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Korean Semiotics of the Face Mask: *Meanings of the Mask, Meanings of Everyday Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Abstract

Surgical face masks have become commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, producing debates on mask practices. This paper explains the semiotic practices of the face mask among Koreans, who accepted the mask early and have simultaneously remained uneasy about it until late 2020. It aims to explain this paradox by discovering various meanings Koreans ascribe to the mask. A content analysis of reader responses to news articles finds that Koreans signify what the mask means for life in various voices (i.e., instrumental meanings) in which they concurrently reveal multiple and contradictory meanings of everyday life (i.e., existential meanings) during the pandemic. Eight themes—beneficence, futility, nuisance, routine, privacy, dominance, collective commitment, and intricacy—constitute what the mask and everyday life mean. This study also finds that contradictions among these meanings are resolved either incidentally by their being simultaneously harbored in one piece of the mask that stays and holds tight in most circumstances or semiotically by certain integrative meanings embracing multiple meanings at once. The study argues that the meanings of the mask reflect meanings of life that are often contradictory and yet held together during the pandemic. It demonstrates that mask sociology serves as a promising humanistic inquiry on how the Maussian totality of everyday life is concretely experienced in the context of the pandemic.

Keywords: face mask, Covid-19, multiplicity, contradiction, totality of everyday life

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Introduction

Medical face masks have become commonplace worldwide since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. The face mask is accepted as one of the necessary tools for fighting against the coronaviruses that are yet to be known and adequately counteracted by science communities and polities across the world. In practice, however, people seem to accept the face mask in varying manners and extents so that mask practices are heterogeneous among social groups and cultures. Varying and contested practices about the face mask reflect the current situation wherein politico-scientific understandings of the coronaviruses are not fully shared (Green et al. 2020; Caulfield et al. 2021; Hyun and Hong 2022) and, subsequently, countermeasures involving the face mask and vaccines are still evolving and debated regarding their efficacy and legitimacy among the public (Eikenberry et al. 2020; Peretti-Watel et al. 2020; Ward et al. 2020).

Therefore, it holds true that people wear the face mask not only because the face mask is believed to be an effective countermeasure against the viruses but also because it is an opportune and available measure that people can rely on temporarily until arguably more perfect countermeasures, such as preventive vaccines and ex-post cures, become available. In this sense, the face mask seems to hold a place as a double entendre and paradox among people. It is an effective tool that people hold on to against strange viruses; it is also an incomplete improvisation that people ultimately want to throw away with the help of other available countermeasures. The face mask marks a unique instance of contradiction that people on the planet undergo together in everyday life. In the specific Korean context, the puzzle and surprise that our study aims to explain is the paradoxical attitudes that Koreans have had toward the face mask throughout the pandemic period, as several existing studies of Korean experiences nicely capture. For example, Koreans have been drastically accustomed to wearing the mask during the pandemic although mask-wearing was not so popular just prior to the pandemic outbreak, and the unmasked face has suddenly been taken as something unnatural although it was always something natural and essential before the pandemic outbreak (Jung 2021, 142); while little kids take the face

mask as almost part of their own body, they simultaneously never become familiar with it and there is always an insurmountable gap between their bodies and the mask (Y. Kim 2021, 114–116). What is this contradiction? How do people live with it? To find answers, our study draws on existing sociological and anthropological theories that are relevant to the research questions. As the questions pertain to paradoxical and multiple attitudes toward the face mask, we reconnect to classical theoretical resources that *acknowledge* multiple, conflicting, and paradoxical meanings of the mask. This theoretical expansion is not only legitimate but necessary to comprehend that people view the COVID-19 face mask not simply as a medical tool but an everyday life matter imbued with political, cultural, and aesthetic values.

From a sociological perspective, the mask, which includes not only medical face masks but other face-coverings, such as eye masks, hijabs, veils, and ritual masks, marks in nature multiplicity, contradictions, and contrasts of many different kinds. Classical studies have suggested that the mask is not simply a tool with which people lead life but the very way in which everyday life and existence unfold (Mauss [1938] 1985; Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988; Goffman 1956; Santayana 1922, 128–139). It is not only a tool for everyday life but a process of life itself. As such, furthermore, the mask delivers multiple and contradictory meanings and entities at once, such as both a corporeal person who wears it and "an element of an impersonal force, or of the ancestor, or of the personal god, in any case of the superhuman power" (Mauss [1938] 1985, 9); both life in the present and death/spirit from the past (Mauss [1938] 1985); both "inherent" materials (i.e., animals and nature) and "diacritical" meanings (i.e., human communities and culture) (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988); both an inherent person and a social role (Goffman 1956); both a backstage self and a frontstage self (Goffman 1956); powers congealed in both distinct people/things and elusive relations (Tonkin 1979); both covering/absence and revealing/presence (Ruiz 2013); identity negation and creation at once (Asenbaum 2018). Ultimately, the literature suggests that life at any moment is full of multiplicity and contradictions that are revealed by and possibly resolved in the mask (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988; Tonkin 1979, 242).

In the contemporary scene, this sociological wisdom of the mask anticipates that the current face mask against COVID-19 may hold multiple and even contradictory meanings relevant to its wearer's present everyday life. Drawing on the sociology of the mask, therefore, we anticipate that the face mask is first a tool with which its wearer traverses this tumultuous time of pandemic; it is also a window and a way in which its wearer makes sense of multiple and contradictory aspects of their life in one piece (i.e., in the mask). A remaining scholarly task is, therefore, to complicate this anticipation with contextual elaboration and qualification. This COVID-19-specific elaboration and qualification contribute in turn to renewing the existing sociology of the mask.

To this purpose, we investigate the meanings that Koreans ascribe to the face mask and their everyday life which they traverse by wearing it. We attend to experiences in South Korea because the country is an Asian country where people have adopted the face mask relatively early compared to other countries (Leone 2020; Lim et al. 2020). Koreans' voluntary or compulsory acceptance of the mask, along with social-distancing measures, has been credited for the low COVID-19 infection rates during the early months of the pandemic. While Korean mask practices have garnered much attention from the world, little interest has been given to the concrete experiences of these so-called *model* mask-wearers. Meanwhile, it is unmistakable from episodic reports of their experiences that Koreans do not share a simple, homogenous way of donning, doffing, and signifying the face mask and their life with it (Lee 2020; NPA 2020). On a par with other countries where the face mask has instigated heated debates among people (Moulson 2020; Mervosh et al. 2020; Mueller 2020; Martinelli et al. 2021), the face mask seems to be laden with comparable tensions and conflicts in Korea. By conducting a systematic investigation, we purport to illuminate these undercurrents of experience and invite further research in other contexts.

