Facemasks and Covid-19 public health guidance delivery:

An applied social psychology perspective

Dr Rotem Perach
Senior Research Fellow
School of Social Sciences
University of Westminster
r.perach@westminster.ac.uk

@DrRotemPerach

Today

An applied perspective

Public health communications

Facemasks branded with cultural symbols: Theory and evidence

Potential research directions

My perspective

Applied social psychology researcher

Using knowledge on factors that affect people's perceptions and behaviours to solve real-life problems

Not a health communications/ behaviour change expert

Do we still need facemasks and facemask research? (we do)

Facemasks have:

Practical protective value against Covid-19 transmission (Howard et al., 2021)

Symbolic value: signal a sense of social and cultural solidarity by putting other people's health first (Cheng et al., 2020).

We urgently need: Normalised wearing of freely available FFP2 masks in high risk environments such as on public transport and in healthcare settings and shops, and in schools and other shared public spaces when community levels of COVID-19 are high

(25.3.2022, Independent Sage)

Gov: "In England, face coverings are no longer required by law. The government suggests that you continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with other people you do not normally meet (gov.uk. 25.03.22)

Sage: "Publish the criteria for triggering adoption of future temporary social distancing, high quality (FFP2) mask mandates and other measures, with details of which protections will be introduced for specific scenarios, particularly upon obtaining early evidence of new variants.

(25.3.2022, Independent Sage)

Vaccination rates

MP Matt Hancock: "The key question is: what now? My answer is that we've got to keep vaccinating and boosting the most vulnerable." (Daily Mail, 27.3.22)

Scientific vaccination advise

"Continuation of the concerted effort to get as many people vaccinated (particularly younger age groups for whom uptake is low) and boosted as possible."

In effect

Lower in 12-15 year olds (56% single dose, 24% second) vs. older age groups
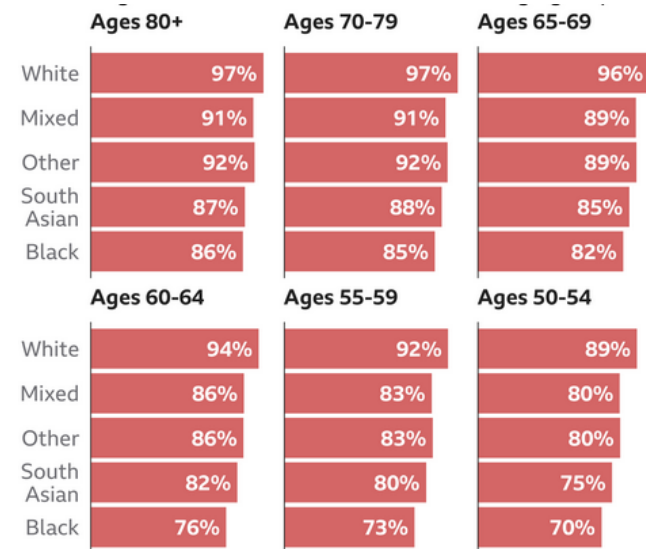
(3.2022, Independent Sage)

Inequality issue

Area: single dose in 12-15 year olds: 74% least deprived areas vs. 44% most deprived areas

(3.2022, Independent Sage)

Ethnic background: Booster takeup lower among ethnic minorities

	Ages 80+	Ages 70-79	Ages 65-69
White	97%	97%	96%
Mixed	91%	91%	89%
Other	92%	92%	89%
South Asian	87%	88%	85%
Black	86%	85%	82%

	Ages 60-64	Ages 55-59	Ages 50-54
White	94%	92%	89%
Mixed	86%	83%	80%
Other	86%	83%	80%
South Asian	82%	80%	75%
Black	76%	73%	70%

