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To cite this article: Ksenia Silchenko & Luca M. Visconti (2021): Facemask: from pandemic to marketplace iconicity, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/10253866.2021.1909004](https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2021.1909004)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2021.1909004>



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Published online: 06 Apr 2021.



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Facemask: from pandemic to marketplace iconicity

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ABSTRACT

As a result of Covid-19 outbreak, surgical facemasks first emerged as a pandemic icon to then expand into a marketplace icon, with substantial transformations in their meanings, uses, and commercial expressions. This essay contends that facemasks have become a (post-)pandemic marketplace icon by articulating tensions in the socio-cultural, the public media, and the economic sphere. Relying upon secondary-data retrieved from mass media and scientific articles boomed during the pandemic, we propose a theoretically eclectic appraisal of (1) facemasks' iconisation, (2) the distinct systems raising masks to that iconic status, and (3) the "Marketplace Icons" series more broadly.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 August 2020
Accepted 18 March 2021

KEYWORDS

Facemask; pandemic; coronavirus; Covid-19; medicalisation; responsibility; neoliberalism; contextual icon; marketplace icon; iconisation

If there is a symbol of the current confusion and fear, the misinformation and anxiety, generated by the spread of the new coronavirus, it is the surgical face mask. When history looks back on the pandemic of 2020, those white or baby blue rectangles that hide the mouth and nose, turning everyone into a muzzled pelican, will be what we see. [...]

After all, the contagion itself is intangible: a microscopic organism resting on hard surfaces, transmitted through the air in water droplets from infected individuals. It can't be seen. Even more than bottles of hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes, the mask has become the virus's avatar; shorthand for our looming dread, desire to hide, inability to protect ourselves, and desire to do something – anything – to appear to take action. (Friedman 2020a)

The horrors of the quickly rising coronavirus contagion and fatality statistics in 2020 will be imprinted in many people's memories through the pictures of doctors and nurses with indentations and bruises on their faces caused by prolonged personal protective equipment (PPEs) use during extenuating shifts (Fernando 2020; Law 2020; Weiss-Meyer 2020). International media have narrated such temporary scars as stigmata of the new "heroes" (O'Kane 2020; Salles and Gold 2020; Wexler 2020) addressing the virus at the "frontline" (Baehr 2008) as healthcare personnel or even as supermarket cashiers. The fragility of the modern healthcare system (Strasser and Schlich 2020) will remain associated with the troubling news about severe disruption of global PPE supplies (Abrams et al. 2020; Cramer and Sheikh 2020; Griggs 2020; Potter 2020; McNeil 2020; Pavesi 2020; WHO 2020c, 2020e), forcing medical personnel to risk their lives in the "war" with the virus (Baehr 2008). While (at the moment of writing) coronavirus launches its second- and third-wave offensive against the entire globe after a short summer-time suspension in the contagion intensity, facemasks strengthen their visibility. The exemplary images of the "new normal" include heads of state wearing facemasks embroidered with national symbols (Bechis 2020; Corbet 2020) or publicly refusing to even consider wearing one (Ghitis 2020; Walker 2020); Instagram celebrities featuring masks as

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high-end fashionable accessories (Garrañd 2020; Veneziani 2020; Williams and Bromwich 2020); and, entire sport teams wearing surgical facemasks as a sign of protest (BBC 2020a). As facemasks have been forced on the individuals exhausted by lockdown, coronavirus statistics, and complete social isolation (Feng et al. 2020; Jingnan 2020), this formerly medical device has made its quick as much as abrupt entry into the everyday life of global consumers, regardless of their age, background, ethnicity, profession, social status or walk of life.

From a consumer culture perspective, facemasks are a consumer artefact integrating a complex system of meanings that largely exceed their public health function, due to their capacity to mediate tensions in the social, media, and market spheres. Adopting a cultural marketing perspective (Visconti, Penaloza, and Toulouse 2020), this essay addresses three aspects. First, in the next section, we pinpoint how facemasks have turned into a marketplace icon. We contend that, due to their utmost visibility, as a consumption object always worn in public and literally on the most visible part of the body – one's face – they can be indeed considered the most significant symbol of the pandemic reality. Since the outburst of the pandemic, facemasks have become the most evident artefact identifying Covid-19, an epochal public health crisis originally taking place in the domain where market was not playing the central role. We posit that facemasks initially emerged as “contextual icons,” that is, as artefacts with the *synecdochical* quality of condensing and representing the global public health confrontation with the pandemic. Second, in the subsequent three sections, we show how facemasks evolved from pandemic icons to marketplace icons. Specifically, we comment on how the market contributed to move facemasks beyond the healthcare realm (i.e. decontextualisation) and to activate their re-semantification by incorporating a number of controversies. Notably, we refer to controversies about their (1) use, which reflects conflicting social norms; (2) meanings, which is connected to complex and pre-existing power imbalances; and, (3) economic behaviours, which express differences in production, commercial exploitation, and semantification of said artefacts. Third, in the concluding section of the paper, we comment on how our work advances *Consumption Markets & Culture's* “Marketplace Icon” series. We posit that articles appeared in said series focus more on the process of iconisation of *individual* artefacts – which we consider as theories of *singularised* iconisation – rather than providing an overarching theory of marketplace iconicity. The most notable exception we detect is GopalDas' largely referenced definition of marketplace icon (2016, 264). Still, GopalDas focuses on *iconicity* more than on *iconisation* and sets the “base” level for marketplace iconicity more than elaborating a grand narrative of market iconisation. This paper ultimately aims to overcome singularised theories of market iconisation and suggests how market iconicity may originate from domains (such as Covid-19 public health crisis, in this case), where markets are peripheral and not central.

In so doing, we largely align with *Consumption Markets & Culture's* “Marketplace Icon” series' most frequently used marketplace icons definition. Following GopalDas (2016, 264), we also consider marketplace icons as,

brands, products, or services that are historically significant for their cultural meanings. While many marketplace icons are widely consumed, iconicity is less about market share than cultural significance. Marketplace icons represent something novel, surprising, or unusual about the current times. Like political icons or celebrity icons, marketplace icons are often passionately celebrated by some, but scathingly critiqued by others, making them polarizing. Marketplace elements become iconic, and sustain their iconicity, through frequent mentions in diverse media and creative adaptations in multiple spheres of social life.

We also show that facemasks' marketplace iconicity rests on a complex system of meanings, which market actors elaborate out of broader and pandemic-unrelated tensions at the level of pre-existing social dynamics, geo-cultural power conflicts, and rival ideologies. We support the conclusion that iconicity has more to do with “critiques” (GopalDas 2016) and “acute contradictions” (Holt 2004) than with univocal meanings and universal agreement.

We ground our discussion on an analysis of themes and discourses in public mass media and scientific articles published on the topic in the first half of 2020, when Covid-19 pandemic outburst and gradually spread. For convenience of reporting, we primarily cite articles published in English, even though we do reference some public media discourses in other languages (notably, Italian,

French, and Russian) in order to compose a “pandemic,” and hence a global, account of the phenomenon of facemasks and their iconisation.