In explicating diverse mask practices in South Korea, the following theory section revisits a group of mask studies, or the sociology of the mask, to flesh out various meanings of the mask found in different contexts, including eye masks, hijabs, veils, and ritual masks. This theoretical review

ultimately stresses that there are multiple and contradictory meanings ascribed to the mask; more importantly, the literature suggests that these multiple meanings around the mask point not simply to varying meanings that the mask holds as a tool or a barrier for the taken-for-granted, known aspects of life (i.e., instrumental meanings regarding how the predefined life is maintained with the mask), but more fundamentally to elements that underlie the evolving and yet undefined aspects of life among mask-wearers at the moment (i.e., existential meanings regarding what life means when it involves the mask). Drawing on this conceptual framework, we find from empirical data that Koreans take from the COVID-19 face mask a set of instrumental and existential meanings, such as beneficence along with futility; nuisance along with routine; privacy along with dominance; collective commitment of various shapes; and intricacy of various textures. These are the meanings of the mask on one hand and, on the other, the meanings of the life that people lead with the mask. In conclusion, we argue that the face mask attests to Koreans that life is full of contradictions and uncertainties that are yet tied to one another as a whole, as the mask holds them together in one piece and stays with them.

Mask Semiotics: Meanings of the Mask in Theory

Both a Tool for Fixed Life and a Way of Evolving Life

A philosopher (George Santayana) that Goffman briefly cites in his book (Goffman 1956) captures precarious meanings of the mask (Santayana 1922, 128–139), by stating instantly that the mask that kids put on the face to astonish grownups adds novel fun, fiction, and imagination (thus, called 'the comic mask') to the known face and mundane substances. At the same time, it readily turns into shells that obstruct true life from breathing freely underneath it (thus, called 'the tragic mask') as these kids grow up and reach beyond the mask. In another instance, Santayana states that the mask exists in relation to and for the sake of the mask itself (and not for the face), and it (the mask) is "no less integral" a part "involved equally in the round of

existence." (Santayana 1922, 131–132). The mask for its own sake is likened to the comic mask that refers to nature, the cry of life, brute habit, and blind play rather than reason and strict prescriptions of life that the tragic mask refers to. In brief, we take from Santayana the implication that the mask is not only a tool for the face and life as usual, where the mask is comic, silly, and unconstrained fiction on one hand and, on the other, a prescribed and tragic shell. In addition, the mask is a way of existence and life, where the tragic, prescribing nature of the mask is only one part of life that is no more integral than the comic, liberating nature of the mask for the full round of life. Thus, resonating with Santayana, we posit that the mask is not for the sake of the face only but for its own sake; the mask and the face are equally involved in everyday life and existence. Indeed, everyday life is made up of both "typifications" and "zones of lucidity" (i.e., the mask *for the face*) on one hand and, on the other, "the darkness" (i.e., *the mask for itself*) that is always behind these types and lucid symbols (Berger and Luckmann [1967] 1991, 59).

Drawing on Santayana, Goffman (1956) addresses the mask as the frontstage self that is not necessarily insincere but as sincere as the backstage self (i.e., the face behind the mask) (Tseëlon 1992). This view of the mask is an outgrowth of the notion that the mask is "a matter of etiquette" (or a tool) to save the face of all parties involved in interactive relations (R. Park [1926] 1950, 244). At the same time, it further addresses the concern that the mask refers not only to etiquette but also to the roles each person strives to live up to in a collectivity and that subsequently give rise to the sense of selfhood, personhood, and individuality for each mask-wearer (R. Park [1926] 1950, 249–250). In this formula, the mask becomes one way of living for a person, just as the face is another way of the person's living. In this sense, it is true that "our very faces are living masks" (R. Park [1926] 1950, 249), and vice versa. Then, the matter of presenting life equally with the face and the mask can be re-formulated into a matter of saving one face composed of many faces involving masks (i.e., 'face-work') (Goffman 1955) or a matter of having one mask made of many masks involving faces (or what we can term 'mask-work'), which one commentary mistakes for efface-work (Baehr 2009). Be it face-work or mask-work, we stress from this Goffmanesque

interpretation that the mask is not only for acting *for* everyday life; it is for acting *in* everyday life, and indeed a way of everyday life itself.

These dual meanings of the mask are formulated similarly in anthropological works. Speaking of masks that people wear in ceremonial rituals in primitive societies, Mauss ([1938] 1985) observes that any clan society has a relatively finite set of names, titles, and masks that are derived from origin myths about how the world and the clan were created by divine beings (i.e., 'the prefigured totality of the life of a clan'). Over and again, these names and masks are then distributed to constituent human bodies of the clan, by which the names and masks of the clan are reincarnated and enlivened by succeeding mask-wearers. In this sense, the mask is for the clan system and even the world to be reincarnated and enlivened by the wearer. At the same time, the mask is for the wearing body to be accepted by, absorbed into, and given a place in the clan system. Whether it be for personal or collective consequences, therefore, the mask works as a tool for preexisting life to sustain and regenerate itself.

This process of mask-wearing, furthermore, has an even more profound implication for life. Mask-wearers often find their body and life to be reconstituted in the very terms by which the mask one wears is signified (rather than how people signify themselves without the mask) in the whole system of masks that they do not know in advance but perceive only incrementally while performing the wearing of the mask. Likewise, the whole system of clan or society often finds itself to be reconstituted in the very terms by which mask-wearers practice and enliven the mask in their details of practice which cannot be foreknown by any but the mask-worn bodies themselves. Therefore, we agree with Mauss that mask-wearing is a sort of "test" (Mauss [1938] 1985, 9). While Mauss remains silent about what this test means, we further elaborate that the test is administered not only to individual bodies but the clan system, and that mask-wearing as a test implies failure as well as success, and a new creation as well as a simple repetition of personal (and collective) life through the mask. In this sense, we posit that the mask means a way of life and what life is (and can be).

Lévi-Strauss ([1979] 1988, 93) shares with Mauss the view that the mask that American Indians put on the face has to be understood

"diacritically." That is to say, the mask acquires its meanings in relation to all the other masks and mask myths (i.e., stories of how each mask was created) and in relation to social, cultural, and economic systems that these myths refer to. That is why, Lévi-Strauss finds, the mask takes "unusual shapes" and is "so ill-adapted to their function" of covering the face (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988, 12). While being dysfunctional and symbolic, the mask reveals and discloses elements of life, such as the existence of supra-individual systems of culture and economy. All the while, the mask remains functional to the extent to which it holds its inherent, natural meanings. It is made up of natural (not cultural or economic) materials, such as bird feathers and fish tongues, depicting totemic animals and designed to be worn on the face of wearers. It works for the function of covering the face. In all, the mask is not only a tool for covering the face with natural entities but also a way in which life reveals itself with various supernatural (i.e., symbolic and cultural) elements.

Multiple Meanings in One Piece

When the mask means not only a tool for preconceived life but also a way of unspecified life, or a way in which life evolves from one moment to another, we anticipate that the extent to which mask-wearers take only one or both meanings from the mask varies from one context to another. In addition, multiple possible meanings of the mask can extend beyond this differentiation between a tool and a way. When the mask is taken as a tool, it employs multiple possible meanings; taken as a way of life, it is likely to signify multiple meanings. Sometimes, multiple meanings of the mask precede the signification of the mask as a tool or a way of life, to the extent to which people do not subscribe to the tool-way distinction and yet still interpret the mask from various semiotic angles. To incorporate all these possibilities in one perspective, therefore, we attend to varying ways in which diverse meanings of the mask, inclusive of the tool-way distinction, are arranged with one another in the existing literature.

