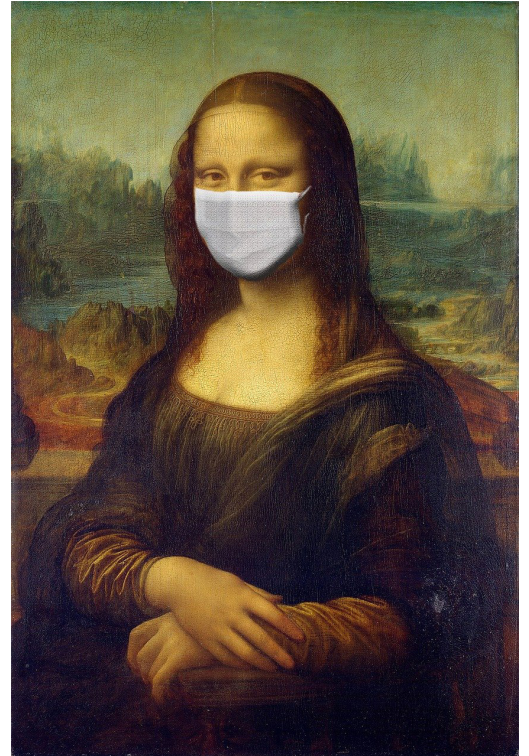


# Analyzing America's Newly Adopted Face Mask Culture

By Sophie Lee





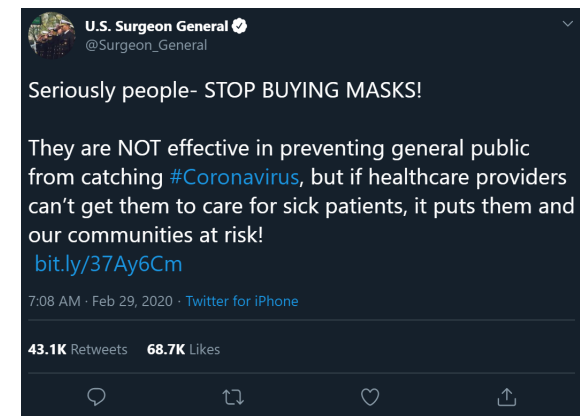
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# Analyzing America's Newly Adopted Face Mask Culture



Times have drastically changed. Most people are limiting the number of times they go out and if they do, they have to practice social distancing which requires people to stay at least six feet apart. But face masks have become our daily necessities, especially when it's just not possible to maintain six feet.

But during the initial stages of the pandemic, United States health officials discouraged face masks. For example, on Feb. 29, U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams posted a tweet that stated that face masks were “NOT effective” in preventing the spread of COVID-19. He also mentioned that buying masks would limit the supply of masks, in addition, the lack of masks could endanger healthcare workers, ill patients—and potentially everyone.



A screenshot of the infamous tweet

Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19, the demand for hygiene products has grown significantly in the United States. Based on the data by Nielsen, a market research and data analytics company, the sales of medical masks rose from 78 percent to 319 percent in the month of February.

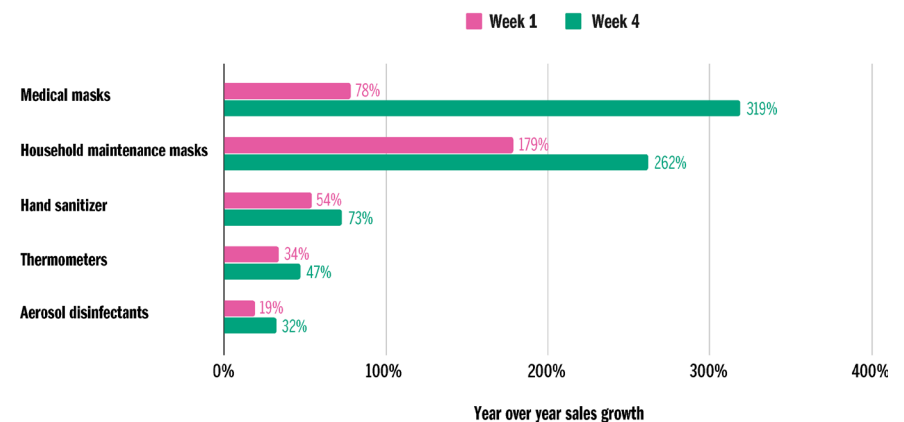
At the same time, the sales of hou-

sehold maintenance masks initially went from 179 percent to 262 percent in the span of four weeks (ending on February 22). This data may be attributed to the community transmission of COVID-19 in the US, which was first detected in February 2020.

