

## FACE MASK DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14569.67684

### **Abstract**

*The present paper examines the social effects of face masks worn during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on the impact of the face mask on social interactions especially facial appearance and expressions, identity, inter-subjectivity and the freedom of the wearer. The work equally x-rays some latent meanings embedded in the face mask, deriving from the peoples' lifeworld. The approach is both analytical and phenomenological. Considered from the perspective of the phenomenal nature of reality, it is discovered that the dynamics of the mask is such that it diametrically and simultaneously exerts positive and negative impacts on both the wearer and the beholder. While the face mask is claimed to shield from the dreaded contagious disease and thus curtails further spread; it somehow distorts the voice and partially occludes the face thus impairing easy recognition, communication and inter-subjectivity. Most times, the face mask arouses confusion that keeps the mind of the beholder ever wondering what lies behind the mask. From interpretative perspective, the mask, generally speaking, connotes spookiness and inauthenticity. The mandatory wearing of masks and social distancing as enforced by many governments during the pandemic, told negatively on personal freedom; just as the ubiquitous caveat "No Face Mask No Entrance" found in most public places sounded highly restrictive. These cumulatively have far-reaching adverse effects on social interactions. While the paper sounds a caveat about these possible social repercussions, it draws attention to the fact that face mask can be still improved upon to remedy these negative effects. The paper finally calls for further exploration of the latent meanings embedded in face mask.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, face mask, phenomenological, social life and freedom.

## **Introduction**

The sudden appearance of the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic which enveloped the whole world early 2020 compelled humanity to a quick search for possible solutions. Masking became one of the handy measures adopted to checkmate the spread of the disease. In the modern world, face mask or nose mask has been mostly used in somewhat secluded or restricted areas like laboratories and operating theaters. The life span is a sudden flash of lightning. Like women's pad, face masks are used and quickly disposed of. Sequel to the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, what has been hitherto confined to the laboratories and operating theaters in hospitals, not only found its way to the public domain but also accorded pride of place, nay a *Vademecum*. Though ultimately targeted towards saving life by curtailing the spread of the disease causing virus, the use of face mask goes not without some social effects and manifold meanings. Martineli et al (1) describe it as "a simple protection tool with meanings." As the post-pandemic era dawns, in the manner of the owl of Minerva which flies at dawn, we reflect on the existential dynamics of the ubiquitous face masks. In other words, the present paper calls for an interrogation of the social implication of the face mask.

Proper attention is yet to be given to the social impact of face mask in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Though facemask serves as a measure to checkmate the spread of the deadly virus, it goes not without some social repercussions. How does the face mask impact on the appearance and visible identity of the wearer? Considering the fact that physical appearance especially facial appearance is not only the most visible and most easily accessible trait of a person but also most times *informational cue* (Gordon 1), it becomes imperative to examine how the face mask impacts on the social identity of the wearer. What happens to human inter-subjectivity when the face is partially eclipsed and the voice is distorted by the face mask which covers the mouth region? To what extent does the governments' imposition of face mask infringe on the individuals' freedom and autistic disposition? What latent meanings does the face mask convey, especially in the African lifeworld? These are the core issues that engage the present work.

The approach is both analytic and phenomenological. The object of study or investigation determines the method to be used. The face mask here under consideration is a sensible and perceivable object remarkably present during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its efficacy in preventing the spread of the dreaded disease is left for experts to determine. The present work rather not only gives a descriptive account of this conscious and remarkable phenomenon but also engages in the hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenology of the face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first section, as a background to the discourse, I consider the phenomenal nature of human face while the second section examines the intersection between face mask, appearance and identity. The third section examines the impact of face mask on human inter-subjectivity. The fourth section considers the mandatory face mask vis-à-vis personal freedom and autistic disposition. The fifth section is concerned with the hermeneutic phenomenology of face masks and mask in general. It x-rays the symbolism of spookiness and inauthenticity which masks portray. The sixth section is a phenomenological engagement on the use of face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. A critical summation of the work which serves as the conclusion then follows.