Santayana stresses that the mask, in addition to the face, is involved in a full round of existence and life and that, in the process, the mask can be

either the "comic" mask that appends new elements of life (e.g., unrestricted fun and imagination) to the face, or the "tragic" mask that casts prescriptions, that are different from and yet equivalent in constraint to the face, onto the otherwise unconstrained life (Santayana 1922). In this sense, we take "fun" and "prescriptions" from Santayana's discovery of the meanings of the mask. We also reason that fun and prescriptions together constitute a round of life. What remains unclear is how they come to form such a round. Similarly, Robert Park ([1926] 1950) speaks of a Japanese American who holds a "Japanese mask" (i.e., appearance) and an "American mask" (i.e., demeanor) together for one's existence, and yet only belatedly realizes that this mixture is scandalous and anomalous in the eyes of both native Japanese and Americans. Under Goffman's equal treatment of the mask and the face for the matter of everyday life, inclusive of frontstage and backstage selves (Goffman 1956), the Japanese American sometimes "has a face (or a mask)" and "is in the face (or the mask)" of many faces (or masks) (Goffman 1955); at other times, the person loses a face (or a mask) and is not in the face (or the mask) when the person fails to put them all together. While we take from this literature that the mask can signify both facial appearance and embodied demeanor, and both frontstage and backstage selves, we hypothesize that this co-signification can be scandalous as well as natural depending on the context, which awaits an explication.

Among classic anthropological works (Mauss [1938] 1985; Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988), the mask reflects multiple temporalities such as the past and the present (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; cf. Berger and Luckmann [1967] 1991, 40–42) and multiple entities such as ancestors and descendants; supernatural spirits and corporeal bodies; immaterial spirits and material objects; animals and humans; and nature and culture. Therefore, just as there are potential conflicts among many masks (R. Park [1926] 1950) and the risk of failing to construct an overarching mask of many masks (Goffman 1955) and one self out of frontstage and backstage selves (Goffman 1956), it is a substantial test for mask-wearers to convey those multiple and contradictory elements together in the mask (Mauss [1938] 1985) and for these elements to be all revealed through the mask (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988). At the same time, the literature intriguingly proclaims

that, in the mask practice, or a masquerade, individual performers are already both detached from and absorbed in the mask (Mauss [1938] 1985, 6), implying that multiple elements are both fragmented from and tied to one another in the mask.

Extending these classic discourses of the mask to those of power, defined as forces that transform existent beings and generate new beings in the world, Tonkin (1979) similarly addresses that the mask holds different and conflicting meanings, such as disguise (of what is *there*, e.g., the material face) and representation (of what is *not there*, e.g., spirits from the dead); concealing and revealing (see also Ruiz 2013); identity negation and creation (see also Asenbaum 2018; Pollock 1995); secret and knowledge ('the greater the knowledge, the greater the secret,' as we interpret it); personality transformed into the fixity of the mask and personality transformed into the dissolution/mobility of the mask; and coercion/domination and energy/dynamism. These multiple meanings of the mask and, more importantly, the paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity that the multiple meanings produce together in the mask, are what makes the mask the loci and expression of power. Not denying that it is not natural to conceive of contradiction as power, Tonkin further states that the mask does not simply reveal contradiction but already creates one new being out of the contradiction and multiplicity that are revealed (Tonkin 1979, 241). To ease this immediate transition from contradiction to one overarching existence of power, Tonkin briefly resorts to a simple psychological assumption on fundamental human need, or "the common preoccupation with continuity" when surrounded by multiple meanings. This alleged preoccupation has only to be examined empirically.

Away from the psychological assumption, at the same time, Tonkin explicitly turns to an anthropological answer to how one new being can be created among contradiction and multiplicity by relying on the conception that each mask constitutes with other masks in mask myths the totality of the life of the clan and community (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988; Mauss [1938] 1985). Only if people *wear* the mask and *believe* in these mask myths and the totality of collective life in the myths, Mauss implies, do they exist as distinct individuals (while wearing) who are simultaneously absorbed into

(while believing) the totality of collective life. The meaning of one specific mask that a person wears becomes clarified within this totality. In reality, however, a mask-wearer usually takes many meanings from one specific mask that one wears; furthermore, this person faces a challenge in putting these different meanings together. Regarding this challenge, the anthropological perspective implies that the person may believe in one overarching myth (a meta-myth, so to speak) that puts together various myths that give rise to many different and conflicting meanings in one specific mask. Whether the person relies on mask myths of such a kind or not, we assume that it is a practical concern for the person to devise ways in which to live through multiple meanings of the mask. At the minimum, whatever diverse meanings of life are revealed *by* the mask cannot but be collected and exist *in* one piece of the mask.

Data and Methods

We purport to elaborate what meanings Koreans ascribe to the COVID-19 face mask on one hand and, on the other, what meanings Koreans discover about their everyday life while they maneuver through it with the face mask on. For this purpose, we have collected a textual corpus of reader responses to 18 daily newspaper articles from a popular national news portal in Korea (Naver) from November 1 to November 16, 2020. It is a cross-sectional study data-wise.

In early November, heated debates arose around the central government's decision to impose fines (100,000 Korean *won*; about 80 US dollars) on those who violated the country's mask mandate as of November 13, 2020. Although the nationwide mask mandate had been in place since October 13 and the Seoul Metropolitan Government had mandated mask-wearing on public transportation as early as May, it was not until November that the central government introduced this even stricter enforcement measure. While Koreans had remained relatively susceptible to the face mask from the early months of the pandemic on a voluntary basis, the idea of fines for violation created substantial ripples among the public, giving

researchers an uncommonly wide window through which to examine what Koreans thought of the mask and their life with it. While passing through the alleviation of mask shortages in the early months of the pandemic and the extended period of mask mandates, people may have naturalized their mask-wearing without clearly verbalizing their interpretations of the mask. The legalization of fines provided momentum to opening a discursive space among Koreans. At the same time, one cannot deny that this incidental momentum generated people's views concerning the mask in more confrontational tones than other contexts might have. Future studies should adjudicate this by employing different data sources.

Out of numerous newspaper reports during this period, we have focused on the 18 because they form a typical sample in the sense that they were published by the five most popular daily newspapers, spanning from conservative to liberal socio-political orientations (i.e., *Chosun*, *Joong-Ang*, *Dong-A*, *Hankyoreh*, and *Kyunghyang*) and they each received a minimum of 42 responses from readers. The maximum number of responses was 411 (mean = 181.5; median = 152). Through the online news portal Naver, readers provided a total of 2,798 unique textual responses to these 18 news reports.[1] The second author collected into a spreadsheet format the news reports and reader responses (i.e., report-response tuples) without using an automated computational method. Of these, 1,581 responses (56.5%) were found to be irrelevant to this study or too short to be analyzed semiotically; some of them include only a few unintelligible symbols and emoticons. We have included the remaining 1,217 unique reader responses in the following analysis. In each response, one or more thematic codes have emerged, depending on the depth of its content. A majority of 876 responses (72% of the total) have produced only one code, while two codes have simultaneously emerged from 253 responses (20.8%); three codes from 64 responses (5.3%); four codes from 16 responses (1.3%); and five codes from 8 responses (0.7%).