Covid-19 and the emergence of facemasks as contextual icons of the pandemic

In an earlier stage, facemasks have become emblematic of the overall uncertainty that commands the Covid-19 pandemic. In the late 2019, the world was shaken by the news of the new coronavirus that quickly spread in China, causing several thousand deaths and the near collapse for its health-care system (*BBC 2020b*). Despite some precautionary measures, in early 2020 the new virus turned into a global public health emergency, infecting millions of people all over the world and leading to over 2.6 million deaths (for a constantly updated map, refer to Johns Hopkins *2021*). To address the emergency, many countries opted for quarantine, social distancing, and lockdown measures driven by the objective of “flattening the curve” (European Commission *2020*). Wearing a facemask in public has also quickly become either a requirement or a strong recommendation.

World Health Organisation (WHO) initially discouraged facemask use outside of hospital setting due to, among other reasons, a concern for exhaustion of their global stock (Howard *2020b*). Nevertheless, driven by the anxiety, insecurity, and desire to maintain some control over one’s daily routine (Arafat et al. *2020*; Sim et al. *2020*), people from all over the world started stockpiling and panic-buying of a number of products, including facemasks. This further drained the global supply and temporarily drove the prices up (Cavestri *2020*). The most struggling epicentres of Covid-19 initially faced such dramatic shortages that people paid up to 20 times the normal price for (presumably certified) surgical masks (WHO *2020d*), and some frontline medical workers had to sew own protective equipment out of trash bags (Coleman *2020*).

Despite early supply shortages and contradictory scientific evidence, facemasks have become mandatory, or at least highly recommended, in various settings in many countries (Feng et al. *2020*; Jingnan *2020*). People from the East and the West reacted differently to the news of the pandemic. While in Asia many immediately started wearing facemasks in public, only a few masks were initially seen in the streets in Europe and the Americas (Javid, Weekes, and Matheson *2020*; Jingnan *2020*), accounting for pre-existing differences in political, cultural, and market conditions. Unquestionably facemask use has become largely diffused and part of our collective daily experience, despite some local (cultural and legal) differences exist.

Norms on facemask use respond(ed) to the application of a *precautionary principle*: since “population benefits are plausible and harms unlikely” (Javid, Weekes, and Matheson *2020*), wearing facemasks, even in absence of definitive evidence about their protective effect, needs to be done at least “just in case” (Greenhalgh et al. *2020*). At this earlier stage, discourse on facemasks was thus primarily driven by the scientific debate, and articulated private fears together with institutional promotion of a new moral framework attempting to control the uncertain (Coveney *2006*; Fitzpatrick *2001*). As a matter of fact, in the earlier months of the pandemic public health discourses over-dominated economic and market discourses, with the market being implicated only for its (in)ability of supplying adequate supply of facemasks.

While a number of measures (e.g. lockdown, home schooling, smart working), norms (e.g. social distancing, frequent hand washing), and artefacts (e.g. disposable shoe covers, hand sanitisers, gloves, Zoom/Skype/Teams calls) are associated with the progressive diffusion of Covid-19, only facemasks have become *synecdochical*, that is, capable of individually standing for the whole public health crisis. Since their iconicity was originally gained in the domain where the market was not playing the front-line role, we qualify this iconicity as *contextual* (or pandemic, in this specific setting). By contextual iconicity we refer to an artefact’s synecdochical quality of condensing a given individual or collective experience occurring in the sphere where the market’s significance and authority is more peripheral rather than central (e.g. a cultural or political movement, a historical or life event). Typically, contextual icons acquire meanings for the individuals directly involved in said experience, and progressively tend to identify and/or qualify them. With the circulation of the

virus, facemasks have become expressive of the presence of the virus, and of the risks associated with it. Similarly, countries standing away from facemask use encouragements have symbolically, as much as unresponsively, distanced from the pandemic by distancing from its contextual icon.

Despite their earlier medical embeddedness, facemasks have rapidly become a semantically rich *consumer* good and, maybe, the “new iconic symbol of our times” (KHN 2020). The shift from more confined, contextual icons to their progressive establishment as marketplace icons (Gopaldas 2016) coincided with facemasks entering mass communication, as testified by the immensity of emoticons, icons, illustrations, and photos that have spread along with the pandemic (among others, refer to Shutterstock or Flaticon online repositories). It also coincided with the increasing commercial exploitation of facemasks by market agents, who progressively diverted facemasks from mere medical protection devices to goods inscribed with additional health-unrelated meanings. In so doing, the market (1) has moved facemasks away from their original domain – what we qualify as the decontextualisation process; (2) stimulated their re-semanticisation to appeal to a broader amount of consumers and for a broader number of reasons (e.g. distinction, fashion, institutional belongingness); and, (3) fostered their wider circulation. From an economic viewpoint, and despite disagreement in estimating the real market value of facemasks – forecasts for the global facemask market range from \$2.45 billion (Allied Market Research 2020) to \$87.67 billion by 2027 (RD 2020) – this massive increase is expected to be more than just a fleeting trend (Nanda 2020). From a conceptual viewpoint, decontextualisation, re-semanticisation, and circulation of facemasks have moved them from contextual icons of the pandemic to the status of marketplace icons. In the next three sections, we discuss how the market – by means of its agents (e.g. companies, communication agencies, media) – has contributed to inflating new meanings into facemasks. Figure 1 identifies three main areas that helped facemasks’ re-semanticisation and iconisation, by connecting them with pre-existing tensions at the level of social norms, public media, and economic behaviours.

Market iconisation through controversies in the social norms

The first sphere within which health-transcending controversies about facemasks arise refers to the social norms accompanying the *use* of facemasks in community settings. First, we show that the use of facemasks was originally associated with altruistic (i.e. prosocial) versus selfish (i.e. antisocial) behaviours, depending on the type of mask a person wears, his/her willingness to put medical professionals’ protection first, and even participation in the production of cloth masks. Second, we document how facemasks’ use has been controversial in terms of both their inclusion among and effect on risk management behaviours. Third, we unveil how wearing masks can surprisingly

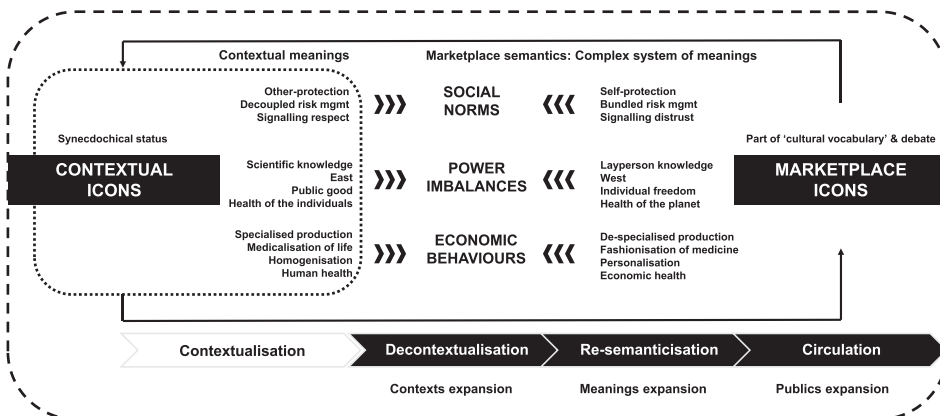


Figure 1. The process of facemasks’ market iconisation: from contextual to marketplace iconicity.

convey disrespectful, irritating, and discouraging messages, when others interpret such conduct as a sign of distrust, weakness, or inability of “moving on.”

