Humanitarian Objects for COVID-19: Face Masks and Shields in the Philippines

Mathea Melissa Lim | ORCID: 0000-0003-3928-9692
Graduate Student of Development Studies, University of Auckland
Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, Philippines
mlim595@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Jesse Hession Grayman | ORCID: 0000-0002-0359-5623
Senior Lecturer in Development Studies, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Corresponding author
j.grayman@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

Focusing on the Philippines’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article examines two key objects used to mitigate the widespread transmission of the virus. To answer the research question, “What is the meaning of face masks and shields in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic?” a patchwork ethnography research method was used to triangulate data from a variety of sources, including academic scholarship, mass media, grey literature, and personal experience. Using Tom Scott-Smith’s theoretical interpretation of Karl Marx’s “commodity fetishism” as a framework, the article traces the concealment, transformation, and mystification of face masks and face shields as humanitarian objects, and explores the social, political, and cultural role they play in the lives of Filipinos during the COVID-19 era.

Keywords

1 Introduction

A week into the Philippines’ first COVID-19 lockdown, I found myself carrying old fabrics into my mom’s room as she dusted off her sewing kit. Like us, several family members and friends were in need of face masks, as the drugstores in Metro Manila were all out. My mom’s solution was to stitch together as many makeshift cloth masks and face shields as possible and give them away to whoever needed them. For the masks, she chose hardy materials with lovely patterns – apart from old sheets she brought out some of her own clothes that she had not worn in years. These were not cheap fabrics. I remember picking up a particularly beautiful grey dress, with pink and white flowers on the thick material and thought that she should reconsider keeping some of the things in the pile. “They’re just masks, Mom. I don’t think anyone is going to mind what they look like. Besides, wouldn’t it be a little obnoxious to wear something this fancy? This is a pandemic, not a fashion show,” I said to her. She took the dress from me and smoothed it out on the desk next to the shearing scissors. She turned to me and replied, “When you look good, you feel good. And people need to feel good at a time like this.” I would soon discover how right she was. While I was initially worried that donning a colorful face mask would be considered tasteless or even insensitive, I could not have imagined how masks were going to evolve into a social force all on their own.

Face masks have become the universal symbol for the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the most prominent visual is the blue and white medical mask found in healthcare settings, face masks of different materials, shapes, and styles have emerged across the world as countries battle the spread of the virus. The use of masks for self-protection against airborne illnesses has a long history dating as far back as the 14th century (Howard et al. 2021), and in the last century alone have been used widely in East Asian countries with histories of epidemics. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic is the first time populations around the world are obliged to wear masks to protect themselves and to protect others (Ghosh et al. 2020). By June 2020 an estimated 90% of the global population lived in regions that had laws requiring mask use in public spaces, and community mask use was recommended by most public health bodies and governments (Howard et al. 2021). The Philippines was one of the first countries in the world to implement community lockdowns in March 2020 (Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease [IATF] 2020, Res 12) and public use of face masks in April 2020 (IATF 2020, Res 18). Face shields

1 Use of the first-person pronoun “I” refers exclusively to the first author and her experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.
were also required on top of masks in select public spaces by August 2020, and by December 2020 were required in all outdoor spaces at all times (IATF 2020, Res 88), making the Philippines one of the only countries in the world to implement the public wearing of face shields nationwide. Thus, the wearing of masks and shields became a part of everyday life for Filipinos in a COVID-19 society, in both private and in public spheres of life.

2 Face Masks and Shields as Humanitarian Objects

Face masks and shields are personal protective items that have been used to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the former in a global context and the latter in the local context of the Philippines. Between the two objects, the face mask is the primary instrument of choice around the world when it comes to preventive action against viral diseases. However, for more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic from the time it first began, Filipinos were required to wear both masks and shields in tandem. This makes the case of the Philippines unique compared to other countries where face shields were not required for public use. Therefore, when examining the context of COVID-19 in the Philippines, it would be remiss to overlook the role face shields played at the onset of the pandemic.

Though there seems to be much controversy as to how much protection face masks actually provide to wearers, the scientific and medical community is largely in agreement that the wearing of masks along with proper hygiene practices and social distancing reduces chances of transmitting respiratory illnesses (Howard et al. 2021; Jefferson et al. 2009). In as much as masks are tools for disease control and prevention, they are not neutral objects (Ferng et al. 2011). Analyses of face masks from a variety of fields including political (Wessel 2021), ethnographic (Tsang and Prost 2021), psychological (Tateo 2020), and social-ecological (Casola et al. 2021), all arrive at a similar conclusion: Masks are more than just an assemblage of elastic, fibers, and strings. In the COVID-19 pandemic, this ordinary object has come to embody extraordinary meaning. As an accessory to face masks, face shields may be viewed the same way given that they have played a similar and supplementary role to masks in the Philippines.