This study has followed the process of qualitative content analysis

1. Current links to these news reports and accompanying reader responses are available from the corresponding author upon request.

(Schreier 2012). While not imposing a priori themes or codes upon the 1,217 raw textual responses, the first step in the qualitative content analysis was to mark text blocks for coding (or, 'coding blocks'), which are in-vivo textual chunks in the raw responses. Through this process, we have marked 1,678 coding blocks from the 1,217 reader responses. This was followed by immediate paraphrasing (or, coding) of these meaningful coding blocks one by one, where we streamlined what these brief responses attempt to deliver semantically. While we located one or more coding blocks from each reader response, each coding block produced one specific thematic code. In doing so, we searched for emergent meanings from each block in relation to our interest in how people signify the face mask and their life with it. These coding blocks are found to discuss what the face mask is and is not; what mask-wearing does and does not mean; and what mask-doffing does and does not mean.

Our coding procedure features a repetitive process of coding practices, such as open coding where coders develop emergent themes (i.e., open codes) from coding blocks; real-time comparisons of these open codes; and subsequent abstraction, concretization, and renaming of these codes in relation to one another. The two authors of this study ran the coding process independently and later convened to develop common codes. These first-level codes were generated in Korean and later translated into English. This first-level coding process resulted in 41 distinct codes regarding the meanings of the face mask and everyday life with it.

Once these 41 codes were established, we abstracted them into 8 second-level codes. This second-level coding process took the form of incremental generalization of first-level codes through which first-level codes were grouped into higher-level themes based upon semantic closeness and hierarchy. Although presented in a linear manner, these first-level and second-level coding processes are mutually constitutive of each other, as second-level codes are informed by how first-level codes are constructed and vice versa. In all, we constructed the final coding frame of 41 first-level codes and 8 second-level codes that together constitute one semantic space of the face mask among Koreans during the pandemic. We used descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency) for these first-level and second-level codes for a

quantitative presentation. For the qualitative elaboration, we described how each of the 8 second-level codes were related to first-level codes and in-vivo texts.

Results: Meanings of the Mask *for* Life, Meanings *of* Life with the Mask

Koreans are found to signify the face mask and their life with it in terms of eight themes (Fig. 1). Among a total of 1,678 coding blocks in this study, the two most dominant themes emerging from the face mask are collective commitment (476 occurrences; 28% of the total) and dominance (476; 28%), followed by intricacy (349; 21%), privacy (143; 9%), nuisance (108; 7%), beneficence (69; 4%), futility (37; 2%), and routine (20; 1%). In

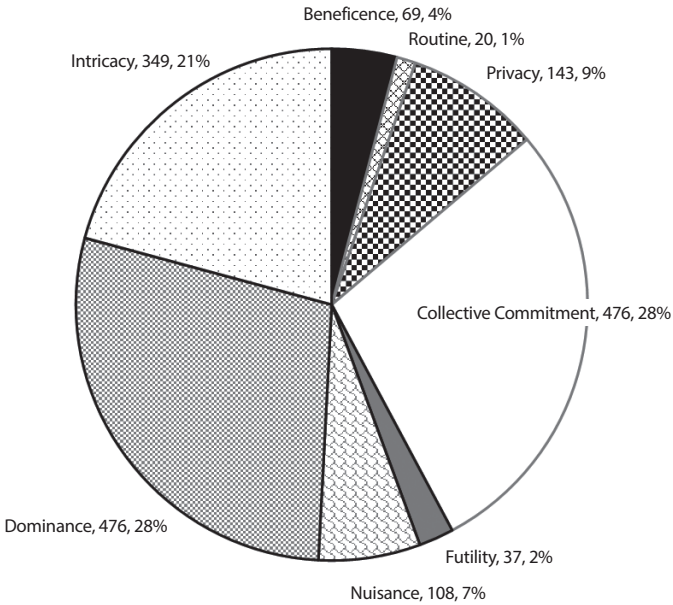

Figure 1. Eight higher-order meanings of the mask (among 1,678 coding blocks)

Source: Authors.

addition, these themes are found to be arranged along four semantic axes, such as beneficence versus futility, referring to whether the mask is beneficial or useless amidst the pandemic; routine versus nuisance, referring to whether the mask is taken as a daily routine or something annoying and irritating; privacy vis-à-vis dominance vis-à-vis collective commitment, addressing whether the mask signifies individual autonomy/independence/privacy, supra-individual dominance, or both; intricacy, where the mask signifies dual or multiple conflicting meanings at the same time. Competing themes on each axis are placed on the opposites of a circle for ease of interpretation. Lastly, each of the eight themes is composed of two to eight sub-themes (Fig. 2).

Beneficence versus Futility

Koreans are found to debate whether the face mask produces instrumental values for their life during the pandemic, although this obvious debate occupies surprisingly the most minor proportion of the semiotic space of the mask (i.e., only 106 among 1,678 coding blocks). On the issue, Koreans believe that the mask is more beneficial (69) than futile (27). Regarding the mask as beneficence (the first row of Fig. 2), people acknowledge the benefits in general terms, such as health protection of ego, the ego's family, close acquaintances, and generalized others (45%), more than specific terms, such as preventive effects against coronavirus contraction/infection (7%). Others do not even address health, the virus, contraction, or infection; instead, they base the beneficence of the mask on unspecific benefits (42%): e.g., the mask is "for the good" of ego, alters, or all people; it is "for reducing (economic) harms" to others. "The good" that the mask produces is sweepingly generalized to people themselves in these instances. One coding block even states that the mask is "more important than life"; another states that it is "something very important." In these two instances, the face mask is represented as the good itself rather than an instrument or a tool for something good (e.g., everyday life). Lastly, the mask is found to produce unexpected benefits in cases where it covers up a personal defect on the facial appearance or blocks bad breath of ego or alters. In all, the mask

