PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

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18. What's behind the Mask? Family, Fandoms and Playful Caring around Children's Masks during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Recognition of Covid-19 as an airborne respiratory virus introduced mask wearing suddenly, and potentially disruptively, into the everyday lives of many children and young people in the UK. Guidance, and later regulations, requiring mask wearing for older children in communal spaces, and the uptake in families of masks for younger children despite age-related exemptions, meant that many families, including our own, swiftly began developing habitual practices around mask wearing. This chapter goes 'behind the mask' as a physical, material object representative of the pandemic, and mask wearing as a focal pandemic practice, to explore mask-related practices within extended families. These practices began reframing masks for children and young people as playful personal items, seeking to make the strange familiar and even fun, to reassure children during a difficult period and to offer outlets for expressing children's identities and interests.

This chapter draws mainly on auto-ethnographic observations within our families based in the UK, where public mask wearing as a means of infection control was not a broad societal norm prior to the

pandemic. It considers mask design, and the giving and receiving of masks within extended families, as both an extension and expression of caring, protective, intergenerational relationships. We explore children's own agency in mask design and how children drew on their own fandoms and digital/literary/media interests, such as the *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars* and *Marvel* franchises. We also consider how masks were even presented to children as a gift or treat, drawing on celebratory tradition. The chapter demonstrates how the underlying relationships within families behind these practices address narratives of children as vulnerable and lacking agency during the pandemic.

Before discussing the role(s) of face masks in our children's own lives, some scene setting is necessary to summarize the complexities of the UK's approach to children's face masks during the global Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic became a reality for the UK in early 2020, the government began introducing policy 'at a speed and scale only seen during wartime' (Cairney 2021: 90). Earliest measures prior to the UK's first national lockdown, announced on 23 March 2020, promoted personal behavioural changes: effective hand washing, social distancing when out and about, and self-isolation for anyone showing possible symptoms (Cairney 2021: 100), and these practices continued to be emphasized for much of the pandemic period.

One area of 'uncertainty' early in the pandemic, however, concerned the usefulness of face coverings to impede the spread of the virus (Panovska-Griffiths et al. 2021: 1), particularly for children. The UK government had at first indicated that face coverings were not required, 'despite prior reports in April 2020 at the height of the pandemic suggesting that they might be useful when used in a risk-based way' (Heald et al. 2021: 2). In June 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended the wearing of cloth, non-medical face coverings in 'enclosed spaces' (Heald et al. 2021: 2). That same month, in the UK, compulsory mask wearing was introduced on public transport, and in shops in July, alongside a slight reduction in social distancing to boost the retail economy (Heald et al. 20201: 2). In September, a campaign from the Department of Health and Social Care unveiled the slogan 'Hands, Face, Space', placing wearing a face covering on a par with hand washing or sanitizing and social distancing (cf. Warren and Lofstedt 2021).

The WHO recommendations mentioned above only applied, however, to those over twelve years old 'on the basis that younger children may have lower susceptibility and potentially lower transmissibility than adults' (Panovska-Griffiths et al. 2021: 3). In the UK, those belonging to groups defined as 'less able to wear face coverings' included children under eleven, with an accompanying recommendation from the UK Health Security Agency that children under three should not wear face coverings for health and safety reasons. When primary and secondary schools reopened to some year groups in June and July 2020, as the first national lockdown began to ease, guidance was provided restricting social mixing with class 'bubbles', 'distancing, hand hygiene, enhanced cleaning and isolation of symptomatic individuals' (Sundaram et al. 2021: 273). Mask wearing, however, was not instigated among primary school children, although in secondary schools 'the government permitted schools to encourage mask wearing in communal areas' (Panovska-Griffiths et al. 2021). Mask wearing in secondary schools persisted until the end of January 2022, by which time 'all mask requirements in schools had been dropped and masks were actively discouraged' (Williams et al. 2022).

The UK's approach towards mask wearing among school-aged children, alongside measures such as vaccination programmes for primary school-aged children, can be contrasted with that of other countries, such as Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, say Williams et al. (2022). They write that 'whereas messages around facemasks in the UK, including in schools, have been confusing, other countries have provided a clear and consistent message around their value, for example the United States'. Instead, concerns were expressed around younger children's welfare if required to wear masks that could potentially affect facial recognition, communication and 'block signaling between teacher and learner' (Spitzer 2020).