While masks and shields are technically considered medical objects, we argue that they may also be considered ‘humanitarian objects’ (Scott-Smith 2013) because they act as protective barriers for people and populations against diseases that cause human suffering. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic can be perceived as a humanitarian crisis. The Philippines is globally recognized as a country in dire condition, where the COVID-19 pandemic compounds
Existing issues with political unrest, human rights violations, natural hazards, and widespread poverty (See 2021). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines received aid in the form of face masks, face shields, PPEs, and other medical supplies from at least 14 different countries (Tomacruz 2020) and from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs as a beneficiary of their Global Humanitarian Response Plan (Gonzalez 2020). Masks also became the focus of local humanitarianism in the Philippines. Due to supply shortage in the early months of the pandemic, government agencies, NGOs, private donors, universities, and local community members banded together to produce face masks and shields for vulnerable people across the country (Lagdamen and Jose 2020). Where humanitarianism and development intersect, communities of indigenous weavers, farmers, and homegrown business owners have found a sustainable livelihood selling masks and shields that boast of their local handiwork, culture, and tradition (Bigtas 2020; Quadra-Balibay 2020; Sanchez 2020).

What might the study of face masks and shields as humanitarian objects offer? “Mass masking” – along with other preventive practices such as hand washing and social distancing – is largely seen by the scientific community as one of the most effective measures to mitigate the spread of viral disease (Parida, Bhatia, and Roy 2020; Howard et al. 2021). The everyday use of these personal protective devices is not just a singular choice merely informed by science. Rather, it is a sustained commitment informed by values, culture, and worldview (Lu, Jin, and English 2021; Gooch 2020). The meanings and values attached to facial covers influence their use in public health crises, and successful implementation and long-term uptake of facial covering on a mass scale should be rooted in the social, political, and cultural realities of the communities they are applied in (van der Westhuizen et al. 2020; Tsang and Prost 2021).

A wide breadth of academic literature on face masks as complex and meaningful objects existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Most research on the cultural, political, and psychological meaning of face masks comes from the United States and Asian countries like Korea, Hong Kong and Japan, where mask-wearing has been a long time practice given a history of epidemics (Tsang and Prost 2021; Chang et al. 2021). However, to the authors’ knowledge, a detailed material analysis on face masks in the Philippines amid COVID-19 does not yet exist at the time of writing. This article aims to contribute to a growing body of academic literature on material analyses by exploring the multi-layered meaning of masks and face shields, and the role these objects play in the politics of health enforcement and policy implementation. Due to strict travel and health regulations during the pandemic that constrain...
traditional fieldwork, a patchwork ethnography approach (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020) was adopted to collect and triangulate data from a variety of sources, including academic scholarship, mass media, grey literature, and personal experiences. A main limitation of the article is the lack of interviews, which would have broadened the scope of narratives to inform the analysis, but was not possible due to time, resource, and pandemic constraints.

3 The Fetishization of Humanitarian Objects

At the onset of the pandemic, concerns about the kind of facial coverings to wear, who should wear them, where they should be worn, and how often they should be used were hotly debated. Even the simple choice to wear or not wear a face mask could be perceived as a statement of one’s beliefs, values, and worldview (Weissert and Lemire 2020). In fact, the face mask had become so politicized in the first year of the pandemic that in the United States, it was likened to wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat (Schneider 2020). In countries of collectivist cultures like the Philippines, public mask-usage is higher compared to countries of individualistic cultures (Lu, Jin, and English 2021) which is linked to a desire among citizens to show solidarity and civic responsibility (Tsang and Prost 2021). To this extent, it is reasonable to posit that face masks and accompanying protective items like face shields have been fetishized – in that qualities, meanings, and values are attributed to the objects that do not derive from the objects themselves.

The common definition of fetishization according to Merriam-Webster can be understood as both ‘an object of irrational devotion or reverence’ and ‘an unwarranted belief’ in an object or an idea. The concept of fetishization as it relates to materiality in post-industrial societies can be traced back to Karl Marx’s theory of ‘commodity fetishism,’ a term that describes the mystery that enshrouds the ‘exchange-value’ of a commodity: its exploitative origins, how it is conceived in the market, and its harmful impact on society (Harvey 2010, 41–47). In his section on commodity fetishism in Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I, Marx attempts to demystify how the ‘exchange-values’ of commodities arise in the market, and pinpoints how they are the product of social relations between things and people, rather than the inherent ‘use-value’ of the commodities themselves and the labor that went into producing them (Marx 1867, 47–53). Through this critique on classical political economy, Marx challenges people to rethink how a capitalist economic system is understood and organized (Harvey 2010, 41–47). Although a widely misunderstood concept, there are Marxist scholars who are of the opinion that commodity fetishism...
is central to Marx’s understanding of the world and the capitalist economic system (Harvey 2010, 38).