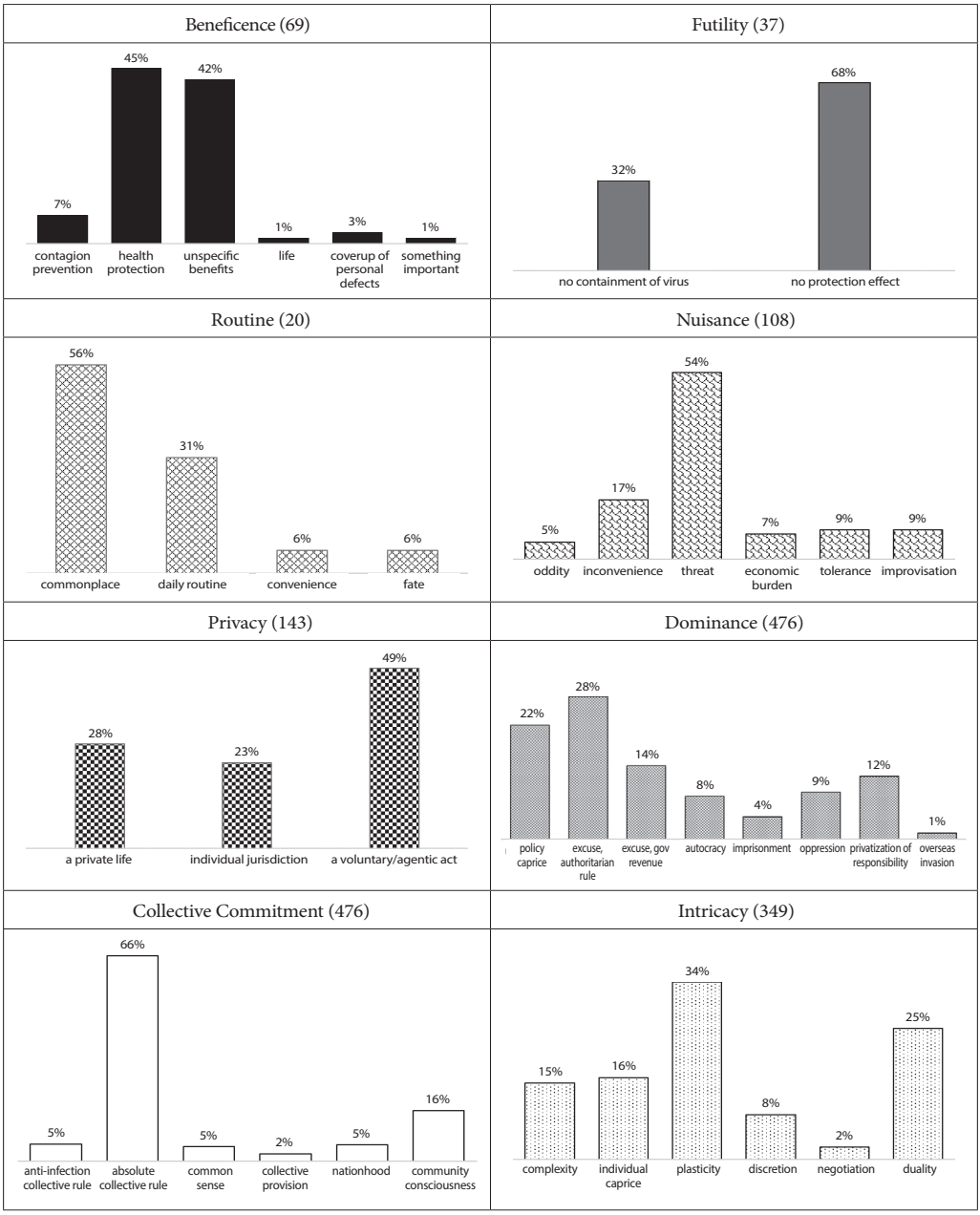

Figure 2. Forty-one constituent meanings of the eight meanings

Source: Authors.
Note: The numbers of coding blocks are in parentheses. Bars represent sub-themes within each of the eight meanings. Bar percentages refer to sub-theme proportions within each meaning. In some cases, total percentages may not come to 100 as they were rounded up or down to the nearest whole percentage point.

produces benefits, both specific and unspecific; both predicted and unpredicted; furthermore, it is benefits by and of itself.

On the opposite of beneficence is placed the view of the mask as signifying futility. The mask is found to produce no effects, either because it specifically cannot stop the spread of viruses or because it is ineffective for unspecified reasons.

Routine versus Nuisance

The second most minor concern is related to how anomalous and inconvenient the mask is. The number of coding blocks on this axis is 128 (8% of the total). Only 20 out of the relevant 128 coding blocks regard the mask as something commonly found and part of everyday life ('routine'). A handful of responses under this theme are as follows: "the mask is everywhere"; "it is at workplaces and playgrounds"; "most people are wearing it"; "the mask has become insensible." Others further stress that the mask has become part of daily life: "it is new culture"; "it is a daily routine"; "it is a garment"; "it is part of life." Only rarely, however, is the mask addressed as "something convenient." It is rather seen as something inevitable and "fateful." It is through the face mask that routine and daily life come along with a sense of fate.

Among the responses along this routine-nuisance axis, a majority (108 out of 128 coding blocks) take the mask as something annoying and irritating ('nuisance'). One sub-theme makes it clear that the mask is never taken as part of daily life or something that people get used to ('oddity') (5%). In another sub-theme, the mask is more directly signified as "inconvenience" (17%): "it causes blurry outlooks through the eyeglasses"; "the mask gets on the nerves"; it is "a pity" and "a misery"; "it is exhausting and wearisome." The most dominant sub-theme is "threat" (54%), as the mask hinders otherwise mundane daily activities such as job performance at the workplace, indoor exercise in gyms, dining in restaurants, drinking in cafes/bars, and bathing in public bathhouses and waterparks. Furthermore, the mask is often ironically considered to be a health threat (rather than a measure promoting health), as it causes breathing difficulties and skin

troubles. Health threats are sometimes more vividly expressed as "pains" that the mask produces physically rather than psychologically. A fourth sub-theme ('economic burden') (7%) shows that threats are not only physical but financial. Therefore, the mask means something that people tolerate and endure during the pandemic ('tolerance') (9%). All the while, the mask has not been viewed as "an ultimate" fix like vaccines; it is only "an improvisation" in life ('improvisation') (9%), however deeply it is involved in life during the pandemic. It is through the mask that people may consider the improvisational, opportune nature of life and, equivalently, the liveliness of improvisation and opportunism.

Privacy, Dominance, versus Collective Commitment

Two thirds of all the coding blocks (1,095) are concerned with which aspects of individual life the mask accentuates or interferes with. In 143 coding blocks (9% of the total), the mask means "privacy and autonomy"; in 476 coding blocks (28%), the mask refers to "dominance"; in another set of 476 coding blocks (28%), the mask means "collective commitment."

Three sub-themes are located within the theme of privacy and autonomy. Many responses refer to the mask as belonging to private and intimate items or matters of life ('a private life'), such as "underwear," "bedclothes," "sleep," "sex life," "condoms," "kisses," and "tooth-brushing." By likening the face mask to these instances of privacy, these responses emphasize that it is a private matter whether to wear a face mask or not. Indeed, another subgroup of responses explicitly claims for "individual jurisdiction" over the mask, arguing that to mask or not is a matter of individual "freedom," "liberty," "free will," and "inalienable rights." As an extension of this view, the third sub-theme highlights that the mask represents "a voluntary act." Responses under this sub-theme describe that people wear the mask not because of external coercion (or a sense of duty toward the community) but out of the free will and for various personal reasons. These responses are implicitly loaded with criticism of compulsory governmental mandates for the mask that put collective needs ahead of personal causes amidst the pandemic.