Altruism versus selfishness

In just a few months, we have learnt that not all facemasks are the same. Medical professionals’ face-masks fall into two types: surgical masks and respirators (N95 or FFP). Since surgical masks fit quite loosely on the face, their primary function is to protect the sterile surgical environment from droplets coming out of the mask wearers’ mouths and noses (Abd-Elseyed and Karri 2020; Esposito and Principi 2020; Spooner 1967). Respirators are rather classified as PPEs that protect the wearer from potentially contaminating airborne particles, such as fine dust or biological aerosols generated from people talking, coughing or sneezing. If worn tightly, respirators reduce inhalation exposure to airborne particles by about 95%, which is why they are substantially more expensive, and harder to produce and use properly (Abd-Elseyed and Karri 2020). Both types are disposable and require special procedures for application and removal not to annul their effect (Chan and Yuen 2020; Esposito and Principi 2020), even though in the times of coronavirus-induced shortages, not only citizens but also medical professionals were opening to the possibility of facemask reuse as the last resort (Abd-Elseyed and Karri 2020; Feng et al. 2020; Ma et al. 2020; Parshley 2020; Phan and Ching 2020).

When a tutorial of an Italian orthopaedic surgeon went viral (Marrone 2020), the difference between these masks was simplified by translating the medical discourse into the moral (cf. Conrad 1992). According to such simplification, surgical masks are socially interpretable as *altruistic*, since they protect others and not the wearer. Respirators with an exhalation valve, on the contrary, would be *egoistic*, as they protect the wearer, but not the others. Finally, N95 or FFP2 and FFP3 respirators without exhalation valves can be thought of as *intelligent* masks that function both for self- and other-protection. Respirator-related moralism has been brought further. Due to global shortage of PPE supply, private purchases of N95 respirators were demonised as selfish and altogether unnecessary outside the medical setting (Cramer and Sheikh 2020; Diaz 2020; McNeil 2020). This paved the way to the market success of another type of facemasks, the cloth facemask, also referred to as *community* mask. As a simple covering worn over nose and mouth in the social setting, it creates a physical barrier for some droplets and thus reduces the possibility for people with no current symptoms to transmit the disease. Cloth masks are reusable and provide some benefit, depending on the quality of fabric and mask’s construction, the number of layers, and cleaning practices (Chan and Yuen 2020). They have also widened the range of prosocial behaviours, by allowing people not only to still wear a mask during surgical masks and PPEs supply shortage, but also to prove the human spirit and solidarity by producing masks for personal and collective use. In producing cloth facemasks, some consumers also turned into temporary “entrepreneurs,” when they started selling the output of their DIY production.

It is debatable whether altruistic or selfish arguments are more effective in promoting facemask use. In the surge of conflicting information and cynicism typical of major health scares (Fitzpatrick 2001), wearing facemasks is associated not only with other-protection – as the official public health campaigns try to convince – but also with self-protection. It might result from a heuristic, or a self-conviction, that people use to justify to themselves the need to rigorously wear masks in public. It may also be the “false security” that wearing a mask itself gives, considering that – as a form of a shield – it makes people feel protected more than feeling that they are protecting. Under the dominant economic paradigm, a “protect yourself” reasoning may be easier to “sell” than a “protect the others” message. Today’s consumer culture is in fact sensitive to neoliberal arguments, arguing that individual pursuit of self-interest is more likely to increase the overall social welfare (Harvey 2005; Skälén, Fougère, and Felleson 2008; Wensley 2010). In sum, the transition of facemasks from the medical to a rather market-gravitating domain helped inscribe morality, consumer responsabilisation, and consumer agency into their consumption and, even, presumption.

Decoupled versus bundled social norms

Facemasks use has been way more controversial than any other risk management behaviour (e.g. frequent hand washing, social distancing, and seeking health information). World Health Organisation itself contributed to the circulation of conflicting indications about facemasks' usefulness and necessity, and only subsequently amended its previous advice advocating for facemasks use in public, when social distancing is not possible (WHO 2020b, 2020f). Differently, washing hands or use of disinfectants have never been questioned. The facemask controversy thus relates to the presumed effect it would have on people's likelihood to adopt the whole bundle of risk management behaviours. According to some, being an extremely visible consumer object, facemasks would create a visceral reminder of constant risk. Such enduring risk awareness should thus augment social pressure to adhere to risk management behaviours that go beyond facemask wearing (Chan and Yuen 2020; Javid, Weekes, and Matheson 2020). A recent study proves that people tend to instinctively keep larger distance from those who wear facemasks (Marchiori 2020), thus strengthening the risk management behaviours in a bundle. At the same time, some public health professionals are concerned that facemasks use could create a false sense of security, making people feel invincible and protected from the virus. The consequence would be to make individuals let their guard down or not use the facemasks properly (Howard 2020a; Javid, Weekes, and Matheson 2020).

When placed at the centre of a medical discourse, facemasks are more likely to be part of a system of public health devices and practices meant to fight infections. Differently, facemasks' transition towards a more market-gravitating domain has forced their decoupling from said system expanding and challenging their original contextual meanings. This has created the paradox of facemasks being both a symbolic promoter, as well as a (potentially dangerous) substitute of other risk management behaviours.

Positive versus negative social messaging

Considering that emerging scientific (cf. Bai 2020) and empirical evidence now confirms that wearing masks indeed limits Covid-19 diffusion, one may conclude that people wearing masks should reassure others, and thus convey positive social messages. Yet, wearing masks may also induce negative social reactions (Tateo 2020). For instance, those wearing masks could be perceived by others "as overly cautious and concerned with protecting themselves" (Meier 2020). Facemasks thus may ironically signal the wearer's (unintentional) distrust towards the others. On the other hand, wearing masks may resonate as a public admission of personal and/or collective vulnerability. Researchers found that men are less likely to wear masks if left free to choose, since covering their face would be shameful and a sign of weakness (Capraro and Barcelo 2020; Howard 2021). Some national governments or heads of state resist facemask use on the ground of reputation (Denworth 2020), especially when their public image rests upon a rhetoric of force, fierceness, and domination. After a very long public refusal to wear a facemask, U.S. president Donald Trump's eventual decision to endorse mask-wearing on July 20, 2020 has been reframed in light of patriotic resistance against the "invisible China virus" (Breuninger 2020), somehow establishing the equivalence between masks and guns. Similarly, for Russian President Vladimir Putin or Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and their governments not wearing masks has been "a badge of honour" (Alves 2020) and a confirmation of "their macho political brands" (Walker 2020). UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is also known for his controversial positions on wearing masks in public venues and commercial settings (Walawalkar 2020). Finally, wearing masks may already resonate as anti-social for people willing to symbolically leave the pandemic behind. In all those cases, facemasks use may surprisingly convey discouraging, irritating, and even disrespectful messaging rather than reassure the others. For its capacity of intercepting different consumer needs and meanings, ranging from endorsing socially sensitive acts to ideals of consumer freedom and self-determination (e.g. consumer agency, consumer empowerment), the market became a sounding board for health-transcending benefits associated with facemasks.