As of now, MarketWatch reports that that the Global Face Mask market is

## Comparison of sales growth of health & hygiene products in February 2020

(period ended on February 22, 2020)



Source: MarketWatch, Statista

Graph by Sophie Lee

valued at 4,581.9 million (USD), and is expected to reach 21,210 million (USD) by 2026.

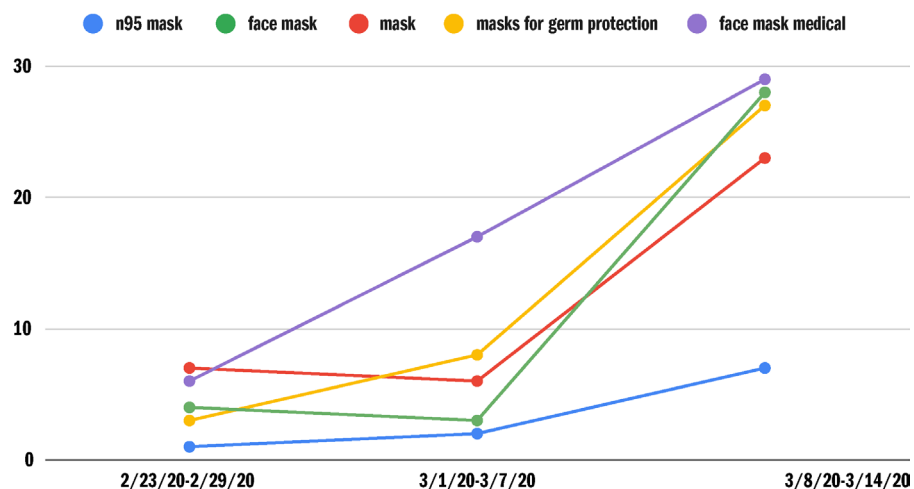
With more people limiting the number of visits to stores, there's been a surge in online shopping, especially on Amazon.com. The New York Times reported that Amazon's sales rose 26 percent amidst the pandemic. In the first quarter, Amazon made \$75.5 billion (compare to \$59.7 billion from the first quarter of 2019). However, profit fell 29 percent because of the costs to keep up with the increasing customer demand.

According to the Marketplace Pulse, the top ten most searched terms on Amazon had "masks" during the last week of February. But from the first and second week

of March, there was a significant difference. The term "face mask" went from being the fourth most searched term to the twentieth-eighth in the span of a week—meaning that the term was being less searched on Amazon.

However from Mar. 1 to Mar. 14, all searches with "masks" weren't in the top 10 rankings anymore. That means either less-and-less people didn't really care to use masks, or people were possibly making their own masks. It's important to mention that around this timeframe, the head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on Mar. 11. And two days later on Mar. 13, Trump officially declared COVID-19 a national emergency.

## COVID-19's impact on top search terms on Amazon.com



Source: Marketplace Plus

## The significance of masks

On Apr. 3, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised people to wear face masks, especially in situations where it's hard to maintain social distancing guidelines. In addition, the CDC recommended that individuals make their own cloth masks, as they can reduce the spread of the coronavirus and prevent the transmission of the virus.

In an interview with Jon Cohen, a correspondent for Science, he explained that people are skeptical of masks only because they don't know if masks are effective or not, and are concerned for the well-being of healthcare providers.

Cohen mentioned that there was confusion because no one understood that the virus could be spread by asymptomatic and presymptomatic transmission—by individuals who are infected but either don't show symptoms immediately or never develop symptoms.