Multiple discourses could also potentially be at play here, notably the construction of children as vulnerable victims of the pandemic, suffering from learning loss and social isolation, with concerns also expressed over very young children's social and psychological development in a mask-wearing world (Cabrera 2021; Twele, Thierry, and Mondloch 2022). Moreover, the wearing of medical-style or cloth face coverings in public to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses is not a habitual

practice in the UK, unlike in some Asian countries such as Japan (Burgess and Horii 2012) and China, making the shift to a (temporary) 'new normal' of public mask wearing during the coronavirus pandemic a stark visual signifier and reminder of the pandemic situation. Feng et al. also call attention to the 'societal and cultural paradigms of mask usage', observing that the disparity 'between face mask use as a hygienic practice (i.e., in many Asian countries), or as something only people who are unwell do (i.e., in European and North American countries), has induced stigmatization and racial aggravations' (2020: 436).

Even putting mask wearing aside, we can recognize that types of head or face covering in the UK has become an issue fuelled by relatively recent moral panics (Cohen 2002) around perceived threats from both 'outside' and 'within' the dominant culture: fears of fundamentalism purportedly in the name of Islam (which further 'othered' Muslims in the UK) and of the 'hoodie' (a pejorative term directed at some young people, deriving from hooded sweatshirts that, with the hood raised, could somewhat conceal its wearer's identity). British Muslim women choosing to wear headscarves or to wear a veil can experience 'hostility' (Phoenix 2019: 1633) while the 'hoodie' was portrayed as 'an assumed indicator of moral decline among youth in contemporary Britain' (Hier et al. 2011: 260). Yet Belton argues that attire such as hooded tops and baseball caps are a response on the part of young people to our surveillance society, whereby 'groups (mainly of young people) develop a determination to minimise the extent they can be spied upon by often invisible observers' (2009: 133).

Ike et al. (2020: 994) point out that throughout history masks have held 'the power to communicate and signify a wide range of individual and culturally held beliefs'. If face covering was contentious before the pandemic, then during it mask wearing became further politicised via the concepts of communal responsibilities pitted against individual freedoms. During Covid-19, mask wearing became ideologically framed and, say Ike et al., writing from a United States perspective, 'divisive' along Democrat and Republican lines: 'In one sphere, the mask communicates a belief in medical science and a desire to protect one's neighbor from contagion. In the other sphere, the mask communicates oppression, government overreach, and a scepticism toward established scientific principles' (2020: 994).

Family and Digital Autoethnography in a Covid Frame

Adams and Manning describe autoethnography 'as a method that combines tenets and techniques of ethnography and autobiography' (2015: 351). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner state that, like ethnography and autobiography, 'autoethnography is both process and product', something the researcher 'does' and a written record that is the product of that activity (2011: 273). They argue that autoethnography is 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)' (2011: 273). They claim it as an approach to the social sciences that 'attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art' (2011: 283), bringing together and storying the personal and the social, whilst maintaining a commitment to being rigorous and analytical, theoretical but also value-centred. Kennedy and Romo (2013), citing Gergen and Gergen (2000: 1028), position autoethnography as a 'historically, culturally, and personally situated' methodology. This makes it particularly apposite for research carried out in Covid times and about personal and familial responses to the pandemic as an unfolding historical and cultural event, experienced as a personal and situated phenomenon, the end of which was (and is) not clear and predictable. Adams and Manning (2015) propose four qualities of autoethnography that make it an approach particularly suited to conducting family research. Firstly, it facilitates the study of the everyday. Secondly, it also enables study of the unexpected and of how families respond to challenging circumstances (of which the Covid pandemic is clearly an example). Thirdly, autoethnography seeks to situate and contextualize the personal against existing bodies of research and knowledge, and fourthly, it seeks to do so in ways that are accessible to wider non-academic audiences.