Criticism of governmental mask mandates is explicit and more prevalent among 476 coding blocks under the theme of dominance, which is the opposite of privacy. Eight sub-themes have emerged within dominance. First, the mask is taken as a symbol of one-size-fits-all governmental countermeasures against the pandemic, which override different needs of various social groups in the population and yet have continuously changed (e.g., nationwide lockdown measures and social distancing) depending on still-intractable developments in the pandemic ('policy caprice'). Typical responses are as follows: "the mask mandates keep changing and are inconsistent"; "the mask mandates are conflicting with other policy measures that ease social distancing in bars and restaurants"; "it is insane to have the mask mandates without shutting down national borders first." In addition, people remark that, given these other governmental interventions that seem to be relatively relaxed at that moment, the mask is an abuse of public policy. Second, people take the mask as "an excuse for the authoritarian rule of government" that has substantial consequences on implementing other counter-COVID-19 measures that even outlaw large-scale political protests on various issues. Third, if not directly political, the mask is seen as "an excuse for increasing government revenue." According to the October mandate, the Korean government can collect fines from people who violate the mask mandate. With an increase in government revenue this way, people criticize, the government can increase its grip on people's lives through increasing resources for emergency financial support during the pandemic. Fourth, the mask is indeed taken not as a mere excuse for but as a symbol of "autocracy," in the very words of Koreans. People relate the mask to the "North Korea"-associated autocratic, communist rule. Fifth, the mask means to some people nothing but "imprisonment" and a grave infringement upon individual freedom. Sixth, similarly, Koreans find in the mask governmental "oppression" of certain social groups (e.g., religionists, sexual minorities) by preempting their rights to gather and assert their identities in private/public spheres of life. Seventh, the mask means another way of dominance in which the responsibility and liability of the current pandemic are transferred and distributed to individuals who suffer the pandemic by wearing the mask ('privatization of public

responsibility'). Lastly, in a few responses, the mask is reminiscent of foreign—especially, Chinese—powers of political and economic significance that intervene in national security ('overseas intrusion').

Between and betwixt privacy and dominance is located another theme, or collective commitment. Whereas privacy and dominance constitute the opposite aspects of each other, collective commitment that the mask signifies refers to a mix of privacy and dominance, or dominance that is legitimized and committed by free and autonomous individuals themselves; it is dominance that is believed to promote people's privacy and autonomy simultaneously. As such, its first sub-theme is an "anti-infection collective rule." People believe that the mask is one of the easiest and simplest measures against the spread of viruses so that every individual should accept it collectively even for one's own sake. For those who strongly believe in terminating the infection, the mask even constitutes the only effective measure to bring this about. As seen in the second sub-theme ('an absolute collective rule'), therefore, the mask has attained the status of an "absolute" rule that cannot be compromised under any situation. The mask is taken as something applied to all individuals for the sake of the collective. Typical responses are as follows: "in order to be effective, the mask practice needs to be never discerning"; "the mask mandates and penalties for violation should be applied to kids younger than 14, 12, or even 10" and to older people; "powerful people" like "political leaders," "professors," "high-rank public-sector employees," and "the President and ministers" are no exception to the rule; "hair salons," "public bathhouses," "swimming pools," "restaurants and cafes," "outdoors," and "television stations" are no exception and no different from one another; "pretensions of mask-wearing (e.g., 'chin mask,' 'nose mask,' and 'wrist mask' that does not cover the whole face) are unacceptable." Third, if not an absolute rule in such draconian manners, the mask is taken as a matter of "common sense" that is certainly out there in the world as a concrete entity, and individuals can commonly make sense of it. Responses in this regard go like: "nobody can miss it"; "unless insane, one surely senses it and its necessity." Fourth, the mask is taken as something that the government should provide for people and which people share with one another like gifts ('a public provision'). Fifth, the mask means a collective

entity to which Koreans identify their selves ('nationhood'). Responses in this theme stress that the mask is something that individuals voluntarily put on as they see that nationhood is part and parcel of their selfhood (e.g., 'as long as one is a member of this nation, one wears the mask on one's own will.'). Sixth, in a less nationalist tone, the mask means caring for others and civic awareness of fellow citizens ('community consciousness'). Exemplary responses are: "the mask means care and consideration one gives to others"; "it is a measure of civic consciousness"; "it is a consciousness of community"; "it is an etiquette whose breach brings harms to others"; "people wear the mask because there are others being at risk as well as being a risk." In all, these six sub-themes of collective commitment suggest that the two seemingly opposite meanings (i.e., privacy/autonomy versus dominance) sometimes coexist in the experiences of the mask.

Intricacy

The coexistence of conflicting meanings is the most explicit among sub-themes of the last meaning of the mask (i.e., intricacy). The overarching theme of intricacy highlights that the mask is an intricate object and symbol conveying multiple and, more importantly, conflicting meanings at once. Its first sub-theme ('complexity') reflects people's clear utterances of the mask as something complicated: "it is confusing when and where to wear the mask" given the meticulous guidelines under the mask mandates; "should I wear the mask" when "working in offices," "eating in restaurants," "drinking in bars/cafes," "bathing in public bathhouses and saunas," "singing in pubs," "hairstyling in salons," "posing for photo ops," and "visiting remote towns?" "People do not know all the rules about whether to mask or not in different places within a city"; "the rules vary a lot between different cities." In these utterances, people are not simply perplexed by where and when to mask but also by the surprisingly unstable meanings of the heretofore semiotically stabilized life activities (e.g., eating and bathing) when the face mask newly accompanies these activities. To this extent, it is not surprising for the mask to reveal and highlight how capricious individuals are ('individual caprice,' the second sub-theme): "old generations" and "politically conservative

people" are "unpredictable" and "usual violators of the mask mandates"; while people mostly wear the mask often do not wear it when they "do not pay much attention to their surroundings" or when "they are drunk"; "the mask mandates cannot regulate how people behave." These responses admit that there is not much to do about the capricious and unstable nature of individual action when people live amidst changing circumstances.

Third, while complex rules about the mask paradoxically reveal capriciousness in human action, the strong presence of the mask in real life suggests the heretofore forgotten plasticity of life matters in practice ('plasticity'). Once these life matters are recognized as being inherently flexible, the mask itself begins to be recognized as something plastic in turn. People respond, "despite the strict mask mandates, people wear the mask realistically and flexibly in different contexts"; "it is ridiculous to mask in public bathtubs or motels"; "we need different kinds of masks that fit differently into various places like swimming pools and saunas"; "mask mandates should be flexible enough to be realistic."