### **The Phenomenal Nature of Human Face**

Of all parts of the human body, the face seems to be mostly designed to appear and be seen. The face is fundamental in every human interaction. Unlike some other parts of the body that are meant to be hidden or covered, the face prides itself in being exposed, cheered, and admired. In fact, given that the usually veiled parts have been from time immemorial called ‘private parts’, it invariably implies that the unveiled parts, of which the face is the most prominent can be called ‘public part’. One might have expected that, Adam and Eve would have covered their faces out of guilt and shame, after they had eaten the forbidden fruit in the garden; but they rather hastily covered their nudity and left their guilt-ridden faces uncovered. Their faces were left to be seen while their nakedness or nudity was covered. The face has a propensity to appear and to be seen. Human face portrays an avalanche of signals that are vital for social interactions. Most feelings such as joy, sadness and sorrow are easily read from the face. These feelings and expressions to a great extent synchronize with the content of the mind. It is ‘out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.’ This is a popular adage.

A photograph that captures the face properly serves as a living memorabilia that somehow evokes or reveals one’s presence in one’s absence. This shows a subtle correlation between the facial appearance and identity. “Does God ever judge us by appearances? I suspect that He does” (Auden 54). The above quote from Auden’s *Shorts* underscores the importance of facial appearance. Auden’s submission finds a strong affirmation in Oscar Wilde who not only placed the greatest premium on the visible rather than the invisible but also severely castigated those who do not judge by appearances as being shallow. “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible,” Wilde averred. The face is meant to be seen. It is the channel for interpersonal interactions.

The synecdoche ‘to show face’ which means ‘to appear’ or ‘to be present’, aptly and simultaneously captures the phenomenal nature of human face and the intrinsic relationship between a person’s facial appearance and his or her identity. The online social network ‘facebook’, which harbours more than three billion users whose faces are conspicuously displayed, is a perfect exemplification of the phenomenal nature of the face. Old friends are here re-connected and new friends made. What would have been the case if these three billion faces are blurred or partially occluded? The reconnection and new friendship would not have been possible. Simple! Indeed the synecdoche ‘show face’ and the online social network ‘facebook’, resonate with the Greek derivation of the word phenomenon (phainómenon), gotten from the Greek verb ‘phaínesthai’ meaning “to appear, to become visible.” From the above excursus, one easily discerns that the human face is meant to be made visible; to be shown and to be seen.

### **Face Masks, Appearance and Identity: The Intersections**

Of all the measures that were adopted in the fight against the dreaded severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), masking seems to be the most striking and pervasive. Its ominous preponderant visibility and partial eclipse of the facial appearance and the identity of its wearer raises serious concern. This happens even as the phenomenon of *presencing* or appearance and embodiment are brought to limelight in the modern world. Meanwhile, in the ancient period, Plato had underscored the vital place of embodiment when he averred, “We are bound to our bodies like an oyster is to its shell” (Phaedrus 250c). Through facial appearance and contours one can be identified even in a shadowy tunnel. In a way, one’s facial appearance is an intrinsic part of one’s identity. The role of facial symmetry in aesthetic judgments, physical attraction and identification cannot be overlooked. The modern protagonist of appearance Hannah Arendt (19) had averred that “being and appearing coincide.” This is undeniable.

The age-long controversy or dichotomy between appearance and reality is much ado about nothing because appearance is inextricably interwoven with reality. As a being is, so it appears. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger categorically states that, “being essentially unfolds as appearing, as stepping into un-concealment” (148). Attendant to appearance is the ability to perceive and openness to being perceived. These are unarguably basic structures of human embodiment. On this note, Arendt (19) averred that, “nothing that exists, in so far as it appears, exists in singular, everything that is, is meant to be perceived by somebody. This greatly underscores the social dimension of physical/facial appearance. Arendt’s opinion finds an echo in Negrin (21) who relates appearance to identity: “It is as embodied that we can touch and be touched [seen and be seen].... to be a body is to be a specific identity that is open to involvement with others.” Negrin (2) further states that,

There is no self apart from that which is constructed through one's appearance this is in addition to the fact that the cult of appearance is privileged over all other modes of self-definition and one's appearance is an inescapable aspect of what it means to be a social being.

In essence, it can be inferred that appearance and identity are inextricably linked. There is no doubt, "an individual's physical appearance evokes responses from others" (Gianine D. Rosenblum and Michael Lewis 52). Invariably, the obstruction of proper appearance in any way tells negatively on the identity.

Nowhere else in the modern world is the inextricable link between facial appearance and identity most prominently shown as in facial recognition systems used in confirming or validating an individual's identity. This is a form of biometric security widely used in unlocking phones, law enforcement, banking et cetera. The facial recognition software identifies one's facial geometry, contours, shapes and other facial peculiarities. These facial features which are somewhat unique to each person are employed in identifying each individual. The facial recognition technology, as used for instance in ID Verification, establishes a synchronization, a sameness between one's facial appearance and oneself. Indeed the etymology of the word "identity" from the Latin word *idem* (sameness, oneness), seems to convey the subtle message: 'Your facial appearance is you!'