Within autoethnographic research, different approaches exist. Interpretive-humanistic and critical ethnographies are the approaches that have informed our thinking in this case. Both focus on thick descriptions from the field which are unpacked and analyzed against the wider cultural contexts. Neither type emphasizes systematic collection, triangulation or coding of data but both can include observation, collection of artefacts (including images), conducting formal interviews

and/or informal conversations, and employing provocations to elicit discussion of memory (Adams and Manning 2015). Writing about her work on transnational family ethnography in the digital age, Winarnita states that 'social media and electronic communication are critical parts of contemporary ethnographic methodologies' (2019: 105). She argues that digital technologies not only sustain and preserve family networks interrupted by distance, they are part of an intergenerational connecting social and cultural context in which self and family identities are created, shared and discussed. Winarnita's research is a pre-Covid transnational study, examining the experiences of female migrant workers in Australia and the role of digital technologies in maintaining their familial relationships in Indonesia. The circumstances of the pandemic make this work relevant to our study of family mask wearing practices during Covid in the UK when various degrees of lockdown restricted the physical gathering of families across households and saw a proliferation of use of digital platforms for familial communication.

Interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies, Adams and Manning argue, 'use personal experiences as a way to describe, and facilitate an understanding of, cultural expectations and experiences' (2015: 353). This has clear resonances with our focus here on how children and families navigated new, unfamiliar and fluctuating expectations of behaviour related to the wearing of face masks during the pandemic. Critical autoethnographies use personal experiences to help identify and challenge oppressive, harmful or unjust 'values, practices and experiences' and to uncover and bring attention to 'silent or suppressed experiences' normally absent from, or under-represented in, research and in popular discourse (Adams and Manning 2015: 353). This critical approach is present in Gingrich-Philbrook's rejection of any framing of autoethnography as a method or 'procedure' (2005: 298). He argues instead that autoethnography is better understood as an orientation towards inquiry—one that foregrounds a Foucauldian notion of 'subjugated knowledge' which can be understood as 'ways of knowing, lost arts, and records of encounters with power' (2005: 298) that run counter to dominant societal orthodoxies.

Children have been persistently framed as 'other' during the pandemic. They have been declared, on one hand, an outlier group, unlikely to suffer health consequences from the virus and, on the other hand, have been labelled 'potential "vectors" for the disease'

(Cortés-Morales et al. 2022). In relation to mask wearing, different and seemingly quite arbitrary age-related expectations have been placed on children in different parts of the world. The framing of children as a whole, and sub-groups such as neurodivergent and dis/abled children as vulnerable, has intersected with competing discourses that position the wearing of face masks both as their salvation and as a form of abuse that could cost their lives. What little research has been done into children's use of face masks has predominantly focused on assessing their efficacy in reducing virus transmission, strategies to support children (including specific groups of neurodivergent or dis/abledchildren) to tolerate mask wearing, and worries about the potential role of masks in causing or exacerbating social and language barriers that could impact negatively on development (Eberhart, Orthaber, and Kerbl 2021; Sivaraman, Virues-Ortega and Roeyers 2021; Pourret and Saillet 2020; Singh, Tan and Quinn 2021). Children's use of different technical types of masks has been researched, based on adult preferences and requirements of Covid measures (Halbur et al. 2021). However, there has been a lack of focus on children's mask choices, on masks as a canvas for children's identity expression and on family masking practices, and a lack of family autoethnographic work that could shed critical light on this subjugated knowledge from the perspectives of children and families. Our chapter seeks to address this gap.

As authors of this chapter, we might best be described as accidental ethnographers. Guy and Arthur (2020) found that for many women in academia, the already fuzzy boundaries between work life and home life became further blurred and impossible to maintain as Covid measures brought work roles and homeschooling roles into the home on an unprecedented scale. I (Yinka) sometimes felt that, rather than working from home, I was now living at work. Our shared academic focus is on childhood and play, mine from a historical perspective and Cath's from a folkloristic one. We are also both parents and proud members of neurodivergent families with interests in identity and fandoms. Separately, and from our own individual impulses (which we discuss below), each of us was informally collecting and analyzing our family practices around children and face masks from early in the pandemic. This became a shared research project in retrospect when, via an online and interactive series of video meetings, we began to share stories and images with each other and to revisit family texts and

WhatsApp messages. We began to make connections across our families and beyond to wider national and global contexts, relevant concepts from our respective academic disciplines and the emerging research in the new academic field of Covid Studies.[1] Nash, O'Malley and Patterson (2021) warn that in family autoethnography decisions have to be made in writing about focusing on families or on themes. They write that 'in one approach, the families got lost, while in the other, the themes got lost' (2021: 105). Ellis, Adams and Bochner remind us, 'when researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience' (2011: 277). They describe the use of 'layered accounts' where data and analysis intertwine, aided by the use of 'vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection' (2011: 278-79). Drawing this advice together, we have chosen to make use of vignettes. We have also chosen to disrupt the narrative flow, moving backwards and forwards in time as we present episodes of data, in order to explore themes that have emerged as we have collected, analyzed and reflected on our families' personal experiences and considered them within wider cultural experiences.