How might this concept be applied to public health management? Anthropologists Margaret Lock and Vinh-Kim Nguyen have explored how material objects such as biotechnologies are entangled with history, politics, and culture that create new ways of perceiving and navigating health and illness in the world. In their words (2010, 20):

Marx noted the key corollary long ago: that by changing the shape of material things we inevitably change ourselves ... Biomedical technologies are, of course, designed expressly to facilitate human intervention into the workings of the body in health and illness; in implementation they change us, and even as they themselves are constantly modified, they change the world in which we live.

Scott-Smith offers a theoretical elaboration that contextualizes Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism aptly to the case of humanitarian objects. Scott-Smith’s particular definition of fetishism examines the ways in which humanitarian objects receive unwarranted commitment and are misrepresented as magical, curative solutions to systemic problems (Scott-Smith 2013, 914). His framework breaks down the concept of commodity fetishism into three components that can be easily understood and adapted to a variety of contexts, including humanitarian action and the management of public health crises: concealment, transformation, and mystification.

The first component is a process of concealment. In commodity fetishism, this takes place when the exploitative origins of a commodity are concealed from those who engage with them in the marketplace. An illustration from David Harvey about how people obtain their breakfast explains this clearly (2010, 40): “The bread, the sugar, the coffee, the milk; the cups, knives and forks, toasters and plastic plates – to say nothing of the machinery and equipment needed to produce all these things – link us to millions of people laboring away all around the world.” In the process of concealment, the producers are alienated from the product of their labor, and from the buyers and sellers that profit from them. In a similar vein, Scott-Smith proposes that the concealment of humanitarian objects takes place when the historical nature and origins of humanitarian objects are hidden from those who deliver and receive aid. In his example, the nutritional supplement Plumpy’nut is perceived as a novel, miracle innovation that has revolutionized malnutrition interventions worldwide, when in reality the technology behind durable, nourishing, and conveniently packaged foods has been around for decades. When the complex
history behind the development of a product like Plumpy’nut is concealed, he says, it contributes to a false sense or ‘mystique’ around its originality (Scott-Smith 2013, 921).

The second component is a process of *transformation*. In commodity fetishism, this takes place when a commodity is reconceptualized according to capitalist relationships of exchange. In the marketplace, commodities are evaluated by a single ‘exchange-value’ (i.e. their economic value, or their price) as opposed to their multiple ‘use-values’ (i.e. their practical value, or the number of ways they can actually be used for). This can be further illustrated using the example of a shoe; though it has many practical uses such as protection and support for walking that are unique to the nature of its purpose, it is transformed in the marketplace when it is marked with a price, making it comparable to other priced commodities of a different nature (Taussig 2010, 25–26; Scott-Smith 2013, 919–20). If commodities are transformed by their *economic* worth, Scott-Smith proposes humanitarian objects are transformed by their *biological* worth – in other words, by the number of lives they can save – at the expense of being able to provide individualized care. He says that the more people an object can treat in a crisis, the more valuable and prized they become to humanitarian actors, whereas other values of the object like its aesthetic and social significance are subordinated. Drawing again from his example of Plumpy’nut, he points out that what was originally intended as food for malnourished people has been reconceived as medicine for populations, therefore its qualities like taste and appearance are subordinated to the properties that make it biologically nutritious and reproducible on a mass scale. Scott-Smith makes this observation not to condemn how humanitarian objects are transformed in times of crisis, but to highlight the danger of single-minded judgement on the usefulness of the objects in question (Scott-Smith 2013, 923–24).

The third and final component is a process of *mystification*. In commodity fetishism, this takes place when commodities appear themselves as a source of value, imbued with an active spirit that drives people’s decisions to engage with them in the marketplace. If in the process of *transformation* their multiple practical values are swapped for their single economic value, in the process of *mystification* this single economic value is perceived as an intrinsic property of the object. By this process commodities seem to come alive on their own, autonomous and dominant over their creators (Taussig 2010, 124) and imbued with the power to influence human activities (Scott-Smith 2013, 926). Scott-Smith applies this logic to objects when they are widely and systemically applied to address humanitarian crises. He proposes that there are humanitarian objects which explicitly appear themselves as the sole solution to the problem, even though they do not address root causes of humanitarian suffering.
Take LifeStraw as an example – a personal and portable water filter that has been heralded as a miraculous life-saving device with the power to transform how we are solving dire water problems (Gorvett 2018; de Lacey 2013). While LifeStraw certainly saves lives, water filters are only a band-aid solution; they do not address the underlying causes of systemic inaccessibility to potable water (Redfield 2016). In this sense humanitarian objects come alive with their own power, influencing the character of humanitarian aid to be object-centered. Scott-Smith warns that prioritizing these technologies facilitates efficient and bureaucratic population management, but at the expense of time-consuming and sustainable solutions to systemic problems (Scott-Smith 2013; 2016).