In addition, he stated that the US doesn't have a "culture" of wearing masks, compared to other countries—especially Asian countries, where it's more common to see someone with a face mask. In the



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US, he says,

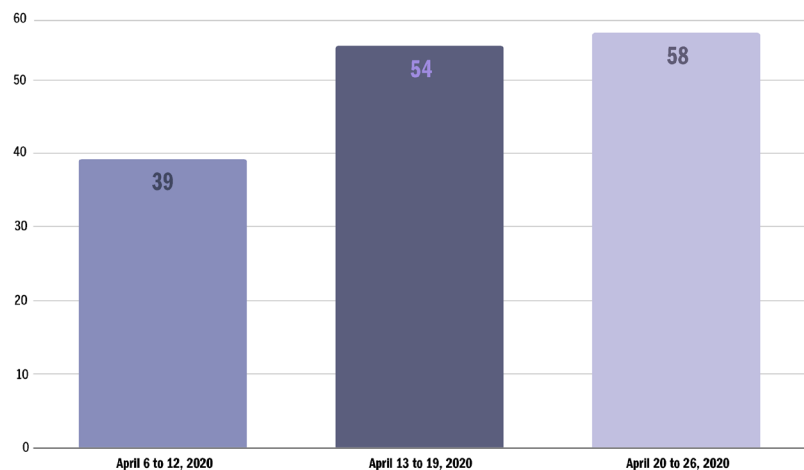
**“It's a sign that you're one of two things: a medical person or someone who**

With more stress be put on having and wearing masks, more and more people are adapting due to the pandemic. In Statista's COVID-19 Barometer, the weekly aggregated data measures individual responses towards COVID-19. In April, 39 per-



cent of respondents (from the first week) said that one of the changes they made to their lifestyle was wearing masks.

### Has wearing masks been a change in your lifestyle?

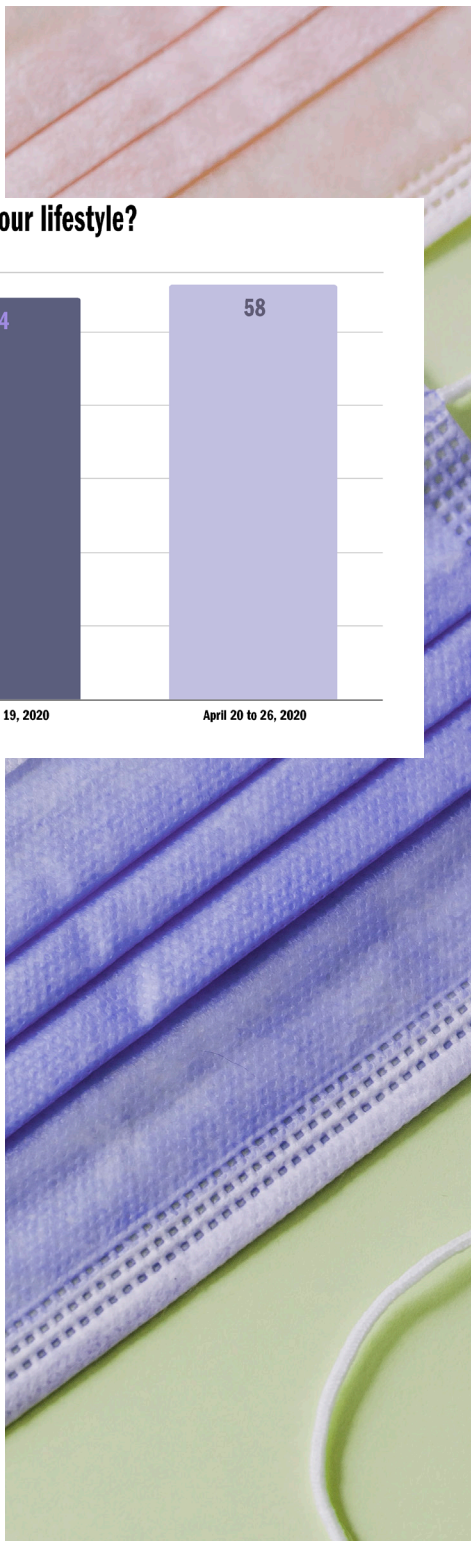


Source: Statista

In the second week of April, 54 percent of respondents said they now wear masks. The following week, it was updated to 58 percent. Although the change wasn't drastic, it doesn't change the fact that more people in the US are choosing to wear masks.

Additionally, the Morning Consult, which describes itself as a global technology company, conducted an online poll from Mar. 13 to 16, on whether people thought that masks were effective against the coronavirus.