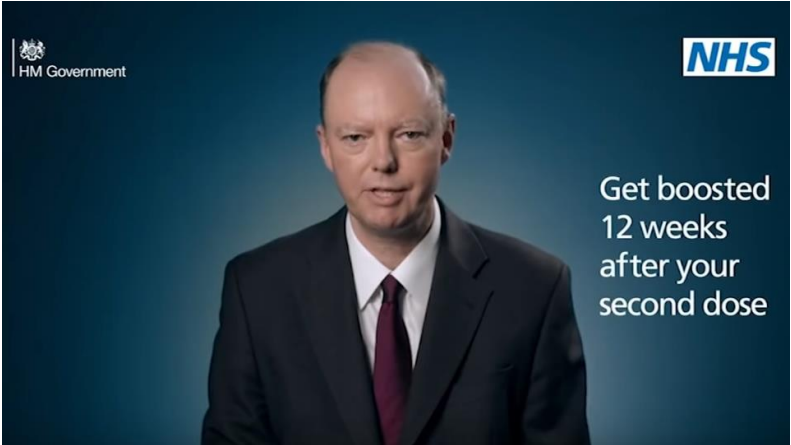Note: Percentages relate to number who were due a booster as of 16 Feb
Source: OpenSAFELY analysis of NHS data in England.
BBC

Need for effective targeted Covid-19 public health communications

(Elcheroth & Drury, 2020)
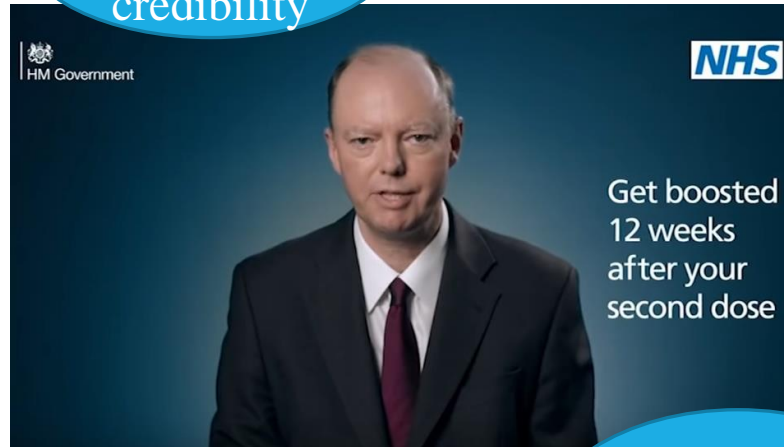
Public communications during the Covid-19 pandemic

Public communications during the Covid-19 pandemic

Public communications during the Covid-19 pandemic
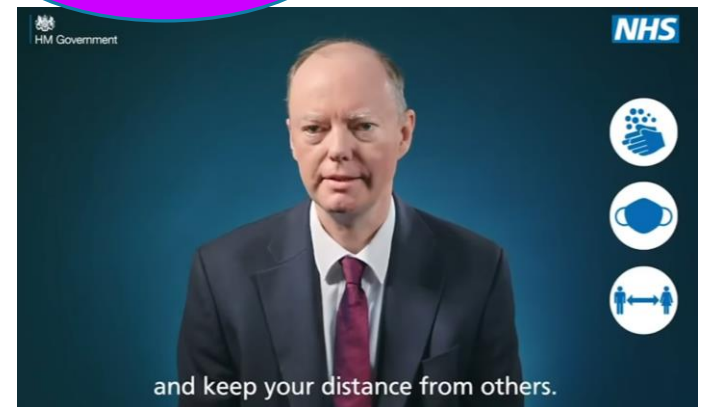

UK flag

NHS

Downing Street

Her Majesty's Government

Why are cultural symbols useful?

Cultural symbols: Constructs of shared meanings that are created by a social group to manage its everyday routine and are passed on from generation to generation (Danesi & Perron, 1999).

Reminders of: British national identity, British values (rule of law, tolerance), solidarity, British pride

National identification predicts public health behaviors (e.g., van Bavel et al., 2022)

Behavioural effects of exposure to valued cultural symbols
## that represent a meaningful social identity (Levine et al., 2005)

Exposure to a valued cultural symbol (a shared social identity prime) increased actual helping behaviour, consistent with group norms

So, exposure to cultural symbols can affect our behaviour, and it matters whether someone is "one of us"

Can facemasks branded with valued cultural symbols increase adherence to Covid-19-related public health communications?