Scott-Smith’s theoretical framework for examining the fetishism of humanitarian objects is a refreshing approach to material analyses that may enable a better understanding of the structures, systems, and healthcare initiatives that make it possible for countries to successfully manage public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The real-world application of this three-part framework is best summarized by Scott-Smith himself (2013, 920):

Through these three processes it is possible to see ‘the fetishism of humanitarian objects’ in quite different terms. Not just the everyday fetishism we see in media representations, whereby objects are revered and imbued with magical qualities, but a more theoretical notion of fetishism, whereby objects illustrate more fundamental socioeconomic structures. Commodity fetishism allows us to examine economic systems through objects, suggesting that commodities help understand the capitalist system. Taking this technique as a theoretical departure, something similar can be said of the world of humanitarianism: objects underpin the humanitarian system just as commodities underpin the capitalist system, and studying the MUAC band and Plumpy’nut can illustrate some structural tendencies in the world of relief.

4 The Fetishization of Face Masks and Shields

While the current body of literature on commodity fetishism generally views the phenomenon as problematic, Pallister-Wilkins eloquently points out that understanding the fetishization of objects through a framework like Scott-Smith’s is a “useful starting point for considering the role of objects, urging caution as opposed to hasty judgments about the importance and positive role of objects in humanitarian practice” (Pallister-Wilkins 2016, 510). The convergence of the negative connotations of fetishism and the positive spirit
of humanitarian objects is a point of interest that motivates our study. While we recognize the seemingly problematic aspects of fetishization, we also acknowledge the productive social and cultural elaborations face masks and shields have generated amidst compounding crises in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature on the fetishization of objects and its impact on people, systems, and societies is diverse. There are studies on the fetishization of conventional objects like currency (Walker 2017), clothing (Amato 2011), and machinery (Hornborg 2008), but also peculiar objects like ID papers (Gordillo 2006) and documents (Cole 2018). Most relevant to our study are the aforementioned studies by Scott-Smith (2013) on the fetishization of MUAC bands and Plumpy’nut as humanitarian objects for malnutrition, and by Pallister-Wilkins (2016) on the fetishization of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the context of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. To our knowledge, a study on the fetishization of face masks in the context of COVID-19 does not yet exist, especially not one situated in the Philippine setting. This article aims to fill this research gap by offering a detailed analysis of face masks and shields as humanitarian objects through Scott-Smith’s (2013) theoretical framework of fetishization, and to examine them as objects that may not be inherently political but are highly politicized in the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the following analytical sections trace Scott-Smith’s tripartite model of concealment, transformation, and mystification by which fetishism takes place, in order to explore the ways in which the fetishization of masks and face shields leads to both productive and pernicious outcomes.

5 Concealment of their scientific nature

According to Scott-Smith (2013, 921–23), to say that humanitarian objects are involved in a process of concealment is to present them in a manner that eclipses their history and origins. In the case of masks and shields, the concealment of their origins and intended purpose may be understood from a scientific lens. When mask-wearing became a community requirement, there was a lot confusion on the right kind of mask to wear, how they function as protective barriers, and how to wear them properly (Ghosh et al. 2020; Babu 2020). In the Philippines this may partially be due to confusion on guidelines from public health authorities. Even before the state of public health emergency was declared in March 2020 (Office of the President of the Philippines 2020), there was already a shortage of masks in Metro Manila due to an earlier event in January 2020: the Taal Volcano eruption. Due to the spread of ashfall across the
northern region of Luzon, public health officials put out warnings for adverse health effects from inhalation of volcanic ash with the recommendation that all citizens wear an N95 mask outdoors (dela Cruz 2020; Esguerra 2020; de Vera 2020). These health advisories sent citizens into a mask-buying frenzy, which inevitably led to shortages within a mere few hours (Ramos 2020).

By the time the first COVID-19 death was announced in the Philippines just two weeks after the Taal eruption, confusion around masks increased. The initial announcement by the Department of Health came with few guidelines on what the public should do: To “practice good hygiene, drink lots of water, eat food rich in vitamins A, C, E and the mineral zinc, avoid crowded places and to wear a surgical mask if they feel any flu-like symptoms” (Gregorio 2020). It begged several questions: Should I wear a mask if I am not experiencing any symptoms? What kind of mask should I wear? Does the mask really protect me, and how? Can I reuse my masks, and if not, how many do I need to buy? During this time, a study on information-seeking behavior in the Philippines showed that the term “face mask” was among the top search queries related to protective personal items, along with additional details such as type, directions for use, where to purchase, and DIY alternatives (Galido et al. 2021). Such search queries may have been triggered by a lack of clear information on mask wearing and the shortage of masks in the market.

