) social pressures and the remnants of 'Confucian' moral values. These two aspects transform an ideology based on collectivism into a heavy compulsion for individual self-care during COVID-19.

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Glossary of Korean Terms

Korean transliteration	Characters	English translation
<i>Masŭk'ŭ</i>	마스크:	mask
<i>Nunch'i</i>	눈치	subtle art and ability to listen and gauge others
<i>Hallyu</i> <i>Sönyöngjajön</i>	한류 鮮英字典	Korean wave English-Korean Dictionary
<i>Pönbwardoelju</i>	新語事典	New Words Dictionary
<i>Yönghwajajön</i>	英华字典	Chinese-English Dictionary