

“I’m Not a Doctor, But I Can Sew a Mask”: An Evaluation of Social Media Messages

Regarding Home Sewing PPE for the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020.

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**Significance and Purpose.** The COVID-19 global pandemic caused an unprecedented need for personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical personnel: The most-publicized shortage was N-95 face masks. As word of the shortage began to spread and some medical facilities began requesting homemade replacements for the unavailable masks, home sewers sprang into action, sewing face masks designed to help fill the gap. The purpose of this study was to understand the messages communicated by home sewers through social media regarding their participation in sewing masks for the COVID-19 pandemic during spring 2020. Given the unique nature of the sewn product, the urgency of the situation, and the significance of social media in craft participation, the messages presented by home sewers on social media demonstrated an unprecedented experience to be documented and analyzed.

**Related Literature and Theory.** Participation in meaningful leisure activities such as sewing and volunteering becomes more prominent in times of significant stress (Stebbins, 1996; Verbakel, 2013). Both have been found to provide participants with a sense of purpose and a way to manage stress, thereby providing a coping mechanism that has been found to have positive effects on their emotional well-being (Pollanen, 2013; Stebbins, 1996). When an individual chooses a way of coping, they utilize the resources that they have to minimize their current environmental stress, including mind-calming problem-solving activities (Pollanen, 2007). Recent research has indicated that home sewing can provide this experience as well as being a stress release (Martindale and McKinney, 2020). Nostalgia is sometimes used as a coping mechanism for dealing with uncertain situations and has been found as a home sewing motivator that can be used as a roadmap for the present and future (Armstead & McKinney, 2019).

The internet has been credited as significant in the growth of craft participation by removing geographical barriers (Johnson, 2008). Blogs and social media platforms have provided a place for like-minded individuals to share stories and communicate ideas (Johnson, 2008). Research has indicated that the relationships formed on these social media platforms have significant effect on participants’ decisions to make an item or buy a product such as a sewing pattern (Martindale & McKinney, 2018). Although the choice to participate in crafts such as sewing is often validated within the craft communities that an individual participates in it has been challenged by family and friends particularly the collection of supplies that most crafters possess. This collection typically referred to as a “stash” of fabric that goes beyond their immediate project needs commonly leads to crafters having to justify their stashes’ purpose (Gabbert, 2000; Stalp, 2006).

**Methods.** This exploratory qualitative research used a participant observer netnographic (Kozinets, 2010) approach to analyze the Instagram content related to sewing masks for the COVID-19 pandemic. To access the content expressed by a wide range of Instagram users’ posts regarding their mask-sewing

participation, two hashtag searches were used to obtain posts analyzed. Hashtags are used by social media users in their posts to help other users identify that their message is about a specific topic (Bendoni, 2019). The hashtags #sewingmasks and #sewingfacemasks were chosen due to their emergence during the Global COVID-19 outbreak and their fit to our research question as they were used almost exclusively by home sewers sewing homemade masks for the pandemic. Instagram posts include three components: an image, post message, and comments. This study analyzed only the written post messages, identified using the hashtag search function on Instagram. Instagram offers two post search options for searching hashtags, either allowing the user to view the most frequently-viewed *Top Posts* or to view all the posts containing the hashtag. To understand the most prominent messages being communicated, the *Top Post* search was selected. Two researchers independently reviewed three weeks of posts from each hashtag and took analytic memos to determine the preliminary emergent themes within the post messages (Kozinets, 2010). The preliminary themes of each researcher were then compared and negotiated until both researchers agreed upon five overarching emergent data themes.

## Results and Discussion.

*This is helping me cope.* Some posts indicated sewing masks provided a sense of control and helped them to cope with COVID-19 uncertainty. By “keeping busy” and “helping” they were able to find “peace & calmness,” a previously found benefit of craft (Pollanen, 2013; Stebbins, 1996). Nostalgia was also used to cope (Armstead & McKinney, 2019), with linkages to World War II, a time “when Americans stepped up.”

*Call to (virtuous) action.* Posts urged anyone who knows how to sew to sew masks using the internet to communicate this significant information and connect crafters (Johnson, 2008). Sewing mask was touted to fulfill someone’s unmet needs and thereby protect and save medical professionals, family members, etc. These posts frequently included expressions such as “Sewing masks can help” or “help us sew masks.”

*Do it right.* Posts gave details of the supplies used and sources of information, which included links to tutorial and recommendations for better masks. Post about the “right” way to make masks and the “best” materials to use influenced what types of mask being sewn (Martindale & McKinney, 2018). Posts recommended working with organized groups and not “bothering” hospitals. There was also doubts about the masks’ efficacy, but most felt it was the “best available option” and “better than nothing.” Posters included amateur sewers, celebrity sewing bloggers, and small businesses.

*Rising to the occasion.* Posts often discussed how many masks one had made and expressed amazement at one’s personal accomplishment. Time and effort devoted to making masks was discussed, including how they had involved family members (children and spouses) in their efforts. Many shared they were doing their part in fighting the pandemic which was well captured by one poster saying, “I’m not a doctor but I can sew a mask.” Their volunteer efforts provided them with a sense of purpose that they needed (Pollanen, 2013; Stebbins, 1996).

*I'm ready for this.* Posts expressed that sewers were proud of their preparedness to sew masks, both in abilities and availability of supplies. The need for masks provided them justification for their sewing skills. It also validated their fabric and supply hoards previously questioned (Gabbert, 2000; Stalp, 2006) as captured in this quote “Fabric hoarders finally vindicated”.

Implications. This evaluation of home sewers’ response to the PPE face mask shortage demonstrates the importance that handcraft still has in our technologically advanced society. The production and distribution of 10,000s of face mask to medical professionals has brought a new validation to the traditional craft skill of sewing. This suggest that industry and consumers alike should reassess their expectation that factory-produced consumer and industry resources will be available.

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