Fourth, the mask accentuates an inevitable aspect of life that requires discretionary judgment in varying circumstances ('discretion'). For example, "the mask is not for everyone (e.g., people with respiratory conditions)"; "the mask is not necessary when people do not spit about"; "we should admit that the mask is not unconditional"; "the presence of the mask does not mean that all people should act the same." Fifth, the mask means a substantial amount of persuasion and negotiation ('negotiation'). People see that it is one thing to require people to wear it and another to have them actually wear it.

Sixth, facing plasticity, discretion, and negotiation in the mask, Koreans seem to ascribe two conflicting meanings to the mask and, at the same time, accept the juxtaposition of contradictory elements in their daily life amidst the pandemic ('duality'). For example, while acknowledging that mask practices are complicated and plastic, some people react to them ironically by wearing the mask all the time and everywhere. Responses highlight that these people wear the mask all the time not because the mask conveys simplicity but because it is laden with complexity and plasticity; people simply wear it because it is so complex. In a sense, simplicity has grown

necessarily together with complexity. It is a kind of simplicity-complexity mix in the mask. As another example, responses reveal that there is a fragile balance to make between blaming and tolerating people who do not abide by mask mandates. "Making people wear the mask should not go beyond limits" nor "develop into blame or insults" to the person; "although we are not comfortable with people without a mask, it is another thing to criticize them for not donning it." In this sense, the mask represents a mix of blame and tolerance. Lastly, the mask reveals a blurry boundary between the private and the public and a ready mix of the two in daily life. Dining at restaurants has produced heated debates on whether it is an intimate, private act or a public one, ever since it became one of the activities that the face mask has been brought into. So do photo-taking, outdoor/indoor exercises, singing, dancing, etc. The mask has not only made people take a fresh look at various activities of daily life; it has also made people to be attentive to the blurry coexistence of the private and the public in these activities.

Conclusion and Discussion

COVID-19 has brought to people's attention the rarely palpable but persistent multiplicities and contradictions of life in Korea as well as in other countries. When palpated, they have to be born out for better or worse in the name of subjectivity (Y. Kim 2021), social individuality and agency (Shim 2023; Shim et al. 2020), democracy (Jung 2021), collective caring (Chang and Yim 2022), and solidarity (S. Kim 2020; Makovicky 2020), to name a few Korean contexts. All along, punctuated is the otherwise forgotten sociological subject, or "the mask" (Tonkin 1979, 240) that includes medical face masks as well as a variety of face-coverings.

We have ingeniously conceptualized that the existing sociological wisdom of the mask is threefold. First, the mask is usually laden with multiple and even contradictory meanings in ceremonial rituals, festivals, or political protests. Second, people who wear the mask construct these meanings on two fronts. People signify what the mask means for life and, simultaneously, what life means that is lived with the mask on. Third, these

multiple and contradictory meanings of the mask are integrated with one another more or less. Against this wisdom (Lévi-Strauss [1979] 1988; Goffman 1956; Goffman 1955; Mauss [1938] 1985; Ruiz 2013; Tonkin 1979; Pollock 1995), one can legitimately anticipate that people are varyingly willing to wear the COVID-19 face mask that is laden with multiple, contradictory meanings; that, among people who wear the face mask, some derive simple meanings from the mask while others take multiple meanings; and that, when mask-wearers take multiple and contradictory meanings, they put these meanings together in varying manners. We need to know the historical-contextual manifestations and modifications in Korea.

By content-analyzing data from Korea, where people wear the face mask more readily than in other countries, we have attempted to complicate and advance the existing wisdom of mask sociology. First, we find that Koreans ascribe varying and sometimes contradictory meanings to the face mask; we have identified 8 higher-order meanings that are composed of 41 lower-order meanings. The eight meanings are beneficence vis-à-vis futility; nuisance vis-à-vis routine; privacy/autonomy vis-à-vis dominance; collective commitment; and intricacy. Second, Koreans take the face mask predominantly along the semiotic axis of individual privacy/autonomy, dominance, and collective commitment; along this axis, while only 9 percent of reader responses take individual privacy/autonomy from the face mask, 28 percent read dominance in the face mask; another 28 percent take the mask as collective commitment (i.e., individuals' willful commitment and submission to collective security, which is a combination of both privacy/autonomy and dominance). Third, the next most frequent meaning is found to be intricacy (21%) in which the face mask is taken as something complex and dual. Fourth, the least frequent meanings are beneficence, futility, nuisance, and routine. As a subsequent effort to further these findings, the first author has incorporated these qualitative semantic themes into a national survey as distinct questionnaire items (J. Kim et al. 2022). Our findings expand existing Korean semiotic studies (Y. Kim 2021; Cha 2022; Li and Yim 2021) to a general Korean population in a theoretical dialogue with the sociological literature.

These eight meanings that we have identified in the data refer first to

what the face mask means for everyday life during the pandemic (i.e., instrumental meanings). Koreans are often found to address the face mask as a tool for their life, without qualifying what life is and taking life as usual. The face mask is taken as something beneficent and futile for such everyday life; something annoying and routinized; something autonomy-generating and dominating; something both individual and collective; and something intricate and ambivalent. Furthermore, these meanings refer to what everyday life that currently goes on with the face mask is like in Korea (i.e., existential meanings), as emphatically demonstrated by those who end up discussing what life means when they intend to discuss what the face mask means. The nature of everyday life that Koreans maneuver through with the mask on is represented as beneficence and futility; nuisance and routine; privacy, dominance, and collective commitment; and intricacy. These findings advance mask sociology on several fronts.

The sociological literature of the mask has long suggested that multiple and contradictory meanings are both *revealed and resolved* at once in the mask. Resonating with the literature, we first argue that *instrumental* meanings that people ascribe to the mask are reflective of *existential* meanings that life has for these people, which serves as a contemporary revisit to the Maussian dialectic between techniques/tools and life (Mauss [1934] 1973); techniques for life are not only tools for life but ways of life itself since life is often manifested as nothing but techniques and tools (for it). While we have complicated this fascinating sociological wisdom with eight semantic meanings around the face mask in Korea, we invite further research on different cultural contexts for possible comparison. Second, we argue that contradictory meanings of life (e.g., beneficence versus futility; nuisance versus routine; autonomy versus dominance) are *resolved* by the mask in the minimalist sense that these contradictory meanings are *revealed* and signified simultaneously in *one concrete piece*, or the mask. Furthermore, we argue that people resolve those contradictions via the mask more proactively by investing the mask explicitly with such integrative meanings as collective commitment (that espouses both individual autonomy and collective dominance in life) and intricacy (that embraces complexity, plasticity, and duality in life). Uncomfortable and strange as they may look

at first sight, these contradictions are not rare or ephemeral; upon a second or third look, they appear persistent and durable during the years of the pandemic thus far. Lastly, classical studies have found that a set of masks complete the totality of the life of a clan or society from a structuralist perspective (Mauss [1938] 1985; [1925] 1990). In this study that takes an individualist approach, one face mask demonstrates the *totality* of the life of an individual in terms of *multiplicity and contradiction existent in one piece*. We have taken an individual perspective to the one face mask that the person wears, and revealed the multiple and contradictory meanings of individual life in the mask. We suggest that, unless one takes a bird-eye view of a total social system, the Maussian sociological imagination of the totality of life will only have to be anchored in the specific experiences of multiplicity and even contradiction that are existent in one piece (e.g., the face mask). While we are emphasizing the mask as the empirical site for such sociological realism in the pandemic context, the mask hardly exhausts the experiential representations of the sociological realism in other contexts.