1. Faces as key source of personality impressions

2. Social psychology perspective concerning exposure to cultural symbols

3. Evidence so far

Faces and personality impressions

People's faces are an important source for inferring people's personality (Yan et al., 2015)
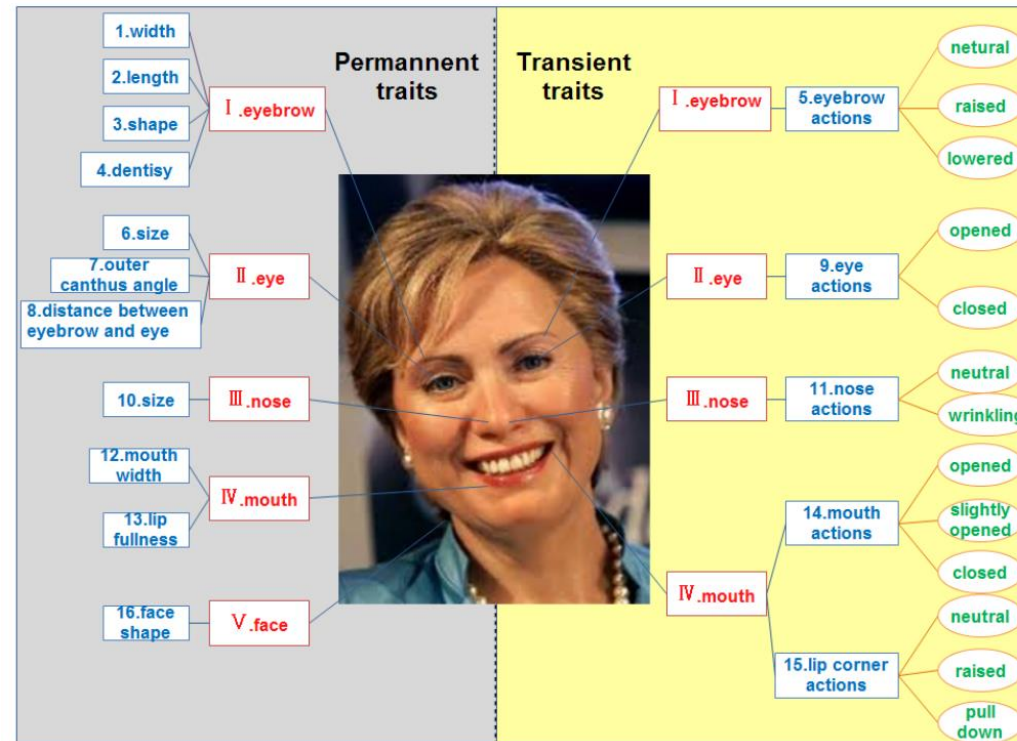
First personality impressions based on whatever facial information is available within 39 milliseconds (Bar et al., 2006)

o   (eg big eyes, round face)=> more trustworthy, honest, warm, kind (e.g., Brownlow et al., 1990)

o   Rapid (100ms) competence impressions in faces of political candidates predict winners (e.g., Olivia & Todorov, 2009)

o   Even when face is covered: Facemask-wearers are seen as more trustworthy, competent, and a more reliable source of advice (Cartaud et al., 2020; Olivera-La Rosa et al., 2020; Klucarova, 2021)

Social psychology theory

When people are reminded that they belong to a social group ("I am a British national"), they use this social identity to define themselves and others, and act according to the group's norms and values (**social identity approach**; Reicher et al., 2010)

Facemasks that activate a social identity (e.g., national) can activate cultural values ("we are one people") and norms such as mutual trust=> "I trust my fellow people more now that I think of my national identity".

From another perspective, these effects are more likely to show when people are reminded of their mortality – by affirming cultural symbols and values people get a sense of symbolic immortality ('I will live on as a member of a long-lasting culture after my physical death') (**terror management theory**; Vail et al., 2012; Courtney et al., 2020)