They found that 34 percent of respondents believe that face masks

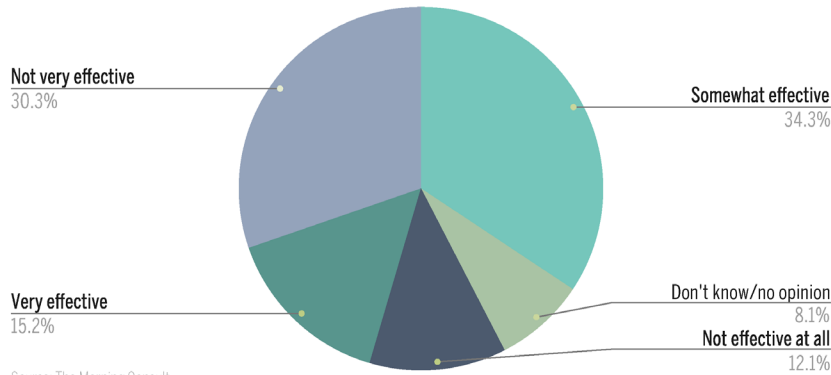


are somewhat effective; meanwhile, 30 percent think that masks are not very effective.

As of Apr. 29, Statista reports that 49 percent of respondents have the same opinion.

### Opinion on the effectiveness of face masks against COVID-19 in the month of March 2020

"To what extent are face masks effective for preventing the spread of coronavirus?"



Source: The Morning Consult

### But, would people wear masks even after the pandemic?

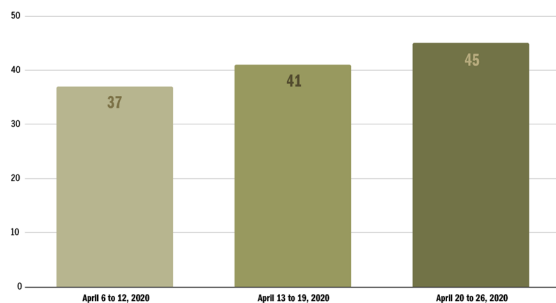
In Statista's COVID-19 Barometer, respondents were asked what they think should happen when or if the pandemic ends.

From Apr. 20 to 26, 45 percent of respondents believe that the public should still wear masks in public, even as a temporary measure.

Even if everyone wears a mask, it's only a prevention tool—and by no means a substitute for social distancing or quarantine. Similarly, we can interact virtually but it can't be a long-term substitute for face-to-face communication.

"You may try to build a connection virtually, but it won't be the same as that face-to-face interaction," said Stephanie Lee, who works as a mental health counselor and behavioral technician. In her line of work, Ms. Lee relies on in-person communication and physical interaction to provide the most support for her clients. "In my work, social interaction is the

Should people wear protective masks outside, even after the aftermath of the pandemic?



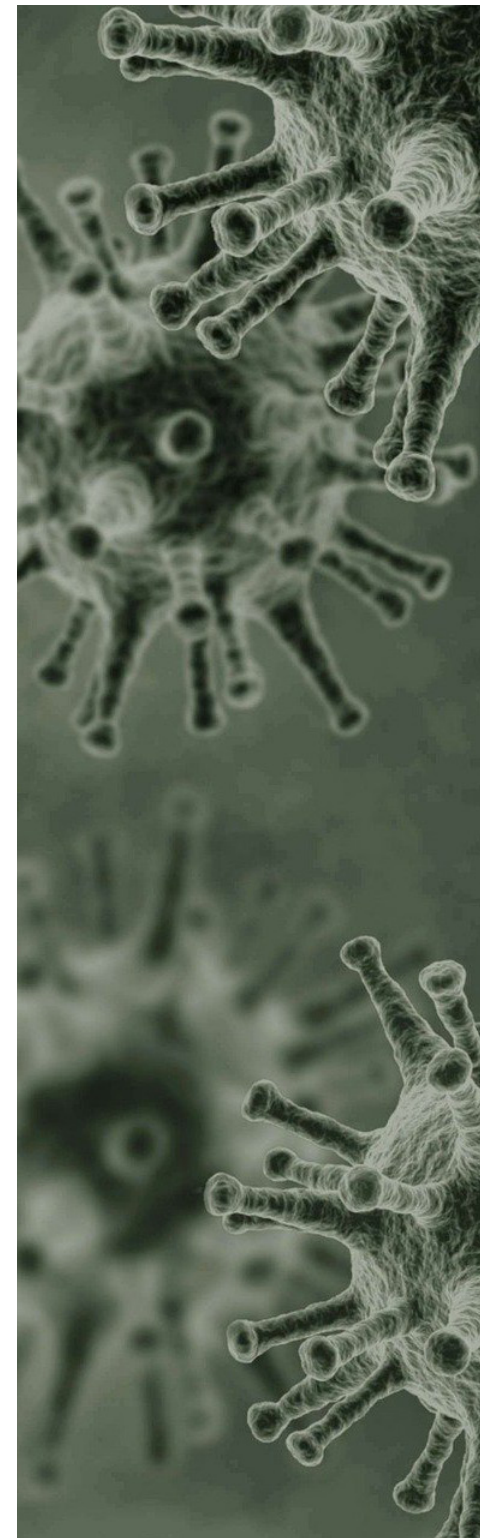
most immediate and effective," she said. "If we don't have that, there's little-to-no effect."