Face shields were another controversy. While the scientific and medical community is largely in agreement that the wearing of masks along with proper hygiene practices and social distancing reduces chances of transmitting respiratory illnesses, there is no conclusive evidence that community use of face shields protects one from infecting or being infected by COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), face shields are typically worn to safeguard the eyes from large droplets, but offer little protection from inhaling smaller respiratory droplets. One study shows they may even have an adverse effect on mitigation efforts because the respiratory droplets from the wearer can bounce back from the surface and spread above, beside, and even behind the individual (Verma, Dhanak, and Frankenfield 2020).

Despite the inconclusive findings, the Department of Health (DOH) gradually strengthened their recommendation for community use as cases rose in the Philippines, with the justification that shields provide added protection for the public (Mercado 2021). Furthermore, the DOH was initially unclear about what kind of face shields to wear. Eventually there was a need to clarify policies on wearing “full face shields” that cover the entirety of the face, as opposed to the visor-type shields that emerged in the market (CNN Philippines Staff 2020). Throughout the pandemic face shield policies in the Philippines have
been characterized as vague and contradictory (Ranada 2021), and it was only toward the end of 2021 that they were no longer required for use in public spaces (Espinosa 2021).

Confusion surrounding the efficacy of mask and shield wearing leads to the concealment of their scientific nature: How they work as protective barriers against the spreading of COVID-19. As a result, there has been a tendency to reuse disposable masks and to neglect the sanitation of face shields after use (Cinco 2021). Given the health risks involved with disposable masks, health officials encouraged fabric and reusable masks instead. Additionally, lack of standardized medical-grade masks and shields on the market forced individuals to find creative do-it-yourself (DIY) alternatives – which is when the social transformation of these objects began to take place.

6 Social transformation

According to Scott-Smith (2013, 923–925), the transformation of humanitarian objects is a process in which they are reconceived by the context of emergencies and are judged by their biological worth, such that all other values attached to the object are subordinated. In other words, humanitarian actors evaluate the usefulness of the object primarily by the number of lives it can save, whereas other factors such as the object’s appearance and cultural relevance are deprioritized. This is where our analysis departs from Scott-Smith’s view of how humanitarian objects are transformed. In the case of masks and shields, it seems to be the opposite – because their scientific nature is largely concealed, these objects are reconceived according to their social worth, rooted in their cultural and material evolution.

In a COVID-19 world, wearing a mask or shield is comparable to donning a fashion accessory (Chua et al. 2020; Blancheton 2021). It is not merely a choice purely informed by medicine or science, it is also influenced by politics (Aratani 2020), personal values (Stewart 2020), cultural standards (Lu, Jin, and English 2021), and aesthetics (Berlinger 2020). In deciding to wear a mask or shield one might consider the following: Does it look good on me? What does it say about my personality, beliefs, or values? How do I feel when I wear it, or how will it make others feel when they see me wear it?

In the Philippines, an archipelago made up of approximately 7,107 islands and inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups, mask and shield wearing presents an opportunity to show off local culture. Communities of weavers and artisans across the country have been crafting masks from indigenous fabrics boasting of different colors, patterns, and textures (Legaspi 2021; Sanchez 2020).
final product reflects not just the beauty of the material, but also the histories of different ethnic groups and the uniqueness of their handiwork. For example, traditional weaving in the Cordillera region has been used since the 1800s to create skirts, G-strings, and blankets. Their signature striped pattern created by the *ikat* technique, involving the maneuvering of large traditional looms and dyeing of fabrics, is now seen on masks that are sold and distributed to various parts of the country (Cerbito 2020; Sorilla 2017). In Nueva Vizcaya, a local school celebrated the annual “Buwan ng Wikang Pambansa” (translated as ‘Month of Filipino Languages’) by encouraging students to showcase their own Filipino style of face masks and face shields with the use of indigenous and recyclable materials (Kabagani 2020). From the Ilocos region, artisan weavers have been crafting masks of *inabel*, a fabric well-known for its softness and intricate details. These masks are sold commercially nationwide, and an article featuring their handiwork boasts that “by simply wearing an *inabel* face mask, one wears a work of art and local culture and helps showcase Filipino craftsmanship.” (Diaz-Sabado 2020) The statement captures the cultural value masks embody and how they act as mediators for relationships between the creators and the wearers. In this sense, masks of indigenous representation have the power to bridge the rich cultural history of weavers in the mountain region to the popular culture of city-dwellers in the capital.

