

Can culture beat Covid-19? Evidence that exposure to facemasks with cultural symbols increases solidarity



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The idea

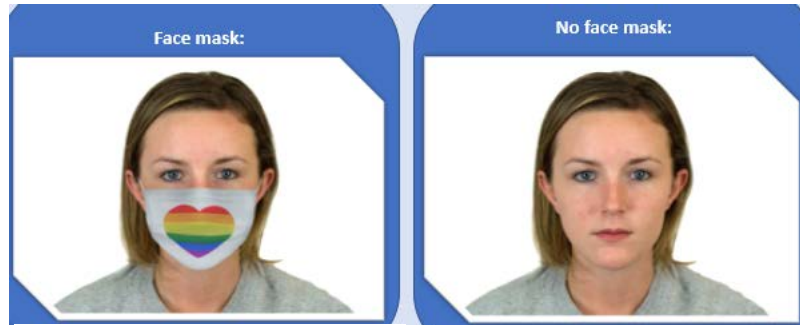
- Facemasks signal a sense of social and cultural solidarity by putting other people's health first
- Facemask-wearers are seen as more trustworthy, competent, and a more reliable source of advice (Cartaud et al., 2020; Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2020; Klucarova, 2021)
- **The idea:** Facemasks with a solidarity-related cultural symbol can increase positive social perceptions, beyond other masks.
- These facemask are a potential vehicle to promote solidarity, trust behaviors, and collective resilience by affecting people's malleable social perceptions

Why would facemasks with a solidarity-related cultural symbol increase positive social perceptions?

- When people are reminded that they belong to a social group (“I am a British national”), they use this social identity to define themselves and others, and act according to the group’s norms and values
(social identity approach; Reicher et al., 2010)
- Facemasks that activate a solidarity-related social identity (e.g., national) can activate cultural values (“we are one people”) and norms such as mutual trust => “I trust my fellow people more now that I think of my national identity”.
- From another perspective, these effects are more likely to show when people are reminded of their mortality – by affirming cultural symbols and values people get a sense of symbolic immortality (“I will live on as a member of a long-lasting culture after my physical death”) (terror management theory; Vail et al., 2012)

Our findings

- Study 1



Pride flag: a symbol of societal and communal belongingness and a meaningful social identity to those who identify as gay or lesbian

- Study 2



NHS: a symbol of solidarity and national identity in the UK

- People wearing (vs. not wearing) a pride flag and NHS facemask were perceived more positively (e.g., trustworthy, reliable, good-natured)
- This was found whether participants were reminded of death, a neutral experience, or a negative experience.

Our findings

- Study 3



- NHS and surgical facemask led to comparable increases in social perceptions when death awareness was low
- When death awareness was high, NHS (vs. surgical) facemask exposure led to greater increases in positive social perceptions.
- Overall, wearing facemasks with solidarity-related cultural symbols can increase solidarity, in some cases more so than surgical facemasks

Potential practical implications

Facemasks as a vehicle for shaping people's psychological perceptions

- The delivery of public health messages for targeted social groups
- Promoting positive intergroup relations in settings of potential social conflict such as protests and sport events
- Preventing abuse towards medical staff
- Use in educational settings?

What's next?

- Going beyond basic effect:
 - Does identification with the targeted ingroup mediate the relationship between facemask exposure and social perceptions?
- Comparing to same mask with no symbol
- Does effect depend on death/Covid-19 awareness?

- Other directions?



Thank you



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