For many working adults like Ms. Lee, physically socializing is unavoidable and essential for any job. She explains that practicing social distancing and avoiding physical contact is "impossible." When asked if she would wear a mask even when the pandemic is over, she said she would.

**"I know it's [the coronavirus] not going to be gone. It's always gonna be here."**

### America's face mask culture

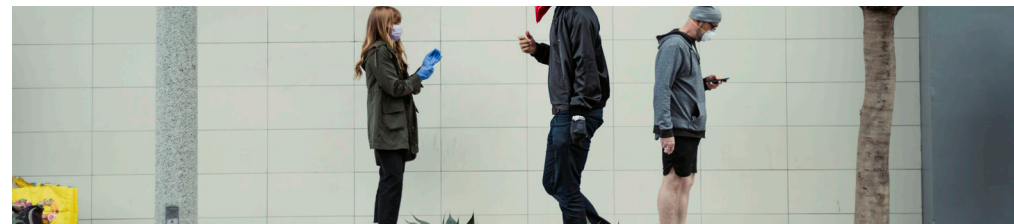
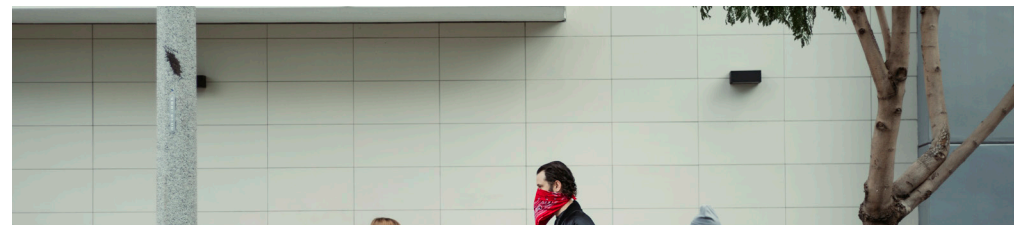
Now, there's been much more emphasis on face masks than ever before. Although wearing masks in public was optional, now it's mandatory. Since Apr. 17, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered all New York residents to wear masks and face coverings, especially when they are unable to maintain six feet in public. As of Apr. 21, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Puerto Rico, and Guam have issued similar restrictions.





However, America's newly found face mask culture is much more complex than most people would assume. From the surface level, the debate on face masks is on the validity of masks and the shortage of masks. But in the United States, face masks are the center of a culture war that may stem from the political division—which is nothing unheard of. In an article by Politico, reporters Ryan Lizza and Daniel Lippman state that for progressives, masks have become a sign of that “you take the pandemic seriously”. On the right, masks are seen as an “overreaction to the coronavirus.”

This pandemic is filled with uncertainty—given the confusion spurred by public health officials—and people are anxious and fearful than ever before. Now, people can't really choose to wear masks; instead, the choice became a moral obligation. And even though we use face masks to at least continue with our daily lives, life just won't be the same.



# **Journalism Design Toolkit**

## **Final**