The act of wearing one’s culture is also a way of showing solidarity and support for vulnerable communities who lost their line of work during the pandemic. For instance, a cooperative of farmers and local weavers in the Cotabato province went viral on social media when they started their business producing face shields made of bamboo. Members of the group lost their primary
jobs or suffered from augmented income due to the pandemic, and therefore turned to the production of face shields as a means of meeting market demands but also advocating for the use sustainable, environment friendly materials (Capistrano 2020). Local government officials and news reporters widely promoted their business with headlines like “Support These Farmers by Buying These Bamboo Face Shields from Mindanao” (Ichimura 2020), and within days the group received more orders than they could manage from different parts of the Philippines and even other countries (Magbanua 2020). This example illustrates how the call to support vulnerable communities and local businesses may influence an individual’s decision to purchase a particular kind of mask or shield. Such a purchase is beneficial to many: The buyer gains a face mask that protects and beautifies them, the weavers and farmers earn a living, indigenous culture is promoted, and local economies are boosted. To this extent, the act of ‘buying local’ may be perceived as form of humanitarianism in its own right.

Furthermore, mask and shield wearing have become something of a political issue, as they are now taken as a means of stating personal beliefs on aspects of life surrounding COVID-19 and even beyond. They are politicized as objects enforced by the government to mitigate the spread of virus, but also by the way people engage in ‘everyday politics’ involving daily activities and ordinary interactions (Nesbitt-Larking 2016) while wearing them. The past few years have been some of the most politically turbulent for the Philippines (Aguirre 2019). Since the start of the pandemic, the country has seen a number of major socio-political events: The call for mass-testing for COVID-19, the government shutdown of the country’s largest media company ABS-CBN, the passing of the Anti-Terror Act, and the campaigns for the 2022 presidential elections. Despite warnings and policies that restricted large public gatherings, the pandemic did not stop activists and angry civilians from stepping out onto the streets in protest. When they did, many branded their masks and shields with messages of dissent.

When the Anti-Terror Act was passed in July 2020, citizens paraded in masks and shields with statements plastered on the front, such as “NO TO TERROR BILL!” (Ratcliffe 2020). In a massive protest held hours before the 2020 State of Nation Address, people found clever ways to wear their messages on their faces – from glasses with the words “JUNK TERROR LAW!” painted across the lenses, to masks with the words “DEFEND NATIONAL MINORITIES! #StopTheAttacks” boldly embroidered into the material. In this protest, a woman was spotted handing out statement masks that called for press freedom, explaining that she wanted to help protestors realize that even though they are wearing masks, they are not silent (Mejico 2020). The sentiment illustrates the irony of mask
wearing and activism in the time of COVID-19, which is that though one’s face is covered, that they can still communicate a message without even having to open their mouths. Despite heightened communist red-tagging, harassment, and killings during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shamdasani 2021), mass protests have continued up until 2022, and Filipinos continue to find creative ways to express their dissent through their protective equipment.

The wearing of a face mask has also been a means to express support for political candidates in the 2022 Philippine presidential elections. A notable example of this is the public support presidential candidate Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo received upon officially declaring her candidacy in October 2021. At the time, Robredo was the incumbent Vice President and highest ranking government official who chaired the principal opposition party against the incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte. Moments after she confirmed her presidential bid in a press release, she was photographed with her certificate of candidacy wearing a pink mask – the color of her campaign. According to Robredo, pink represents the future and a new way of life (CNN Philippines Staff 2021). Meanwhile, Filipinos in the audience showed their support for Robredo by wearing pink masks with the words “Team Leni Robredo” printed in bold text (Quito 2021). In this context, the act of wearing one’s political statement on their face is a way of expressing the desire for political change (Lagman 2021).

Ultimately, the profound transformation of mask and shields has empowered people to wield them in ways beyond their intended use. They are no longer simply used as protective devices. In fact, the more outlandish they become, the more they lose their safeguarding qualities. What is the purpose of these items, then, if they offer less protection against COVID-19? During the pandemic in the Philippines, they have come to embody cultural, social, and political symbolism that lend meaning to the actions and behaviors of the wearers as they engage in current events. Preventive masks and shields are transformed and used to communicate statements about one’s beliefs to others. In these ways masks and face shields may be understood as vehicles for new interactions, relationships, and connections between people (Fountain 2014).