In addition to our contribution to mask sociology in general, we make further contributions to the currently emerging body of semiotic studies on the COVID-19 mask around the question of what the mask means. An elite-based exploratory study on what health experts in different countries think of the face mask (Martinelli et al. 2021) affirms that the face mask reveals the "interchangeability" of one being a risk (to others) and being at risk of virus contraction (from others) (Heimstädt et al. 2020), and that of selfishly protecting oneself and altruistically protecting others. In essence, this finding agrees with our study in the sense that interchangeability in that study and intricacy (and duality as one of its sub-meanings) in our study both illuminate the sociological wisdom that individuals are social individuals (Mead [1934] 1972; Berger and Luckmann [1967] 1991), and there is a blurry line between self-interested/private and altruist/public lives. While the study of Martinelli et al. is based on elite opinions and, subsequently, sketchy on real-world experiences, however, our study that uses on-the-ground public responses shows how the fact that individuals are social individuals is experienced through real voices about what the face mask means. It is not simply a data-wise innovation but a theoretical one. We have

expanded several theoretical frontiers of social individuality. We argue that the private-public duality as a life challenge is accompanied by and, thus, made livable by other instances of duality (e.g., the simplicity-complexity duality); alternatively, the challenging duality is accommodated within and, thus, made livable by the higher-order sense of life being intricate in nature and being both autonomous and dominated. These contributions have bearings on pioneering studies among Korean scholars who have similar sociological viewpoints (Jung 2021; Y. Kim 2021). Once having identified multiple meanings of the mask in terms of historical contexts and contingencies in politics, everyday practices, built environments, and industrial policies, one study suggests that the COVID-19 mask practices provide a venue in which Korean democracy can reconstitute itself (Jung 2021). Our study adds to that study by showing that this reconstructive democracy is already on its way among people who learn to live with contradictions and multiplicity in various ways identified in our study. This dialogue is seamlessly applicable to another breathtaking study that shows that human subjectivity, or childhood (an instance of humanity), bears out "despite" contradictions (Y. Kim 2021); we add that it may bear out and even prosper due to contradictions.

Complex meanings of the face mask have been reported in other studies as well. A study based on an online experimental survey of students at a Norwegian college (Tateo 2020) finds that the mask means both "safety/protection" and "fear"; both "ordinariness" and "extraordinariness." It also finds that, given this complexity in mask meanings, students try to impose "neutrality" and "cuteness" meanings to the mask: the former to overcome the confrontation of safety and fear; the latter to overcome the ordinariness-extraordinariness confrontation. That is, students seem to take the mask as something neutral that is neither safe nor scary, and as something cute that is neither ordinary nor extraordinary. We find this second argument interesting as it implies that people rely on neutrality and cuteness as a third meaning and hope to live with contradictions and dual meanings in the mask. Although one might see a parallel between this neutrality meaning and the meanings of intricacy and collective commitment in our study, Koreans do not clearly bring up neutrality or cuteness as a way of holding

together contradictory meanings of the mask (cf. Li and Yim 2021). While the differences between a survey experiment of Norwegian college students and an observation of the general Korean public may well have resulted in this discrepancy, the discrepancy itself is worth noting. It invites future research on potentially different semiotic ways in which people live with contradictions in life with the face mask on.

Regarding such a comparative future study, noteworthy is an additional group of studies on mask semiotics among racial/ethnic minorities, especially Asians, in the United States. The most common finding is a double jeopardy and bind in which the mask signifies to Asian minorities both "a (white-dominated, socially constructed) threat to racial/ethnic identity" that results from the dominant American view of the mask as Asian inferiority and weakness on one hand and, on the other, "an effective health protection" (Ren and Feagin 2021; Ma and Zhan 2020; Kahn and Money 2021; Choi and Lee 2021). Encountering these two contradictory meanings of the mask, minority Asians are found to trample the former with the latter under a theme of life, or the signification that to have a secure life is more important than to have an opportunity to live Asian against anti-Asian racist prejudices (Ma and Zhan 2020). Alternatively, they are found to integrate the two divergent meanings under a theme of freedom, or the signification that it is both one's own right to face identity threat (e.g., 'I would take the threat willingly') and to enjoy the health protection effect (e.g., 'I seek for the effect willingly') (Ma and Zhan 2020). In the name of freedom, the study suggests, the two contradictory meanings can be held together in the US. By contrast, our study shows that individual autonomy and freedom do not wield such an integrative power in Korea; if any, autonomy/privacy is rather a competing meaning (vis-à-vis dominance) than an integrative meaning. Instead, collective commitment is found to be an integrative one that melds autonomy/privacy and dominance together.

Lastly, our study makes an unambiguous counterargument against the still reemerging views that unduly simplify the meanings of the face mask. While describing the meanings of the mask among Asians living in the US, studies report dominant American views of the mask as a threat to individual freedom and a hiding/negation of individual identity (Choi and Lee 2021;

Ren and Feagin 2021). Among Americans, the face mask is reported to signify safety and civic responsibility among people who agree to wear the mask and criticize non-wearers; on the contrary, it is reportedly taken as an unnecessary rule, dictatorship, and weakness by those who do not agree to wear it (Bhasin et al. 2020). While these studies are informative in showing that there are varying meanings, however, they unwittingly give a wrong impression that there is a strong bifurcation between mask-wearers who take only positive meanings from the mask, and non-wearers who take only negative meanings from it. Our study suggests that the mask can be laden with conflicting meanings within an individual no matter whether the individual wears it or not. The social confrontations regarding whether to wear the face mask or not may have more to do with divergent responses to the question of how to live with contradictions in life than binary responses to whether the mask is good or bad. For example, people who (are enabled to) find ways to accommodate conflicting meanings are more inclined to wear the mask than those who struggle with those contradictions. This invites future studies about whether there are cross-national differences in this matter. A mirror simplification that pervades the literature among some Korean scholars is the binary view of the fundamental Korean/Asian culture accustomed to the mask and the Western culture against it (Park and Minezaki 2020; Kang et al. 2021). While there is suspicion (Hong 2022) and doubt (Jung 2021) at once, it is worth noting that inquiries open to the multiple meanings of the face mask provide historical accounts for why Koreans (and Asians) are more susceptible to wearing the face mask than Westerners (Jung 2021; Kim and Choi 2022), while the studies that simplify the mask as a hygienic and public health measure have yet to find an historical account for the same puzzle (Hyun 2022; Chang and Yim 2022). In this sense, our finding of the semiotic multiplicity of the mask is necessary, if not sufficient, to resolve the curiosity surrounding mask-prone Koreans/Asians versus mask-resistant Westerners.

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