



Benefits of Mask Making and Donating

Melanie Carrico & Haeun (Grace) Bang, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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Introduction. When the coronavirus (or COVID-19) pandemic began in the United States in 2020, medical masks and face coverings were in high demand but supplies were strained (Khazan, 2020). Hospital systems across the country asked sewists to make and donate cloth face masks in order to fill their immediate need for masks. Consumers also found themselves in need of masks early in the pandemic to comply with local mask mandates, yet there were none available in most stores.

The sewists who dug into their fabric stashes and produced thousands of masks for their communities were lauded by the Washington Post as “rock stars” (Koncius, 2020). Groups of sewists united through social media to identify and fill needs for masks far and wide. One woman who found a socially distanced way to distribute the masks she made to her neighbors by taping them to a tree in her front yard stated that making the masks was “a creative outlet and also a way to ease my anxiety” (Bringle, 2020). Our study seeks to understand what motivated individuals to make cloth face masks and donate them to others during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we investigated whether the act of sewing masks had benefits for the sewists.

Literature Review. Other researchers have investigated mask makers recently with similar lines of inquiry around the sewists’ motivations for and feelings about making masks. Schnittka (2021) interviewed adults in the United States ages 60-87 who sewed masks early in the pandemic to either give away or to sell. Martindale et. al (2021) collected data about mask makers from public Instagram posts in March 2020. While the authors above identified different themes, there were similarities in some of the results. Both articles identified that mask making provided some relief from anxieties around the pandemic and gave sewists a sense of control during the unusual times. Martindale et al’s (2021) theme of “rising to the occasion” aligns with Schnittka’s (2021) themes of “engagement and accomplishment”. Participants were, at times, obsessed with making masks (engagement) while also feeling satisfaction at their accomplishment of making a lot of masks. Both studies included references by sewists as having “superpowers” as mask makers.

Like the sewists above found anxiety relief while making masks, many who partake in sewing, along with other textile crafts like knitting and weaving have anecdotally referred to the act as being therapeutic. Caltabiano (1994) demonstrated that sewing as a hobby can reduce stress, specifically in females, although noting that females in their study participated more in craft type of leisure than did males. Through interviewing quilters, Dickie (2011) identified that participants considered quilting to be therapeutic. Pöllänen and Weissmann-Hanski’s work (2020) supported the notion of therapeutic benefits from crafting. Their subjects experienced

stress relief, self-empowerment, and social benefits, among others when crafting. Martindale and McKinney (2020) found that women gain personal fulfillment when sewing for themselves.

Research Method. To understand the social phenomenon and personal benefits of making and donating masks, structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants who volunteered to be interviewed in a previous online survey. The interviews took place in April and May 2021 via zoom. Before participating in the interview, participants received the consent form and were fully informed about the research. They were also provided the interview questions to think about and prepare their answers. Transcripts were cleaned and coded, and phenomenology was used to analyze the data. Pseudonyms were created to maintain anonymity of the interviewees. All participants were female. 42.1% of them were baby boomers (born between 1943-1963), 26.3% were millennials (born between 1983-2003), 15.8% were Xennials (born between 1977-1982), 10.5% were Gen X (born between 1964 and 1976), and 5.3% were silent generation (born before 1943).

Results and Discussion. Participants noted that providing masks for health care workers, their friends and family, and their communities at large was one of the leading motivators behind their mask making. Lynn's motivation for mask making was "to alleviate suffering within my community." Sewists without a personal connection to someone needing masks started sewing them to fill new-found free time or due to hearing about the need for masks from the media or friends. Tina, for example stated "what got me making a lot of them was one of the quilting stores developed her own website of mask makers for southeastern Wisconsin. So, I was making masks and helping to support the stuff that she was doing." Each participant highlighted the idea that mask making was either something they could do or that they should do.

Participants noted that they learned things about themselves and their communities during their time making masks. 3 of the 19 respondents mentioned they learned that people are willing to step up and help those in need in their communities and at large. While 5 others highlighted learning something about themselves through mask making; discovering their 'tenacity', what they enjoy, and even how to better manage their time. Another benefit that participants highlighted was that mask making provided them with a way to keep busy and relieve tension during the pandemic. Denise felt that making masks was a good escape from the stresses of the pandemic. She said "there's a good, positive distraction to be doing something and feeling like you're being impactful. And I honestly haven't sewn that much in a long time either, and I really forgot how much I love sewing. It was good to have something to do." Beth said about making masks that "It kept my stress level down, ... Absolutely kicked my sense of self-worth and my self-esteem up, because I'm being useful and helping others." In fact, 6 of the 19 respondents stated that mask making made them feel good about themselves or helped with their self-esteem. Kim echoed what previous studies suggested "sewing is even more a therapy for you just for your mental health." Cindy also likened sewing to therapy and stated "I was sad because I wasn't working. So, I just focused on something else... Instead of working, I just sewed."

In addition to relieving stress, making masks also became a creative outlet for the sewists. 10 participants indicated pleasure from working with colors and patterns of fabrics. Renee “just had a really good time shopping for fabrics,” and Janet said “for me, as the one who's making them, the important thing is playing with the colors and the patterns. It just caught me off guard, how much I love doing that.” Other interviewees shared that they enjoyed the act of sewing more than anticipated. For instance, Julie shared that “I enjoy making them because it's a quick process.” Cindy also appreciated the quick process saying “I enjoyed making the masks. I loved just zooming through it. It was fun once you got the groove.”

Conclusion. This study examined the motivations of making and donating masks during the pandemic and what the perceived benefits of this social behavior are. As our findings confirmed, sewing can be an activity that can help community and society connect and support each other, assist individuals to have positive psychological effects, and allow individuals to express creativity. Future research can investigate other forms of philanthropic crafting as well as other benefits to individual wellness that sewing may provide.

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