Market iconisation through power controversies in the mediascape

Within the mediascape (Appadurai 1990), often pre-existing *power imbalances and conflicts* have fuelled *rival meanings* ascribed to facemasks and those using them. Referencing to a variety of media – academic and non-specialist, analogic and digital, print and multimodal – four domains of power tensions emerge, where conflicts surface from active manipulation of facemasks’ meanings. First, common sense wisdom has continuously downsized scientific wisdom in public health debate around pandemic, leading to what seems to be “the death of expertise” (Nichols 2017) or, at least, its prelude. Second, community use of facemasks sheds light on the East–West rivalry. Face-masks provision from China to the rest of the world during the first Covid-19 wave aims to contain the damage of being addressed as the “infected” and “virus spreaders” as much as to affirm its raising power and to invert the “flow of pity” that has long moved from the West to the East (Tett 2020). Third, public mass media counterpoise individual responsabilisation and freedom to public health interest, and thus question the neoliberal foundations of our consumer culture. Last, facemask use illustrates the conflict between humans’ right of protecting themselves from the virus spread and the cost this behaviour inflicts on the planet and future generations. All in all, the marketplace and the mediascape have facilitated the circulation of health-unrelated discourses and concerns, which they have eventually inscribed in facemasks.

Scientific versus common sense wisdom

With Covid-19 outbreak and widespread facemasks use in China, domestic facemask production increased along with massive ordering of the stock from the other countries. As the new coronavirus started spreading globally, discourses on the usefulness, risks, and costs of facemasks use tilted (cf. Beswick 2020), with major clashes occurring at the frontier between scientific and common sense wisdom. From a rational viewpoint, expert evidence-based opinions should prevail over popular voices. Yet, in a number of cases this is not what happened. While room taken by “common sense wisdom” (i.e. ideas grounded on anecdotal evidences, non-scientific data, and personal opinions) varied depending on central states’ regulations and political conditions as much as on consumers’ pre-existing familiarity with facemasks use (e.g. very high in China or Japan; Rich 2020), in several contexts non-expert advice met large consensus. We contend that facemasks help illuminate, and were used to push forward, a substantial power crisis that scientific expertise is facing (Nichols 2017). We identify three causes that may have helped fragilise scientific wisdom in favour of common wisdom on the matter of facemasks.

First, WHO – arguably, the most authoritative reference point during a pandemic – has restlessly modified its position on facemasks use. Initially, WHO issued guidelines discouraging community use of facemasks outside of hospitals (Howard 2020b; WHO 2020c). According to WHO’s official guidelines, the only legitimate use was by individuals with respiratory symptoms to avoid infecting the others. Fuelled by active endorsement of mass facemask use by Chinese authorities, the global information flows somehow clashed on the issue of facemasks resulting in inconsistent official guidelines and contrasting views, which exacerbated the uncertainty overall (Jingnan 2020). Eventually, WHO has amended its original recommendation based on the novel finding about asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic individuals’ contagion capacity (WHO 2020a, 2020b, 2020f). While the exact effectiveness of facemasks use by general population is still quite uncertain (Chan and Yuen 2020; Eikenberry et al. 2020; Javid, Weekes, and Matheson 2020; Worby and Chang 2020), WHO’s initial hesitation was motivated on the ground of absence of “enough scientific evidence to back up (...) use [of cloth masks] by healthy people” (Beswick 2020). Strictly speaking, the efficacy of cloth masks is a case of “absence of evidence,” rather than “evidence of absence of benefits” (Javid, Weekes, and Matheson 2020). Paradoxically, the case of facemasks exposes that the scientific method may not be the best suited to provide prompt and straightforward prescriptions at the climax of the public health crisis, even more so considering that “strategic deployment of scientific

expertise and application of scientific information during crisis events is understudied” (Colwell and Machlis 2019, 2).

Second, the vacuum created by public health experts’ initial hesitation during Covid-19 diffusion was quickly filled by the market, comprising a range of more opportunistic agents, such as celebrities, influencers, politicians, and public figures, who often created compelling narratives of “scientism” (Mayes and Thompson 2015), that is, superficial references to science and simplification achieved by translating (some version of) “science” into layperson’s terms. Upon the early onset of the pandemic, on February 26, 2020, Gwyneth Paltrow was among the very first celebrities to post her picture wearing a high-end Airinum facemask. The actress commented that she had “already been in this movie,” referring to 2011 thriller *Contagion*, where she portrayed patient zero in a rapidly spread global pandemic of a deadly respiratory virus, the scenario admittedly inspired by the 2003 SARS outbreak (Garrañd 2020). This post has reportedly led to such surge of Airinum respirators orders (starting from a minimum price of \$75 a piece) that the website has been sold out for months. However, it is the rise of cloth masks again that helped make facemasks even more visible, more Instagrammable, and more frequently referred to in diverse media and spheres of social life (Friedman 2020b; Lockwood 2020; Petrarca 2020).

Third, market agents have also contributed to capitalise on the (absence of) voice of international health experts and organisations, turning their contradictions and hesitations into business opportunities. A number of brands and companies, with literally no former experience in the production of PPEs, jumped onto the bandwagon. While some were driven by good intentions (e.g. to help fill the void under facemasks shortage; Ward 2020), others followed more commercial interests (e.g. the transformation of a medical device into a fashionable accessory; Nanda 2020). In addition, due to the overall shift towards culture of disposables in medicine starting from the 1960s, medical reusable cloth masks are no longer manufactured industrially, and thus only disposable masks are subjected to efficacy tests today (Strasser and Schlich 2020). With no hard evidence on cloth masks’ filtering capacity, which leaves the scientific community sceptical (Chan and Yuen 2020; Javid, Weekes, and Matheson 2020), this market has remained unmanned by specialised medical supply companies. As most countries embraced community masks in line with a precautionary principle (Jingnan 2020; Sugrue et al. 2020) believing that wearing cloth masks is instrumental for *community protection*, non-specialist newcomers in facemasks production appeared to occupy and exploit such market gap (and are here to stay). In all of these cases, scientific evidence on facemasks (or what is presented as such) has become integrated into a system of market(ing) communication (Silchenko and Askegaard 2020) turning the expert wisdom into “a commodifiable media product” (Coveney 2006) rather than a universal “truth.”

Eastern “exoticism” and community use versus Western scientism and medical use

It comes as no surprise that Western superpowers look at Eastern rising superpowers as a threat to their long-lasting (lasted?) economic, political, and cultural supremacy. The longer and shorter (i.e. Covid-19-related) history of facemasks concur to illuminate East–West power tensions. While it is debatable when and where the first medical facemask appeared – with some commenters identifying the first mask in 17-century Europe and plague doctors’ “pointed beak,” while other historians postponing the invention to late nineteenth century (Postrel 2020), between Austria and France (Luca 2020) – there is little doubt about facemask’s Western origin.

