

Face Mask

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The year 2020 has been of uncertainty for all. In a matter of weeks face masks became a mandatory article of clothing for anyone stepping into the outside world. There are even government mandates, effectively forcing people to own and wear a mask to partake in any activity that takes place outside of the four walls of their home. The piece of clothing I have chosen for this assignment is the mask I wear daily, because it has become an integral part of my life, and represents where I am from.

People have been using face masks to stop the spread of diseases for eras. During the era of the Black Plague, people also wore masks but they had a “beak” like structure where the wearer would put flowers to avoid the smell of death that the plague left in its wake. Medical face masks were created in the early 20th century by a public health specialist named Wu Lien-teh from Malaysia, the masks were made with a double layer of gauze to try and maintain a plague that had started in the Northeastern part of China. During the Manchurian plague in 1910 to 1911 and the influenza pandemic in 1918 to 1919, face masks were used to protect medical workers and patients throughout hospitals. Face masks which have been widely known to be used to stop the spread of sickness as well as epidemics and pandemics alike. During the influenza pandemic, San Francisco made it a policy where it was mandatory to wear a face mask and that helped decline the death rates. Face masks are also purchased and worn in an attempt to keep harmful particles in the air out of the body, such as smog in areas with a lot of pollution.

In the time of the coronavirus, face masks have been deemed as one of the only acceptable procedures worldwide in trying to keep the spread of the virus to a minimum and hopefully stop the spread outright. Even though some people do not agree with wearing a mask, areas have varying levels of mask wearing requirements and social distancing regulations. For instance all zones require masks to be worn to enter inside stores, on public transport, or when social distancing cannot be followed. Mask requirements also vary from country to country, with each countries' current standing with the virus dependent on their containment strategy.

Half of the mask has a denim jean fabric/design to it and the other half has the Puerto Rican flag all over it. The outer side of the mask has a rough thick feeling to it and the inner side has a soft smooth feeling. The mask has a filter between the two layers making sure nothing gets through, and adjustable elastic straps so it can fit my face. The material used for all the layers was cotton making it soft on the face. Masks are a simple barrier to help prevent your respiratory droplets from reaching others as well as others' droplets from reaching you.

The mask was made in Puerto Rico by my aunt at the beginning of the pandemic. My aunt makes the face masks in the pharmacy she owns and sells them by hand. She had started making them because of the coronavirus. She wanted her customers to be able to have access to buying masks, especially reusable ones. All the masks that my aunt had made were sewn by a sewing machine. To get the straps to stay she had knotted each one to make them into circles, then she folded the ends of each side with the elastic in the fold and sewed it. She also put the adjustable rubber beads on the elastics. When she started making masks she decided to give one to my mom, who lives in New Jersey. After having the mask for a couple of months, my mom allowed me to have it because it was one of the few masks to fit my face. I have had the mask for three months and my mom had it for five months before giving it to me. This object is meaningful to me because it keeps me healthy in a time of sickness. It connects me to the world because it allows me to be out in public and allows me to go into places when I have to. Since it is adorned with the flag of my country, I feel a sense of pride when I wear this article.

The Puerto Rican flag reflects close ties to pro-independence activists. In 1898, the United States took possession of Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War. During this time, the United States made sure that there were no flags other than the United States national flag hung from public places to the inside of one's house. After the Treaty of Paris was signed, Puerto Rico's chances of becoming independent took a sharp turn for the worse. Puerto Rico's own legislature passed a law in which it was illegal to have their own national flag, sing patriotic songs or do anything that was celebrated or pushed for their independence. In 1957, the law was repealed and the flag was flown again. The blue triangle in the flag represents three branches of their

government and the body of water they are surrounded by. The star represents the island itself. The red stripes represent the blood they sacrificed to have their independence and the people who fought for Puerto Rico while the white stripes represent victory, liberty, and peace. Puerto Ricans take pride in where they come from and to have that taken away because the United States hurt them and when they were able to hang their flag again they hung it everywhere.

The “social life” of this mask is in tune with my own social life. In the world we currently live in, one cannot go anywhere without a mask of some kind. This mask allows me to go out and do my food shopping, get to and from work, see family and friends, and step out into the world while remaining safe. Face masks are just as essential as a coat in the winter, or an umbrella when it is pouring now during the pandemic and the make I wear is so personal to me especially since it is not a regular single use mask or a mass produced cookie cutter design. Having a mask that is personal, a representation of me has made wearing a mask all day each and every day more bearable. It has become less of a chore and more of a habit. I love wearing this mask. It makes me happy because it brings me closer to my culture even though it is just a flag. Even though I have never been to the island itself, I come in contact with people that have and we have conversations about it because we share the culture itself. We have the same heritage, even though the way it was brought to us was different. When I am working and I wear a mask someone always comments on it. I have had people from different backgrounds tell me they loved my mask and Puerto Ricans especially love the mask. We have five to ten minute conversations about random stuff because they see that I am also Puerto Rican. I do not normally talk to people but I genuinely enjoy talking to these kinds of people because we have something in common. I have noticed multiple Puerto Rican masks at work and I kind of wish there were different cultures that would wear their flags out and about. I feel like people would be closer if they did. I also noticed a lot of African masks with their patterns and fabrics and they are gorgeous. During the pandemic, I have come to know that culture, clothing and health have close connections with one another because of how the pandemic started and everyone was terrible to all Asians and how people of color are placed at the top of who is dying from the virus. I saw a man at my job with a

mask that said “I am Vietnamese.” This pandemic has taken its toll on a lot of cultures to the point where they have to differentiate themselves.

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