Pandemic Researchers/Pandemic Parents: Locating Our Researcher and Parent Selves in the Research

Yinka and the Historical Impulse

We all play roles within our family structures and one that I have claimed since childhood is that of family archivist. I record, salvage and file away traces of the present before it slips into the past. I like to think that this is a trait I inherited from my maternal grandparents who kept the top drawer of a huge mahogany chest filled with documents and artefacts from a shared family past, lined with pages from newspapers from bygone decades. Every now and then the drawer would be opened and an evening spent pulling out these items. A hand would reach in to extract the next treasure—binoculars, a pair of leather gloves for

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1   Recognising that our experiences had the makings of a small research project, we sought ethical approval from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee and consequent consent from child and adult family members before embarking on specific data gathering.

motorbike riding, diaries, letters, official records and the occasional photograph—and I would listen with rapt attention as the telling and re-telling of family stories unfolded, the comedy, tragedy, mundanity or triumph associated with each object explored.

In adulthood, I have my own drawers and boxes of similar keepsakes. However, the development of digital technology has meant that the largest proliferation of my instinctive urge to record family history is virtual rather than material. My iPhone tells me that I have over 27,000 photographs stored in the iCloud. On a single day I can take more photographs of my children than were taken of me in the entirety of my own childhood. I am drawn to take these photographs of my children's lives and activities as a mother. However, the images I see on my camera screen as I frame my shots are inevitably also viewed through my lenses as a historian of childhood and a researcher of children's play, past and present. I document my children's playful and creative activity, interested in playful processes and in the meanings (cognitive and emotional) they construct and deconstruct for themselves in their play. As well as people, I have a strong attachment to place and to recording the changing, often fleeting and ephemeral, streetscapes and landscapes that provide the context for my family's lives. In my wider family, the sharing of digital images via platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook is also a regular occurrence. Therefore, as well as providing provocations for the telling and retelling of stories, like the physical family artefacts of my children, these images prompt an ongoing thread of family discourse, connecting images of play and childhood today with family childhoods past.

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached the UK, I viewed it from the start as a historical event. My maternal grandparents, both now deceased, had lived through the flu pandemic of 1918 but no trace of their experience remained that could have served as a reference point for making some sense of the developing crisis. Their childhood flu experiences were not part of family history, not represented in artefacts from the mahogany top drawer. I had so many questions to ask of them but no means to do so. So personally and professionally, I was determined that the first global pandemic of the digital age was something to be documented and archived to help us bear witness to it and enable future generations to understand. Many colleagues who specialize in empirical fieldwork with strangers or laboratory-based research were cut off from their research due to Covid lockdown. In contrast, I was embedded at

home, the epicentre of childhood and play research in Covid times, watching it emerge before my eyes—a participant-researcher in an unfolding family autoethnography.

Cath and the Folkloristic Impulse

While the pandemic could be seen as a period of fragmentation, with social distancing measures separating us physically from work colleagues, friends, family members and even meaningful places and spaces, for me it was also a time of curious coalescence as my researcher identity merged with the roles I (Cath) inhabit in my home and my immediate family's life. As I embarked on new ways of enacting my responsibilities—home working while parenting and homeschooling my sons, then aged nine and fourteen—boundaries between what I was observing on the Play Observatory project concerning children's pandemic-related play and what I was observing my own children doing in their day-to-day lives began to blur. While gathering data online due to social distancing, I was simultaneously living 'in the field'. Furthermore, broader societal perceptions about children's well-being playing out in media and social discourses, and also being interrogated by our research team, were issues I was grappling with as a parent—issues such as popular concerns over children's increased time on digital devices, and notions that children were suffering due to social distancing measures and other preventative acts such as school and club closures. What could folklore studies as a discipline, I questioned, bring to these questions and to my own immediate situation?