In the West, facemasks have always served a strictly medical function and have been confined to healthcare settings, starting primarily from operating rooms. Wearing facemasks in public has thus never been a mass “Western practice,” with the sole exception of their widespread use during 1918 epidemic of Spanish influenza, which killed between 20 and 40 million people globally. It is likely that the same influenza first brought facemasks use to the East, starting from Japan (Yang 2014) (other accounts speak about a slightly earlier adoption of facemasks around 1910–1911 during Manchurian plague in Northeast Asia; Strasser and Schlich 2020). Despite the Western origin,

public use in the East has resisted ever since and wearing facemasks in public has now become seen as an “Eastern habit,” which Western people have often discarded as excessive and even plain ridiculous. Community success of facemasks in Asia depends on a plurality of factors, including epidemics (2002–2003 SARS outbreak, and 2006 avian influenza); natural disasters causing air contamination (e.g. Japan’s 1923 Great Kanto earthquake; Yang, 2014); industrial pollution (Lynteris 2020; MacIntyre and Chughtai 2020); cultural specificities (e.g. the philosophical importance of breathing and wind in Taoism); market reframing of facemasks as fashionable items (Feng et al. 2020); and even social motives (e.g. recent masks use as “social firewalls” to discourage social interactions; Van der Haegen 2020; Yang 2014). In sum, facemasks use in the East has been not only broader and public, but also richer in functions and meanings. In our framing, we could say that the East has already assisted to a partial migration of facemasks from pandemic to marketplace icons. Wearing masks has in fact become “a symbol of collective solidarity within the community” (Van der Haegen 2020). For example, sociological analysis of the SARS epidemics in East Asia (Baehr 2008; Lynteris 2020) proved how a quickly improvised yet obligatory behaviour of mask-wearing become a form of social ritual that created solidarity, the feeling of shared fate, intimacy and trust between the individuals, equally exposed to vulnerability and fear:

The mask symbolized a rule of conduct – namely, an obligation to protect the wider community. [...] Through mimicry and synchronization [...] mask-wearing amounted to a joint action, normatively embodied, the entrainment and attunement of the society as a whole. By disguising an individual’s face, it gave greater salience to collective identity. By blurring social distinctions, it produced social resemblance. Mask-wearing activated and reactivated a sense of a common fate; it was a mode of reciprocity under conditions that supremely tested it. (Baehr 2008, 150)

As community use of facemasks starts spreading in the West, we are not only learning from Eastern consumers how to wear a mask or why. Rather, the re-semanticisation and broader circulation of facemasks as a consumer (as opposed to a medical) practice “highlights how the geopolitical order is changing. A couple of decades ago – say, during the 1997 Asian fiscal crisis – aid, along with pity, tended to flow from West to East. This is now being reversed” (Tett 2020). The semantics of reverted equilibria between East and West comes across facemasks as much as narratives about Covid-19. As the East gains power over the West, provides PPEs to its “enemies” in need, and evangelises the practice of wearing masks beyond medical settings, (some part of) the West replies by qualifying Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus” (Breuninger 2020). In doing so, the Eastern helper is brought back to the role of subaltern and the enemy. As Mari Webel (2020) notes, naming diseases by place has a long tradition, yet it comes at the cost of spreading mistakes, focusing on the “wrong things,” and worsening public health.

Collective versus personal rights

Capitalistic economies firmly rely upon neoliberal ideologies that trust markets’ self-governance capacity (Harvey 2005; Skälén, Fougère, and Felleson 2008; Wensley 2010). During Covid-19 epidemic, the discourses that vastly circulated were about defending personal freedom and choice – in that context translated into the right of *not* wearing a mask – against top-down regulations imposing facemask use in the common interest. Adapting Pellandini-Simányi and Conte’s (2020) framework to our context, we could similarly argue that two opposite ideologies appeared. On the one hand, governments and various opinion makers argued in favour of the responsabilisation of each person, thus defending personal freedom under the belief that each individual could and had to act responsibly. On the other, some suggested a principle of individual de-responsibilisation, under the opposite assumption of limited consumer rationality that a “shift of responsibility from consumers to the state” (Pellandini-Simányi and Conte 2020) and public health institutions was necessary. Said positions contended that, in the interest of public health (as well as of the market), only widespread community use of facemasks can produce positive outcomes, in line with the “herd effect” logic of vaccination. In a pro-public vein, some governments, such as Italy, have imposed

artificially low price caps on surgical masks to assure compliance with mandatory mask wearing policies (Giugliano 2020). At the same time in other settings (such as the US or the UK), wearing masks was met with such resistance that it even resulted into political protests, arrests and violence (Denworth 2020).

The tensions between individual versus collective interests can be eventually instilled in a question “Are facemasks rather public or private goods?” Plenty of people are reluctant to wear facemasks considering them an infringement on civil liberties (*The Economist* 2020b) and comply only to avoid imposed fines (Yandex Zen 2020). “Anti-maskers” are the pandemic version of “anti-vaxxers.” For them, a facemask is the symbol of oppression, invasive control, and violent state intervention into the everyday, and of what might derive from mask-wearing in terms of substitution of privacy with the abstract concept of the “public good.” Other consumers, instead, not only supported discourses limiting personal freedom in the sake of higher-order interest, but also concluded that, in the social climate characterised by the fear of and a natural aversion towards “plague spreaders,” facemasks create *positive homogenisation* that erases the differences between the healthy and the sick (Lynteris 2020). They symbolise heightened sense of shared vulnerability, where the quest to protect the vulnerable is in the hands of the vulnerable individuals themselves, which conversely gives people the strength in the face of adversity (Baker, Hunt, and Rittenburg 2007; Baker, LaBarge, and Baker 2015).

The case of facemasks’ iconisation reflects how in the global “marketization of life” (Sherry 2011) public goods are disguised as private, and vice versa. “Selling” the public benefit of community protection is enacted via the consumer market of (cloth) masks, among others. After all, if the society eventually benefits from a “herd effect” when everybody wears masks based on the misbelief in their self-protection function, then does it actually help responsabilise and educate the public about the “true” other-protecting function of facemasks? Or is it actually more effective to preserve the “myth” as it is and urge use of masks for self-centred reasons rather than altruistic and/or civic ones?

Humans’ versus planet’s health

As disposable facemasks spread, so do preoccupations about their environmental impact, to the point of questioning whose interest should be put first: those of humankind or those of the planet? The question matters also from the perspective of intergenerational equity, where future generations’ right to “nondeteriorated ecological and economic capacity” (Padilla 2002, 69) is part of the equation:

If we apply the equal-opportunity view, and if we assume that individuals are identical except for their birth-dates, we would have to say that justice requires an intertemporal resource allocation which enables all individuals, regardless of their date of birth, to acquire the same level of welfares (Roemer 2007, 203).

Estimates about the environmental impact of Covid-19 masks consumption are a conundrum. According to the Dutch consulting company Ecochain, the footprint of one N95 respirator and of one cloth mask is about 50 and 60 grams of CO₂-equivalent, respectively (Liebsch 2020). Yet, by considering that cloth masks are reusable, their long-term environmental footprint is much lower than that of disposable surgical masks or respirators, not to mention that surgical masks’ lifespan is about 450 years (Eric Pauget cited in Kassam 2020). The environmental impact can however be even bigger than we think. *The Economist* (2020c) argues that not only has consumption of single-use plastic (notably, facemasks, gloves, and visors) increased by 250–300% in the U.S., but also recycling of plastic has decreased, due to decline in oil price (which makes production of new plastic less expensive) and anomalies in municipalities’ recycling procedures determined by the pandemic. In sum, widespread marketisation of facemasks contribute to raise considerations that are more complex than mere medicalised aspects in terms of when and which mask to use. The expansion of meanings accompanying facemasks’ market iconisation forces to include in the equation evaluation of intergenerational justice and human/nature domination as well.

Market iconisation through economic controversies

Unlike the previously discussed controversies around social norms and power imbalances where facemasks expansion into market meanings and practices aggravate the (pre-)existing tensions, the economic controversies are rather specifically commanded by the market. At a strictly market-place level, we observed controversies about production, commercial exploitation, and semanticisation of facemasks. First, non-specialised producers have gained legitimacy in a formerly specialised medical supply market, under Covid-19 urgency as much as through strategic use of ideological opportunities. At the consumer level, two additional controversies consist in the conflicting re-semanticisation of facemasks as both medical versus fashion items and as homogenising versus self-expressive consumer goods. While facemask fashionisation helps alleviate fears and negative emotions, personalisation satisfies need for distinction, self-expression, and belief in preserving control despite the pandemic. Last, as Covid-19 economic costs emerge, public health and economic wealth riskily stand as conflicting interests.