Can exposure to facemasks with valued cultural symbols shape personality impressions? Evidence: Studies 1-2 (2X2, online, pre-registered; Perach & Limbu, 2022)
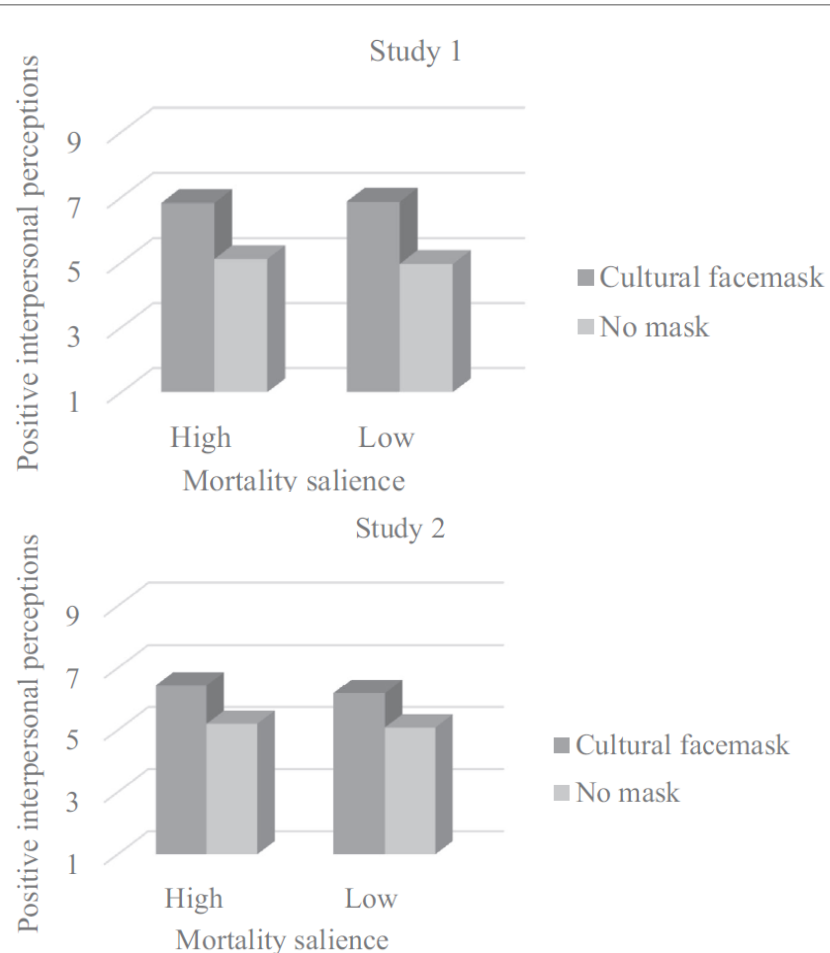
Study 1

Pride flag: a symbol of societal and communal belongingness and a meaningful social identity to those who identify as gay or lesbian
Low mortality salience = reading a book

Study 2

NHS: a symbol of solidarity and national identity in the UK
Low mortality salience = pain

Evidence: Studies 1-2 (Perach & Limbu, 2022)

Study 1

Positive interpersonal perceptions

High | Low
Mortality salience

- Cultural facemask
- No mask

Study 2

Positive interpersonal perceptions

High | Low
Mortality salience

- Cultural facemask
- No mask

N = 178 Prolific users, identified as gay/lesbian, US residents, 62% women, age: 18-52 (Mage = 23.75, SDage = 5.90)

Pride facemask exposure -> significantly more positive interpersonal perceptions, M = 6.84, SD = 1.24, vs. no facemask, M = 5.03, SD = .84, F (1, 174) = 129.95, p < .001, $\eta 2p$ = 0.43.
Mortality salience -> ns, p = .74
Interaction -> ns, , p = .56

N = 198 Prolific users, UK nationals, 64% female, 18–78 (Mage = 33.83, SDage = 12.64)

NHS facemask exposure -> significantly more positive interpersonal perceptions, M = 6.31, SD = 1.27, vs. no facemask, M = 5.14, SD = .83, F (1, 194) = 58.60, p < .001, $\eta 2p$ = 0.23.
Mortality salience -> ns, p = .24
Interaction -> ns, p = .69

Evidence: Studies 1-2 (Perach & Limbu, 2022)

Key findings

- People wearing (vs. not wearing) a facemask with valued cultural symbol (pride flag, NHS) were perceived more positively (e.g., trustworthy, reliable, good-natured).

- This was found whether participants were reminded of death, a neutral experience, or a negative experience.

Study 3 (Perach & Limbu, 2022)

N = 218 UK university students, UK nationals
82% female, age: 18–42 (Mage = 19.87, SDage = 2.12)

Key findings

NHS and surgical facemask led to comparable increase in social perceptions when death awareness was low

When death awareness was high, NHS (vs. surgical) facemask exposure led to greater increases in positive personality perceptions.