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2 In a report about the dire situation of human rights in the Philippines, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) defined the term ‘red-tagging’ as the labelling individuals and groups as communists or terrorists (Human Rights Council 2020). Since the anti-terror law was passed in 2020, incidents of the military red-tagging activists and protestors who express dissent against the government have increased (Ines 2021).
Figure 2  Activism in the time of COVID-19. A woman wears a mask with a call to defend national minorities during the ‘SONAgKAISA’ protest.
Photograph by Alecs Ongcal, from Rappler

Figure 3  A protester wearing a message painted on his face shield during a rally at the University of the Philippines.
Photograph by Basilio Sepe, from BenarNews
Finally, Scott-Smith (2013, 926) says that objects become mystified when they explicitly appear to be the sole solution to systemic problems and are given unwarranted praise. In a similar vein, it can be argued that masks and shields implicitly appear as a sufficient solution for protecting oneself and others from COVID-19. It is widely understood that masks and shield wearing work best when done alongside a variety of other practices such as handwashing, social distancing, and limiting social contact. However, it seems that over time, the wearing of masks and shields create a false sense of security which leads to a reduction of the aforementioned practices (Parida, Bhatia, and Roy 2020; Cartaud, Quesque, and Coello 2020). In the Philippines this occurs on both a policy level and a community level, as seen in the ways masks and shield wearing has enabled people to behave in ways that are dangerous to their health.

At the policy level, the Department of Transportation (DOTr) strictly implemented the “no mask, no shield, no entry” policy on public transportation while it reduced the required physical distance between commuters. In September 2020, less than 6 months into the lockdown and with COVID-19 cases at its peak (Calonzo 2020), a plan was proposed that would gradually reduce the required physical distance from 1.0 meter as recommended by the World Health Organization to eventually settle at 0.3 meters. According to the DOTr this was done in an attempt to boost the economy by providing more transportation trips and increasing passenger capacity (Calonzo 2020). The gains of such a policy may be economically beneficial to some degree, however it also gives off the impression that so long as people wear their masks and shields, that other practices like social distancing may be regarded as less significant and therefore compromised.

At the community level, Filipinos have continued to wear masks though they have gradually relaxed on distancing and socializing in-person. A study about consumer behavior in the Philippines showed that even with COVID-19, customers feel positive about shopping and daily living so long as they are masking and social distancing (Ong et al. 2021). This is most evident during Christmas, a sacred period of festivities in Filipino culture; the holiday is typically celebrated by a combination of customs from Philippine, American, Chinese, and Spanish influence, bringing nuclear and extended families together not only on Christmas day but throughout the entire month. Though nine out of ten Filipinos were reportedly wearing masks in December 2020, an inevitable surge of COVID-19 cases occurred due to a higher frequency in social gatherings in both public spaces (e.g. malls, restaurants) and in homes (Dancel...
The Philippines also saw an increase of COVID-19 cases in December 2021 (Ropero 2021). Despite the government’s policies on social distancing and public health warnings to refrain from large gatherings, Filipinos have continued to convene in mass gatherings to celebrate religious traditions such as “Simbang Gabi” (translated as ‘Midnight Mass’) with their masks and shields on (Testa 2021; Regencia 2020). Such is the power of these objects. Though mask and shield wearing are not explicitly regarded as the end-all solution to COVID-19, the physical barriers give wearers the impression that they are safer than they truly are.

8 Impact of Fetishized Masks and Shields

The fetishization of masks and shields in the Philippine context brings about both productive and pernicious implications. On the productive side, mask and shield wearing has inspired new movements in culture and local humanitarianism. The situation was dire at first. In the earliest months of the pandemic, Filipino frontliners suffered greatly from the shortage of not only masks and shields, but hospital equipment in general. Scrolling through social media and opening the television to news channels revealed an endless stream of tragic stories and cries for help from the medical sector on a daily basis. Hospitals appealed to the public for donations of a wide range essential items for frontliners, like face masks, shields, goggles, surgical gloves, protective suits, hospital gowns, syringes, IV cannulas, beds, hospital gowns, surgical caps, hand soap, and ethyl alcohol (Lino 2020). Hospital workers were forced to improvise the creation of their own PPEs, put together using spoiled x-ray film, foam packaging, elastic, and rain coats (Fornell 2020). Some even wore garbage bags over their bodies and ordinary plastic bags on their feet when even the most basic substitutes were not available (Diomampo-Grana 2020).

In response to this need, people all around the country mobilized locally to help frontliners in their area. An indigenous group of weavers in the Cordilleras sewed 2,000 pieces of PPEs for hospital workers using materials donated by members of the community (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2020). Local designers sewed masks from fabrics in their warehouses and donated