Productive (de)specialisation

Propelled by the pandemic, facemasks changed their geography and spread from the medical to a vast fashion and crafts marketplace. In the times of the critical shortage of PPEs, global fashion businesses took collective responsibility action to address the void of personal protective gear. Starting from March 2020, such luxury brands as Balenciaga, Brooks Brothers, Christian Siriano, Gucci, Hugo Boss, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Ralph Lauren, and Saint Laurent Paris, as well as mass-market brands such as Calzedonia, H&M, Mango, Rails, and Zara among others have repurposed their production facilities to manufacture and distribute facemasks to frontline workers (Bramley 2020; Cary 2020; *Grazia* 2020; Syme 2020). Such brands as Armani, Canada Goose, Ermanno Scervino, Herno, Prada, Ralph Lauren or Zegna launched production of disposable medical overalls, while Bulgari, Dior, Givenchy, Guerlain, Hermès, and others – of hand sanitisers (Bramley 2020; Cary 2020). The fashion industry also made conspicuous donations and organised influential fundraisers (Crivelli 2020; Luna 2020). Can we then still label apparel and fashion businesses *non-essential* in times of pandemic? Armani (Mauri 2020) took even action to slow down the fashion cycles in order to address the economic, environmental, and societal consequences of fast fashion (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015), a topic of intense reflection during the global lockdown (Parisi 2020; Tashjian 2020). Such actions attracted massive attention from both mass- and social media, where face-mask-related posts even captured 73.2% more responses than other coronavirus-related posts (Lockwood 2020). Production of facemasks has been associated with patriotism, solidarity, trust in market morality, and even optimism about the future. Helping the frontline medical *heroes* (Salles and Gold 2020; Wexler 2020) has thus eventually turned the fashion industry actors themselves into “heroes,” or at least something like that (Hess 2020).

An entry of non-specialised producers into the market of PPEs fed the increasing power of common goodwill at the expense of science (as a domain of specialisation). The market was crucial to simplify the medical (or scientific) discourse, by translating its wisdom into easily tradeable and useable consumer goods, whose functioning was unquestioned by the largest majority of users. Once more, the market transformed specialist scientific knowledge into consumeristic “enchantment” (Rose 2014), implying that consumers suspend their disbelief and buy in companies’ capacity of providing them with quasi-magical solutions to problems exceeding their understanding or control. While the process of re-semanticisation of technology and science by the market transcends the pandemic context, we note that during the Covid-19 emergency companies’ entrance into formerly specialised production systems was legitimised by the urgency as much as by marketing and market ideologies (Silchenko and Askegaard 2020). First, the recently popular belief that companies should overcome market interest in order to act as citizens – the umbrella concept of corporate social responsibility (Maignan and Ferrell 2004) – provided non-specialised producers with an

ideological justification to share responsibility with other public health institutions in addressing the crisis. The flat distribution of responsibility for solving public health emergency has thus traded competence with civic activism. Second, non-specialised producers gained legitimacy from another dominant market ideology known as “medicalisation of the everyday life” (Conrad 2007; Crawford 1980; Lupton 1995), establishing a tight link between consumption and personal and collective health. Covid-19 outburst just reinforced this cultural trend and legitimised producers standing outside the medical market to also contribute to public health.

A further case for non-specialised market players refers to “spin-off” facemasks markets. While we may have to wait before we see facemasks in books or movies, they have already become part of (creative) expression in such faster-moving forms of media as advertising (Hess 2020), Internet memes (*Voices of Monterey Bay* 2020), emojis (Berger & Föhr 2020; Evans 2020), street art (Mitman 2020; Suri 2020; The Guardian 2020), and other forms of visual creativity and design (Nicholls-Lee 2020). Such signals are likely to reinforce the number of non-specialised market actors dealing with production and commercialisation of facemasks “of all genres,” and the further expansion of market-led meanings that transcend the pandemic and medical frame of reference.

Medicalisation versus fashionisation

With the rise of acceptance of cloth masks not only in common sense wisdom terms, but in the official public health discourse (WHO 2020a), the main channel for facemasks distribution has moved from the pharmacy to the apparel and small-scale garment stores, illustrating facemask re-semanticisation from mainly a medical to a lifestyle “fashionised” good. Regardless of size or market positioning, a number of brands introduced masks into their offering, including Asos, Adidas, Fendi, Heron, New Balance, Yohji Yamamoto, and Zalando. Facemasks are now offered in cotton, denim, elastane, linen, non-woven fabric, silk or pretty much any other material. They can be purchased as a stand-alone product or as part of a coordinated bundle matched to, for example, a hair band, a hat, a hijab, a purse, a tie or a complete outfit. Etsy’s homepage, the hallmark of DIY lifestyle offering, has become all about facemasks around late March-beginning of April 2020, with the drastic increase in both demand and supply (Spellings 2020). Multiplicity of designs and small businesses rethinking their product offering around this item cannot help but make one think that we are actually preparing for the long-lasting co-habitation with this new fashion accessory, rather than just taking a temporary measure to contain the virus and “flatten the curve” (Nanda 2020). Post-SARS Chinese and Japanese markets *de facto* experienced the same effect (Rich 2020).

In light of the process of consumer responsabilisation (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), fashionised facemasks constitute a form of consumer *capabilisation*, consisting in the creation of a concrete offering enabling consumers to enact their responsibility for containing the spread of the virus. The cloth facemask market, in particular, has infused facemasks with an array of responsabilisation-related meanings associated with everyday consumption rather than with the medical or pandemic domain. While promotion of multi-use cloth facemasks speaks to responsible sustainable consumption, a call to choose locally produced masks – probably by individuals and firms stroke by the pandemic crisis – over cheaper alternatives is also inviting consumers to enact their responsibility in “restarting the local economy.” Together with resources for capabilisation, the market provides frivolous lifestyle means to oppose one of the worst public health crises of our times. From this perspective, facemask fashionisation is a diversion from people’s fears and the opportunity for escapism, lightness, and playfulness.

Homogenisation versus personalisation

Despite its utmost visibility, wearing community facemasks (and, even more so, surgical masks) results in overall homogenisation. When every person, with the exception of small children and the disabled, has to cover half of one’s face and loses most part of the facial expressions, we

inevitably start looking the same. Non-specialised producers turned such consumer distaste for standardisation into massive commercialisation of cloth masks (Sanoff 2020). In this sense, they came to rescue not only the scarce supply of PPEs, but also consumers' endangered possibility of self-expression. Self-made or designer facemasks allow "to protect with style," "to be cool and express yourself," and "to bring back some colour and vivacity into the life" – as some of the recurrent cloth facemask slogans declare. They serve as forms of self-expression and – being not only a representative, but also a very personal possession – as true objects of self-extension (Belk 1988), in both analogical and digital contexts (Belk 2014). Last, some consumers also interpret personalisation as a means to affirm personal agency and their identity projects in front of the identity annihilating violence of the pandemic.

At the same time, facemasks can provide a "social firewall" effect, which is actively sought-for by some consumers, under particular conditions (e.g. risks of sexual harassment) and/or in given cultural contexts (e.g. younger generational cohorts, Asian consumer cultures; Yang 2014). While homogenisation-as-anonymity can be identity flattening, homogenisation-as-shelter provides a space for self-isolation, even when people are returning to their social contacts.