The face mask partially conceals the facial appearance and invariably the identity of the wearer. In other words, it impairs face recognition process. The human face is not meant to be covered rather it is meant to be shown and to be seen. In a way, the face mask interferes with the substantive fixity of facial identity by shielding the existing features and creating its own. This leads to partial mutation and creates confusion.

### **Facemasks and Human Inter-subjectivity**

As banal and superficial as facial appearance may seem, it remains a determinant in building social relations or inter-subjectivity. Facial expressions are informal means of communication. Communication is the life-blood of human inter-subjectivity. This is achieved not only through spoken and written words but also facial expressions and body language. In Nigeria today, the phenomenon of body language has become a trending topic. People have learnt to read the mind of others especially the leaders through the body language and facial expressions. Friendship, quotidian interactions and socialization are mostly initiated via facial expressions. William Shakespeare (Act 1, Scene 4) is therefore wrong to have hastily concluded that "there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face." Feelings and emotions are easily read and interpreted through facial appearance. When one's facial expression fails to synchronize with the content of the mind, one is

suspected of insincerity. Facial appearance is not only part and parcel of embodiment but also the primary avenue for perceiving others and being perceived by them. It opens the vista of one's involvement with others.

Following from the above exposé, the impact of the face mask can now be evaluated. Face masks impair not only face recognition but also voice production. The mouth region is covered thus somewhat obstructing and distorting the normal human voice production and line of communication via human speech. In some instances, people do remove their masks so that they can be clearly heard and understood. This measure defeats the essence of the face masks. Meanwhile, observation of the labial movements helps in no small way in understanding a speaker. This is to say that communication is achieved not only through words but also through non-verbal means such as observing labial movement and facial countenance. What then happens to speech and proper communication when the face is partially eclipsed and the entire lips or labial parts covered with face masks?

On a different but lighter note, face masks have got some aesthetic dimension wherein creativity and beauty were made manifest. It was not all gloomy! Some fashion designers have been able to create face masks that pair or match with clothes they sewn. It was a beautiful sight beholding some soldiers, nurses, and policemen/women et cetera, wearing matching face masks that pleasantly rhymed with their respective gears or attires. The face masks thus became a source of beauty and glamour amidst the raging Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Mandatory Face Masks vis-à-vis Personal Freedom**

The greatest challenge posed by COVID-19 pandemic is not about health but freedom: freedom to wear face mask or not to wear; freedom to be vaccinated or not to be vaccinated; freedom to move about during the lockdown or not to move about. How does the mandatory use of face mask impact on personal freedom? In a nutshell, the compulsory use face mask enforced by many governments during the pandemic, inasmuch as it helped in the fight against the spread of the disease, it somewhat impacted negatively on individuals' freedom. The enforcement failed to consider the discomfort that the face masks cause to some wearers. Secondly, it goes without due consideration of peoples' autistic disposition and possible allergy. According to Seung Eun Cha et al, "those with higher self-perceived attractiveness are *less* willing to wear a mask as they believe that wearing a mask hinders the opportunities to deliver a favorable impression to others" (2). The ubiquitous caveat, "No facemask No Entrance" found in most public places sounded restrictive. Is this not sheer usurpation of personal freedom? Jean Jacques Rousseau was no less right to have averred in the first book of his *Social Contract* that, man was born free but everywhere he

is in chains (Rousseau). This in a way underscores the dichotomy between personal freedom and societal good.

How do we set the boundary between personal freedom and public good? Without such boundary or limit, the society becomes lawless. Personal freedom is not absolute freedom. To put it mildly, personal freedom is often sacrificed for the societal good. One is often compelled to bear some inconveniences and to set aside autistic disposition for the general good of all. This is what obtains when one wears discomfoting face mask during the pandemic.

### **Masks as Epitome of Spookiness and Inauthenticity**

The term ‘mask’, of which face mask exemplifies, maintains an unappealing connotation of disguise or inauthenticity as well as spookiness throughout its history; its various usages notwithstanding. In the antiquities, from its use in Greek drama, to Roman funeral procession as *imagines*, the underlying motif remains the same: to disguise or to personate. Not only in ancient Rome but also in Africa is it used to impersonate the dead ancestors thus arousing the aura or feeling of spookiness. The vestige of this ethereal or ghostly symbolism still hunts us today during the celebration of some feasts such as Halloween, Christmas, and New yam festival. In all these instances, there is fundamentally concealment of either a part or the whole body with masks. Face masks as used during the COVID-19 pandemic re-enacted the concealment by partially eclipsing the lower part of the face (mouth region).