Overall

1. wearing facemasks with valued cultural symbols can increase positive personality impressions in people for whom this symbol represents a meaningful social identity (studies 1-3)

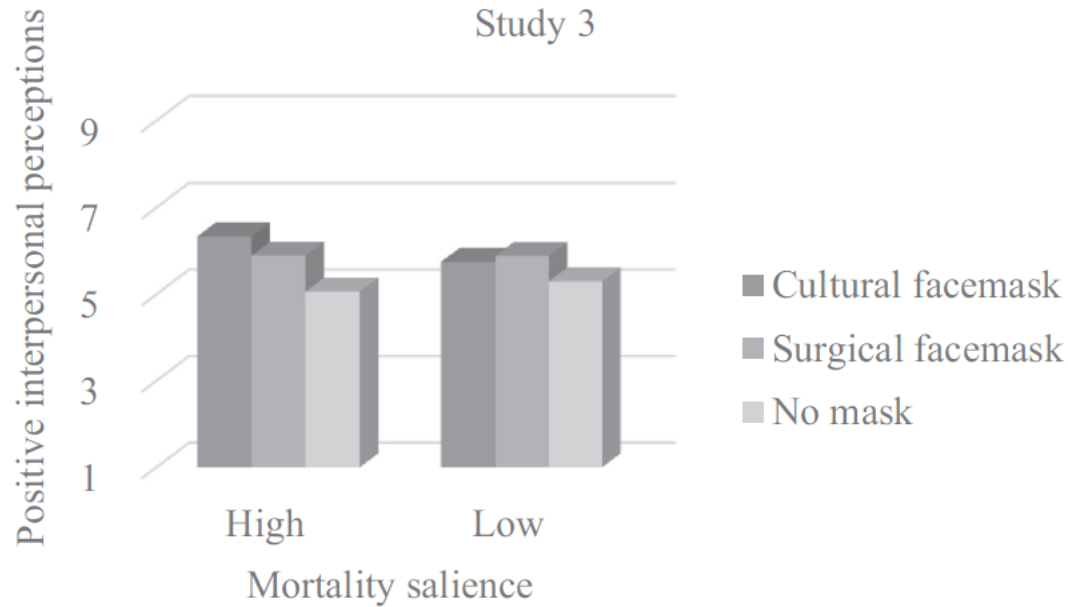**2. In some cases this increase is greater than surgical facemasks (study 3).**

Study 3

(Bar chart: Positive interpersonal perceptions vs Mortality salience, with legend: Cultural facemask, Surgical facemask, No mask)

TABLE 1 Means (SDs), sample size per cell, and significant differences in positive interpersonal perceptions

| | Facemask | | |
| | Cultural[a,b,c] | Surgical[c] | No mask |
	M (SD), n		
MS			
High	6.33 (0.95), 34	5.88 (1.06), 39	5.06 (0.62), 34
Low	5.74 (0.94), 38	5.88 (1.12), 33	5.29 (0.82), 40

[a]Significant difference between high and low MS conditions.
[b]Significant difference in comparison to no mask and surgical facemask conditions in the high MS condition.
[c]Significant difference in comparison to no mask condition in the low MS condition.

The case for culturally-branded facemasks in public health communications

o Face matters. Cultural symbol is quite literally in your face (unlike when on t-shirt or in background)

o Authority figure seen as *one of us* + modelling of protective measures

o Evidence: Facemasks with valued cultural symbols remind people of their nationality/other valued social identity -> positive impressions of mask-wearer (e.g., trustworthy) increase

o Trust and national identification predict adherence to protective measures (van Bavel et al., 2022; Han et al., 2021)

o Health message delivered by wearer of facemask with valued cultural symbol -> increased trust/national identification -> increased adherence?

Some research directions

Delivery

- Mode of message (video, official leaflet, tweet with profile picture)
- Person relaying message (scientist, politician)

Facemask

- Symbol (national, subpopulation-specific)
- Mask (no mask, surgical mask, mask with valued cultural symbol, mask with control cultural symbol)

Other

- Audience (general public, people who identify with symbol, people who do not)
- Type of protection advise (masks, non-masks)
- Behavior (intended, real-life)
- Death awareness

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Thank you

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Collaborator: Maliyana Limbu, Junior Research Associate

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