In line with post-SARS reactions (Baehr 2008), another positive signification of homogenisation relates to its "equalising" qualities (Lynteris 2020). It leverages individual differences; reinforces and organises collective identity; expresses sense of shared vulnerability; and, shortens social distances, thus contrasting narcissistic self-expression. The market "helped" consumers frame and act within the interpretive divide originated by homogenisation. For those believing in positive homogenisation, the market offered traditional (and identical) surgical masks, self-made, and other freely distributed cloth masks. Rather, for those rejecting homogenisation, the market provided a full array of solutions, from customised to high-end branded masks. Differently from other luxury players producing free-of-charge masks to alleviate mask shortage or sharing profits from sales with the community (Cohen 2020), these "masstige" or luxury companies commercialise masks at about \$100 or more (Fernandez 2020).

At a corporate level, personalisation and self-expression have transcended into branding initiatives. It comes as no surprise that the cloth mask market has proliferated also thanks to product customisation with commercial logos (Kulp 2020). Under said circumstances, masks are conceived as extensions of uniforms or as stand-alone spaces for displaying a corporate logo, especially in case of front-office employees, as various businesses restart their operations after the lockdown. Deetz (1992), one of the founding figures of the corporate democracy discourse, would have probably questioned the extent to which such material "colonisation" of employees' bodies intersects politics of personal identity. We contend that branded corporate masks invite to reflect on how corporate personalisation of masks translates into captive homogenisation at the individual (i.e. at the employee) level. Overall, on either the individual consumer or the corporate level, both sides of the homogenisation/personalisation controversy are fuelled through the process of market iconisation with more than one set of meanings, turning them from polarising to nearly universal consumer objects.

Human health versus economic wealth

Initially, the public health and the economic discourse evolved hand in hand in both Asia and Europe, arguing that saving lives and limiting the pandemic spread were instrumental to defend and eventually relaunch the economy. From this perspective, human health and economic wealth were two engines synergically running the same machine. For instance, McKinsey & Company (2020) presented Covid-19's economic expectations by framing scenarios where virus spread and public health response were positively associated with better expectations about the economic response. However, the discourse changed rapidly following the first and saddening economic evidence consisting in "nearly half of global workforce at risk" (UN News 2020), sharp decline in world GDP (expected to fall between 11% and 12% during the first half of 2020; KPMG 2020), and the

worsening of economic inequality (Goldin 2020). During the second and subsequent Covid-19 waves, human health and economic wealth look like two rather antagonist objectives, which policy makers and citizens cannot expect to safeguard at the same time. In the U.S., *The New York Times Magazine* launched a morally based panel discussion titled “Restarting America Means People Will Die: So When Do We Do It?” (Bazelon 2020), whereas *Forbes* questioned “Should the Government Save Lives or Save Jobs?” (McCarthy 2020). Similar questions are not alien in Europe, where this conundrum has been summarised as “can we afford another lockdown?”

Tensions are likely to worsen, as predictions about Covid-19 economic effects present apocalyptic scenarios – echoing the Asian Development Bank, the BBC (2020a) estimates global costs to top \$8.8 trillion. Such framing of public health and economic interests as conflicting is risky. Since Covid-19 has magnified economic injustice (Goldin 2020) and measures of economic health are often, and erroneously, linked to the stock market performance (*The Economist* 2020a), we risk to protect the most privileged listed corporations’ and healthiest consumers’ interests at the expense of the more vulnerable populations. *The Economist* (2020a) reports that 88% Americans with incomes over \$100,000 own shares, whereas only 19% Americans with income at \$35,000 or lower do. Such framing paves the way for the Medieval adage “*mors tua, vita mea*” (roughly translated as “my life at the expense of your death”), positing that my gain corresponds to your loss. If recent market and consumer trends have seen growing enthusiasm around circularity, social justice, and sustainability, Covid-19 outbreak has put the depth of such trends to a serious test: what really comes first, “health” of the individuals or “health” of the markets? (Firat 2013). In the trade-off between protecting people and the medical system (via complete lockdown) and protecting the market (via libertarian approach), facemasks may represent a compromise. They ground a “social contract,” wherein consumer responsibility performed through facemask wearing is rewarded by the possibility to return to the “normal” market interactions. Even when this leads to bizarre scenarios, as any time the actual consumption cannot be reasonably performed with a facemask on, like in restaurants, where one needs to have a facemask on and a verifiable temperature of less than 37.5° C in order to be seated, but can take it off the second the ordered meal arrives (Crepaldi 2020). Or when the most advanced technology fails to start the device due to failure of mask-wearer face recognition (Cipriani 2020). Thus, the expansion of contexts, meanings, and publics involved in facemask consumption and production reflects how delicate the balance between human health and economic health actually is, despite the fashionable ideology of the “triple bottom line” (Elkington 1997) that drives the modern unproblematic business rationale based on a win-win-win logic, bringing together people, planet and profit.

Conclusion

Informed by Gopaldas’s definition (2016), we conclude that facemasks have become marketplace icons, since they are (1) historically significant, (2) reflecting and nurturing animated controversies, (3) dense in cultural meanings, and (4) prominent in spheres where market does not play a central role. In line with Kravets and Örgе’s definition of icons (2010) as artefacts “standing for something else,” we also suggest that facemasks (will) stand in collective memory for both the whole pandemic uncertainty – what we qualify as the synecdochic trait of their contextual iconicity – and the complex system of health-transcending tensions they elicited and integrated. Not only are facemasks already part of mass media and social discourses, public policies, and “spin-off markets” such as advertising (Hess 2020), street art (Mitman 2020; Suri 2020; *The Guardian* 2020), and other forms of visual design (Nicholls-Lee 2020), but they are also standing as symbols of broader ideological discourses as varied as consumer (de)responsibilisation and neoliberalism (Giesler and Veresiú 2014), infringement on civil liberties (*The Economist* 2020b), intergenerational justice (Liebsch 2020), or (dis)trust in science (Nichols 2017). In the following sections, we briefly discuss the two main contributions of this paper.

Facemasks' iconisation: from contextual to marketplace iconicity

This essay documents and critically discusses the way facemasks have expanded from contextual icons of the pandemic to marketplace icons. We posit that said shift is the result of a process of decontextualisation of facemasks from the original and exclusively medicalised sphere to a sphere where marketplace logics and practices advance more to the forefront via process of facemasks' re-semanticisation leveraging upon social norms, media, and market actors. Originally gravitating around the medical world (on the user side) and of specialised expertise (on the producer side), facemasks' progressive "marketplaceness" has loaded them with conflicting meanings (e.g. altruism/selfishness, healthism/self-expression, equality/distinction; Marrone 2020), which emerged partially from facemasks' polysemy, partially from their porosity to incorporate pre-existing ideological and societal tensions (e.g. East/West power, North/South divide, neoliberalism/statism, individualism/collectivism, elitism/democratisation, humankind/planet rights).