3 “Simbang Gabi” is a nine-day series of Catholic masses leading up to Christmas, beginning on December 16 and ending on December 24. Spanish friars introduced this tradition to Filipinos during the Spanish colonial period of the Philippines (1500s–1800s). On these days Filipinos gather at churches and shopping malls where masses are held at night or at dawn. After masses people eat together. The food is prepared by families or sold in the vicinity of the mass, typically Christmas delicacies made out of rice (e.g. puto, bibingka and suman).
them to frontliners (Sun 2020; Iglesias 2020). Community drives were put up to provide masks, shields, and other PPEs for free to both frontliners and those who could not afford such devices (Fernandez-Brojan 2020). Volunteers rallied together to sew masks for others in need (Lopez 2020). Local acts of humanitarianism grew even stronger when natural disasters compounded the public health crisis. When super typhoon Ulysses hit the country in November 2020, private companies, NGOs, and independent groups stepped up to provide aid that included masks and shields for affected communities (“LIST: Aid from Philippine Companies during Coronavirus Pandemic” 2020; “Typhoon Donation Drives” 2020). During that period I volunteered to pack relief goods at my church, and spent the majority of my time counting and repacking masks and shields into large cardboard boxes for delivery to typhoon victims. All of these efforts illustrate how the mask and shield movement has become an intersection of development, humanitarianism, and capitalism working together to address multi-layered crises.

On the pernicious side, Scott-Smith warns against the unwarranted commitment to a fetishized object, and in the context of the Philippines this is seen in the government’s militarized approach to implementation of mask and shield wearing. Policies established in 2020 stated that improper wearing of face masks could result in fines, community service, or imprisonment depending on the severity of the case (House of Representatives 2020, HB 6623), though closer inspection of the policy will show that the behaviors that warrant such sanctions were not clear. This is a challenge in a country where millions of people live below the poverty line and are unable to afford effective masks, shields, and the resources needed for proper sanitation of such devices (Bordey 2021). There was even a case of a 70-year old man who had to create his own makeshift mask and eye shield out of coconut shell because he could not afford to buy proper ones for himself (Malig 2020).

Between May 6–10, 2021 alone, a record of 18,862 apprehensions, 904 arrests, 8,027 fined individuals, 491 community service orders, and 61 inquest hearings were charged due to improper mask and shield wearing (Bolledo 2021). In an extreme case, a drunk man who refused to wear a face mask and attacked local officials was shot dead by the police (Lovett 2020). Given that most of the perpetrators are from slum areas and poor communities, this approach to mask and shield implementation has been labeled as oppressive and tyrannical to those who need state support the most (Ki 2021; Lorenciana 2021). Rather than taking a militarized approach, state investment in the provision of free masks and shields to the public may be more constructive, especially if the challenges are a result of inaccessibility (Bordey 2021). Additionally, since the decision to wear a mask is found to be influenced by media messaging and social norms,
efforts may be redirected to conceptualizing and disseminating public health information on the benefits of mask wearing and other COVID-19 precautionary measures (Casola et al. 2021).

Given the implications of mask and shield wearing, one may see the dilemma as two sides of a coin. On one side, the conditions of those living in poverty have inspired Filipinos to rise up and provide masks and shields to those who need them urgently. On the other side, the militarized approach to policy implementation puts the same impoverished people at further risk of violence and oppression. While the achievements of local humanitarianism in providing protective equipment should be recognized, humanitarian approaches should also consider ways to protect vulnerable people from the harmful social-political effects of mask and shield wearing as well.

9 Conclusion

In the realm of development scholarship, academic literature often neglects the analysis of materiality in favor of examining cultures, discourses, and power dynamics. Yet, as Fountain (2014) astutely asserts, material things are pivotal for how development works. Food is given to the malnourished, shelters are built for victims of typhoons, and textbooks are provided to children in need of formal education. In the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks and shields are objects wielded to protect citizens from a virus. Understanding face masks and shields through a socio-political lens may lead scientists, governments, and public health authorities to craft effective policies and health campaigns in preparation for future pandemics (Casola et al. 2021; Chang et al. 2021). To what extent does the government have control over what people wear and how they should conduct themselves in a crisis? What behaviors do citizens owe one another in the name of public safety? Answering these kinds of questions through the study of objects may contribute to better governance and critical citizenship on a systemic level (Clifford 2021). In the Philippines, mitigating confusion around public health measures in the future may be possible if the government were to craft ‘one voice’ that clearly communicates what people should know, feel, and do in a crisis (Cordero 2021). More clarity on public health policies – like mask and shield wearing – would prevent their harmful fetishization.

The examination of face masks and shields as humanitarian objects in the Philippine context was motivated by curiosity around the meaning these objects might carry and how they both shape and are shaped by human engagement in a pandemic world. Closer investigation of these objects through Scott-Smith’s tripartite model of fetishization dissects the concealment of their scientific
nature, their social transformation, and implicit mystification – revealing how they have evolved into meaningful symbols with both productive and pernicious implications on the everyday lives of Filipinos.

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Notes on the Contributors

Mathea Melissa Lim is completing a Master of Arts in Development Studies at the University of Auckland. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Ateneo de Manila University.

Dr. Jesse Hession Grayman is a Senior Lecturer in Development Studies at the University of Auckland. His research in Indonesia examines the long-term impacts of humanitarian interventions, particularly the role of civil society.

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