The occlusion and disguise make for inauthenticity on the part of the wearer of masks who pretends to be what he or she is not. Frantz Fanon aptly captured this ugly phenomenon in his book *Black Skin White Mask*. As the title implies, Fanon decried the inauthenticity of the colonized relegate their indigenous cultural identity to copy those of their colonizers. These are blacks who attempt to sheepishly emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man (Fanon xiii). The irony of the above mimetic behaviour is that the actors end up becoming neither white nor black, nay black skin, white mask. This is the hallmark of inauthentic existence.

### **Face Mask in COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Engagement**

The present inquiry on the use of face masks in COVID-19 pandemic concerns itself with not only the description of a reality and experience that became prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic but also a further interpretive engagement in relation to people’s lifeworld as being-in-the-world. This makes apparent what is may be latent or embedded in the phenomenon of face mask. The approach therefore transcends mere descriptive (eidetic)

to interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology. The hide-and-peek, sweet-and-bitter dynamic operations of face mask easily comes to mind here. While the mask shields the wearer and limits the spread of virus, it partially occludes the face and impairs the communicative role of the human face, and inter-subjectivity. Conversely, when well-designed with matching clothes and colour, the face mask showcases good creativity, beauty and aesthetic, but at the same time, turns humanity into an anomalous mass of indistinguishable mask wearers. The caveat here is lest the individual is swallowed in the anonymous mass of mask wearers; nay a rapid change from authentic to inauthentic existence.

The import of the face mask on the individual's or collective lifeworld and the human freedom draws attention to its hermeneutic inquiry. In the first place, the phenomenon of face mask raises great concern on the dichotomy between situated freedom and radical autonomy. One is compelled here to argue that one's subjective choices and experiences are clearly embedded within the prevalent or available context created by the society as clearly evidenced during the pandemic. Secondly, from a deeper analysis of given historical, socio-cultural and political peculiarities, the face mask evokes some symbolism, meanings and significance. For the African, the phenomenon of mask not only symbolizes the ancestors, but also reminisces the colonized and the paradox of false identity or identity crisis- 'black skin white mask' as encapsulated by Frantz Fanon. This is an epitome of inauthenticity and identity malady. Today, efforts in decoloniality are partly geared towards unmasking and disentangling whatever mask or inauthenticity that keeps the decolonized in bondage.

## **Conclusion**

The present paper has done an investigation on the phenomenon of face masking during the COVID-19 pandemic. It x-rays the social impact of the face masks. As a background to the discussion, the paper did an exposé on the phenomenal nature of the human face. This was followed by an excursus on the impact of face mask on facial appearance and identity. The paper further examined the effects of face mask on human inter-subjectivity. The aesthetic dimension of face mask was also hinted at. Freedom is a key concept in existential-phenomenological inquiry. The paper examined the impact of masking on the freedom and autistic disposition of the wearer. Man is born free but everywhere in chains – Jean Jacques Rousseau. Where is the freedom to be free and to breathe fresh air while putting on the suffocating face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic? The paper attempted to set the boundary between personal freedom and public good.



The paper went deeper in search of meanings, symbolism and significance which the face mask incarnates; to give a hermeneutic touch to the phenomenon of face mask by drawing attention to the impact on the lifeworld as exemplified in the African cultural and historico-political situation. Accordingly, it harped on the symbolism of the ancestors and its spookiness or scariness, yet ancestorship remains a key factor in African cultural and religious environment. The phenomenon of mask equally reminisces the African cultural alienation and the dichotomy of authentic versus inauthentic existence occasioned by the oppressive and subjugating African experience occasioned by slavery and colonialism. This dilemma is aptly captured by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask*. In a résumé, the paper drew attention to the social impact of face mask worn during the COVID-19 pandemic; 'simple protective gear' that partially occludes the face that incarnates different meanings. The paper suggests that face masks can still be improved upon to minimize the negative effects. If technicians could manufacture transparent eyes glasses for possible eyes contact with the wearer, transparent face masks are not impossible. Finally, the latent meanings embedded in the face mask could be further explored to better the human society.

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