In so doing, the case of Covid-19-related facemasks helps illuminate the (absence of) divide between notions of contextual (here, pandemic) versus marketplace icon(icity). Being an unusual case of marketplace icon – they were in fact hardly considered a (mass consumer) market before the pandemic – facemasks show us how markets may quickly, almost instantaneously, absorb cultural icons that come to existence in the context where markets do not play a central role and invest them with marketplace meanings and "rules of conduct," while fluidly redefining the public good as a private consumer good and vice versa. Before the pandemic, facemasks were iconic of certain places (e.g. operating rooms) and (sub)cultures (e.g. medical professionals, respectful Asian consumers). In such contexts, the marketplace was not playing a central role and facemasks functioned as signs of medical professionals' affiliation and health consciousness.

Following the pandemic, not only facemasks' geography has spread, but also market actors have progressively incorporated in facemasks some surrounding social norms, behaviours, and discourses. Market interests have entered the highly visible and debated facemasks territory and infiltrated into the voids created by controversies in regard to their use, meanings, power imbalances and economic processes, creating some kind of offer for pretty much any (consumer) choice. Due to such marketisation, facemasks got decontextualised from their original places and (sub)cultures – that is, from their initial domains. Through their market iconisation, they might even become decontextualised from the historical event itself (i.e. the pandemic), which means that they will stay around for a while (especially if we take the post-SARS experience in Asia as a proxy). All in all, if we evaluate marketplace icons in terms of their ability "to reflect and contribute to consumer culture" (Patterson 2018), facemasks qualify to be considered not only as pandemic, but as marketplace icons as well.

In sum, our first contribution consists in clarifying the difference between contextual and marketplace icons, and in dynamically linking the two notions together. While marketplace icon(icity) is clearly rooted in CCT research (Gopaldas 2016; Holt 2003, 2004; Kravets and Öрге 2010), to the best of our knowledge its separation from the notion of contextual icon(icity) is novel. By contextual icon(icity), we refer to any artefact symbolising and condensing a given individual or collective experience occurring in domains where the market does not play a central role, and thus having synecdochical quality in regard to the said experience (e.g. a cultural or political movement, a historical or life event; or, here, a public health crisis). Our work on facemasks in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic proves that, while analytically distinct, contextual and marketplace icons may coexist and may evolve one into the other: for instance, facemasks have not lost their medicalised valence or meanings, yet largely expanded and modified the said meanings. The specificity of facemasks, we posit, does not derive from having been originally contextual icons to later expand into marketplace icons. Among the many examples we could confront, market re-semanticisation of the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag (Rossi 2020) or of street art practices (Borghini et al. 2010) and tattoos (Patterson 2018) – all cases of initially contextual icons – provide similar illustrations. Rather, the specificity, if any, of facemasks may stand from the fact of being associated with negative personal or

collective circumstances, such as illnesses and public health crises. However, our work shows that, despite their potentially repulsive connotations, the market is so powerful to revert even negative connotations by means of decontextualisation, re-semanticisation, and circulation practices.

Positioning this essay within CMC's "Marketplace Icons" series

In line with a large majority of formerly published essays in *Consumption Markets & Culture's* "Marketplace Icons" series, analysis of facemasks shows how conflicting actors and forces drive *iconisation*. For instance, such tensions come across in recent contributions on beauty salons (Ourahmoune and Jurdi 2020), whose iconic success relied, among other forces, upon a paradoxical mix of scientific and magic arguments; corset and Spanx (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019), which gained iconic status via conflicting beauty and gender standards; fashion shows (Pinchera and Rinallo 2019), whose success derived from a net of tensions between *haute-couture* versus *prêt-à-porter* logics, and between property rights protection versus fashion imitation and mass-circulation; or tattoos (Patterson 2018) that became iconic by leveraging upon tensions between coolness and deviance, and between tattoo permanence and body transformation.

Through closer inspection of formerly published essays in this series, we conclude that most of them are focused on showing how certain artefacts – and one at a time, actually – have become iconic (i.e. their process of iconisation), more than on analysing the implications of iconicity in or for the market. This may result from the fact that, from a consumer culture perspective, market boundaries are fairly elusive to trace as far as consumption becomes less a matter of economic utility and more a question of mundane experience (Woodward and Holbrook 2013). Are catwalks (Pinchera and Rinallo 2019), denim (Miller 2015), sneakers (Denny 2020) and tattoos (Patterson 2018) marketplace icons or fashion icons? Are electric guitars (Ostberg and Hartmann 2015), rock festivals (Chaney 2020), rock 'n' roll (Drummond 2017), and vinyl (Bartmanski and Woodward 2018) marketplace or contemporary music icons? Are mobile phones (Reyes 2016), MP3s (Denegri-Knott 2015), synthesisers (Lanier and Scott Rader 2020), big data (Deighton 2019) and surveillance (Ball 2017) marketplace or digital technology icons? Are beauty salons (Ourahmoune and Jurdi 2020), handbags (Rosenberg et al. 2020), high heels (Parmentier 2016), lipstick (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019), shapewear (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019) marketplace or gender(ed) icons? Are football (McDonagh 2017), movies (Kerrigan 2018), theme parks (Brown 2018), and TV series (Yalkin 2019) marketplace or entertainment icons? Are champagne (Rokka 2017), gin (Pedeliento, Pinchera, and Andreini 2020) and whiskey (Holt 2018) marketplace or national pride icons?

Despite a number of elements in common, when contrasted to former essays in this series, our work differs in three ways. First, former studies provide vibrant theorising about *singularised* iconisation processes, yet do not give rise to a general theory of market iconisation. We are far from claiming that our essay can fill this gap. Yet, it provides an initial contribution in separating the process of iconisation from two end-results of it: contextual versus marketplace iconicity. It thus provides a more dynamic model of marketplace iconicity that may transcend the specific case of facemasks.

Second, the most widely cited definition of marketplace icons by Gopaldas (2016) in fact disconnects the marketplace icon status from the market performance and rather associates it with complexity of cultural meanings attached to it, its power to instigate a debate and generate polarising feelings, as well as its ability to become part of a "cultural vocabulary" in various media and social conversations. Yet, it is still quite unclear how to distinguish between contextual and marketplace icons. If we consider the "global marketisation of life" (Sherry 2011), which posits that markets have become contexts where individuals explore, identify, and experience the world around them (Fitchett, Patsiaouras, and Davies 2014), any present-day icon has to be a marketplace icon too. An alternative hardly exists.

Third, differently from other formerly published essays in the series, our account does not privilege a single or dominant theoretical framework, such as the case of contributions on champagne

from a myth-making perspective (Rokka 2017), on lipstick from a feminist angle (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019) or whiskey from the viewpoint of cultural branding (Holt 2018). Rather, we take the opportunity of matching the narrowed focus on a single consumer good with theoretical pluralisms – in terms of disciplines, research streams, and scope of analysis (micro, meso, macro). This approach to academic thinking and writing is (regrettably) rare outside the “Marketplace Icons” series and may thus constitute one of its most distinctive merits. By tracking facemasks and their iconisation, we came across power imbalances between snoozing Western lions and rampant Eastern tigers; socio-cultural shocks jeopardising expertise in favour of more easily palatable forms of “wisdom”; gendered appraisal of political equilibrium and discourses unmasked by Covid-19 masks; and the risky tug-of-war between public health and economic wealth. We have not pursued theoretical variety for the mere sake of eclecticism, however. Instead of forcing the phenomenon within a unidimensional framework, we have tried to provide a rounded theoretical reconstruction of the many ways this artefact established a solid presence in our markets, and on our faces. And we remained captivated by acknowledging the extent to which a single artefact can be such a “microcosms” of our collective past and present.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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