

Will mask wearing still be common in Britain after the pandemic is over?

August 9 2021, by Nathan Abrams, Hayley Roberts, Simon Willcock and Thora Tenbrink



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Face masks have been a crucial part of the UK's strategy to contain COVID-19, but have also evoked contradictory emotions and reactions.

Some see masks as an important means to [halt the virus's spread](#), as well as a sign of social consideration and [altruism](#). Others have politicised them, seeing mask mandates as trampling over their rights as individuals.

But what will mask wearing in the UK look like in the long term? This is an intriguing question, and one that our [interdisciplinary team](#) is currently exploring as part of a larger project on the role that the media plays in influencing people's decisions to wear [masks](#). Our research covers what factors drive people to wear masks across different parts of the world, exploring the use and effects of media messaging in the UK in light of what happens elsewhere, such as in east Asia.

Globally, the UK sits somewhere between the politicisation of mask wearing [seen in the US](#) and the more communitarian mask wearing of east Asia. Importantly, the US and UK don't have a history of mask wearing to build on, whereas many east Asian countries do.

People in east Asia have worn masks for a host of medical, [cultural](#) and environmental reasons since at least the first half of the 20th century. Masks are worn out of courtesy, to avoid putting on makeup, to keep warm, to avoid attention and communication, and to protect against the sun. They're also worn to protect against pollution (the [100 cities](#) worldwide with the worst air pollution are all in Asia), though people may [overestimate the protection they offer](#).

The real turning point, though, came in 2002, with the outbreak of [severe acute respiratory syndrome](#) (SARS), which started in China before spreading to Singapore and Taiwan over the following year. As a result, masks grew in popularity, so much so that they came to be used day to day as [fashion accessories](#) as well as for protection. Could the same thing happen in the UK too?

How masks became normal in Asia

In several east Asian countries, the high uptake of mask wearing has been driven by government messaging. As a result of SARS and [avian flu](#), for example, the government in Hong Kong [urged people](#) consistently, clearly and frequently to use [face masks](#) when they had flu-like symptoms, both to prevent illness and prepare for other future flu-like epidemics. Warnings were regularly broadcast on television and in train stations.

Meanwhile, in Japan over the past few decades the government has [stressed](#) that it's up to individual citizens to lead a healthy lifestyle. In the early 2000s, [public health programmes](#) and [laws](#) were introduced to get people to actively monitor and take care of their own health.

At the time of the 2009 swine flu epidemic, the Japanese government then relied on this sense of personal responsibility to help contain the virus. Campaign posters at the time [read](#): "The spread of the influenza must be prevented by each individual!" This reflects the sense of duty to act for the "greater good" that exists in many Asian countries, and which manifests itself in people choosing to wear masks if they feel under the weather so they don't pass any illness on.

The success of this tactic may be due to many of these countries—including [China](#) and [Japan](#)—having what the anthropologist Geert Hofstede has defined as "[low individualism](#)". In such countries, the prevailing culture generally favours acting in the interests of the group. A strong motivation to adhere to social norms will therefore [influence people](#) to wear masks. The force of this may be so strong that [mask wearing moves](#) from being something targeted at specific health threats to a general practice, adhered to daily without a specific purpose.

The emergence of branded masks or masks as fashion statements reflects this. For example, in Japan, what is known as "[kawaii](#)" culture is strong. This encompasses a love for anime characters, cute animal

mascots and colourful fashion, and masks have proven to be an easy home for this aesthetic. Masks becoming fashionable may then in turn influence behaviour, making the everyday wearing of them more popular.

Will the same trends appear in the UK?

In the short term, it's unlikely that Britain's mask wearing will mirror Japan's or Hong Kong's. In east Asia, there's been almost two decades of experience with flu-like outbreaks, leading to repeated government messaging around mask wearing and personal responsibility. There just hasn't been the same context in the UK.

There are cultural differences to consider too. Unlike in Britain, in Asia wearing a face covering is not only done by large numbers of people, but is also [socially approved of and expected](#), with lower levels of individualism driving conformity with this norm. Britain, in contrast, [scores much more highly](#) for individualism. Mask wearing, now that it's broadly not mandatory in England, is therefore more likely to be seen as a matter of personal choice.

Current government messaging in England is also emphasising the rights of the individual (the branding of the lifting of restrictions as "Freedom Day" being the key example), and so stands in direct contradiction to supporting the greater social good through mask wearing.

Indeed, anecdotally it doesn't seem that frequent exposure to people wearing masks—whether on TV or in the street—has resulted in the development of a continuous pro-mask attitude and lasting behaviour change in the UK, and [a third of people](#) have indicated that they won't continue to wear masks now they don't have to. However, one way this could change is if mask wearing continued to be [depicted as normal across the media](#), including in fictional settings—on TV and in films,

music videos and so on.

If required for a healthier future, continuing to portray their use in this way could serve as a means to normalise them, beyond governmental campaigns. This, though, isn't a public health tactic that has been tried extensively to date.

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