

Knit Your Socks and Sew Your Masks:
Hand Knitting in the World Wars Compared with Home Sewing Masks for COVID-19

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Significance and purpose. Similarities and differences between home knitting socks for the Red Cross during the World Wars and home sewing masks for hospitals during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 crisis were examined. Although it has been over 75 years since World War II, our society is again relying on unpaid handcraft work to fulfill shortfalls in the country's supply of equipment for workers on the front lines. Therefore, there is a need to document the comparisons among these events to understand how history is repeating itself. By comparing these events, we can evaluate changes over time in the context of and value placed on home crafting by society and crafters themselves.

Related literature and theory. Previous studies have examined knitting for troops in World War I and World War II (Orwig, 2017; Strawn, 2011). Orwig (2017) analyzed social, political, and economic factors impacting the messaging given to knitters in WWI and how those factors were used to motivate women to knit for the war effort. Strawn (2011) traced the history of knitting through American history, finding that knitting was promoted during WWI as an opportunity for women without professional training to contribute to the war effort. In WWII, knitting came to symbolize contribution to the war effort, becoming patriotic imagery as much as actually contributing large quantities of needed supplies (Strawn, 2011). However, the published literature on the topic remains sparse. Home sewing of masks during COVID-19 is a contemporary, but similar, phenomenon.

Methods. The *New York Times* and *The Ladies' Home Journal* were selected for the historical part of this study, because they were the leading national newspaper (2019 was a Record Year for Digital Growth at The New York Times Company, n.d.; *History 1835-2018*, n.d.; Usher, 2014) and the leading ladies' magazine for the periods studied (Damon-Moore, 1994, p. 1; Peterson, 1956, pp. 14, 23; Rutherford, 2003; Sebastian, 2014). Online databases for these two publications from were searched for articles including "Red Cross" and "knitting," from 1914 to 1946. Identified articles were reviewed and themes were identified. For the second part of this study, Instagram posts by home sewers making masks were analyzed and themes identified. Social media now surpasses print newspapers as the primary source of news for Americans (Shearer, 2018); therefore, analyzing the posts on Instagram in 2020 was deemed equivalent to examining the *NYT* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1914 to 1946.

Results and discussion. Common themes among World War I knitting, World War II knitting, and sewing masks for the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic included using crafting as a coping mechanism, social factors including public recognition and pressure to contribute, confusion over the "right" way to do things, and the way the work was gendered. Similarities and

differences are discussed in the context of the crafting, expectations of crafters, and the crafters' responses.

Context. Coping, or crafting to get one's mind off problems, was common to all three. One New York Times article from WWII described knitting as "soothing," useful for "getting [the] mind off [one's] troubles," and good for "quiet[ing] the nerves" (Cobb, 1940). Between WWI and WWII, knitting had become much more popular; in the early days of WWI, knitting was not widespread – one columnist noted that few Americans knew how to knit (Nicoll, 1914). Both knitting and mask making occurred in a social context; whereas knitting featured in-person social gatherings, mask-making occurred primarily online, with online groups created to coordinate supplies and production and facilitate delivery to medical professionals and others. As Orwig (2017) noted of WWI sewing, both the knitting and the mask sewing were gendered activities, almost exclusively female, and consisting primarily of unpaid volunteer labor. This volunteer work sometimes included contributions from other family members, including children. During the World Wars, materials used for the projects were either given out by the Red Cross or purchased by the knitters themselves. In the COVID-19 sewing, many sewers mentioned using up their own supplies, purchasing supplies, or having supplies donated to them by other individuals. In the World Wars the rationale for this activity was patriotism (Strawn, 2011), whereas the 2020 mask sewers focused more on contributing to community health and wellness. A nostalgic angle was common to all three, with WWI referencing knitting during the Civil War, WWII referencing WWI, and mask sewers referencing WWII.

Expectations of crafters. Promoting knitting and sewing masks as a virtuous activity is something that all three eras had in common. A perceived need to contribute to a greater cause was a motivator for crafting, hoping that one's "little bit" of crafting might help. Social pressure to participate was another common factor, with directives such as "knit your share" coming from magazines and newspapers in the World Wars and posts from Instagram during COVID-19, corresponding with Orwig's (2017) findings about WWI. This pressure existed despite controversy about the usefulness of the items being made; furthermore, questioning the skill of makers or the efficacy of their products was often viewed as unpatriotic or ungrateful. Knitters and sewers were rewarded with recognition for their efforts; particularly-dedicated Red Cross volunteers were recognized by name in the newspaper and were allowed to wear a special blue veil signifying their status, and mask sewers received attention on social media. Numbers were a form of recognition; statistics on knitting included the number of articles made as well as the number of pounds of wool used, and mask makers often listed how many masks they had sewn.

Crafters' responses. Confusion and disputes among volunteers regarding the "right" way to do things occurred in all situations. In the World Wars, the Red Cross acted as a central authority to disseminate needed patterns and standards; in the COVID-19 crisis, authority was splintered among politicians, social media influencers, and individual hospitals, with little or no centralized direction. Debate about the "right" way to make items was common; in World War I, a New York Times article mentioned an elderly woman who had previously knitted socks for the Civil War and was upset that the Red Cross required a different pattern. In the World Wars and in the mask sewing, some items were produced that were not up to standards.

Conclusions and implications. This study found few significant changes in the expectations and responses of crafters between WWI, WWII, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The most notable changes occurred in the context of changes in technology, with the COVID-19 pandemic

coordination being carried out online and in virtual social groups rather than physical ones as had been the case during the World Wars. The primary themes remained constant across events, including crafting as a way of coping with crisis, social motivations for contributing (although the World Wars focused more on patriotism whereas COVID-19 had more a community health and wellness focus), confusion and disputes about how to make items correctly, and the gendered nature of the volunteer labor.

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