Our project team had followed somewhat in the footsteps of two British folklorists, Iona and Peter Opie, in our devising of the Play Observatory survey, drawing on their now established but then groundbreaking approach of questionnaires designed for children, as we sought to centre children's voices. Consequently, our survey was as child-friendly as possible and, moreover, we took inspiration from the Opies' method of 'prompts' to encourage children to share in their own words their pandemic play experiences. We also attempted to devise a survey which allowed children to self-identify in terms of ethnicity and ability/disability (Olusoga, Bannister and Bishop 2021). These choices speak to folklore studies' potential to act as a mediator and platform for marginalized groups through its focus on, and valuing of, unofficial

cultural practices shared among peers in 'folk groups' (Ben-Amos 1971: 12-13). As Fivecoate, Downs, and McGriff observe, folklorists 'acknowledge that the vernacular knowledge held by small groups of people is valued, valuable, and worthy of serious academic attention' (2021: 2).

Furthermore, folkloric expressions can be a lens through which to observe events and crises spawning, for example, beliefs and language, contemporary legends, narratives, jokes, parodies and memes, reflecting public anxieties, lived experiences, and social and political tensions (cf. Sebba-Elran 2021). Such events can also throw issues of marginalization and disadvantage into relief. With children perceived, as the above discussion has shown, as victims of the pandemic, creating an outlet to share their play practices through our Play Observatory allowed us to investigate those popular perceptions through valuing and respecting children's own experiences, including their emotional experiences.

Reflecting on my own positionality (Holmes 2020), I can see that my responses to my own children's play were informed by that same folkloristic sense of value. Both my children, made anonymous as Jeff and Frank in this chapter, are neurodivergent. Prior to the pandemic, I acknowledged their online digital play as important as a means for them to communicate with each other and friends in ways that my eldest particularly finds complex in face-to-face interactions with peers.

In regards to this chapter's specific topic of face masks and masking, folklore is concerned with material culture/material behaviour (Jones 1997) as an expression of communal identity and group traditions, with the making or crafting of artefacts, their design, practical applications and symbolic collective meanings falling within folklore's remit. Jones argues that folklore research has demonstrated that 'to understand tangible things we must investigate the circumstances that obtained before their existence, the processes by which they came into existence, and the consequences of their existence' (1997: 209).

As an example, Chomitzky (2020: 27) draws folkloric connections between Ukraine's 'national cultural history' of embroidered textiles which influenced cloth mask designs during the pandemic in both Ukraine and among the Canadian diaspora. She writes that 'through a subversion of their common purpose—to hide one's identity—masks have been used in the pandemic as an open/performative display of culture'. This perspective let me reflexively reframe my own family's

mask-making practices and the choices my children made in mask design as (alongside playthings) markers of group identity and belonging (to a fandom, in my son's case, or to a *Minecraft*-located virtual world for both) and, for the mask makers, part of both family tradition and a broader tradition of making within the home (and transmission of such knowledge), which was adapted during pandemic times, in my own family's experiences, by those already occupying caregiving roles.

The Data: New Family Practices and Networks of Caring—Material and Practical

Mask Design and Identity: Fabric and Fandoms

Vignette 1: Accessorizing the Face Mask (Yinka)

It is Wednesday 3 June 2020, and I have escaped temporarily from my desk and laptop screen in the dining room and I am sitting reading on my bed. My nine-year-old son, Levi [name changed] comes in and announces that he has accessorized his new face mask. I look up to see him wearing his custom-made face mask that arrived in the post a few days earlier. Levi has always had a fascination for dressing up, particularly as characters who are the villains in the book, film and television franchises he enjoys, and he has developed an eclectic mix of interests and fandoms. These come together in his styling of his new face mask. The *Harry Potter* face mask, a white text and shield design on a black background, fits tightly over his face and nose, lying just beneath his eyes. On top of the material, above where his top lip resides beneath the fabric, he has placed a brown, stick-on moustache. He and his sister got these for Christmas and they make regular appearances in his costume designs and occasionally on random inanimate objects around the house. On Levi's finger is a large ring in the shape of a skull. He bought it on holiday the previous summer in the gothic seaside town of Whitby and liked it because it resembles the skull in the dark mark that Voldemort's followers have and that appears in the sky in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of*

Fire and in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince.* On his head is a black turban, reminiscent of the one worn by Professor Quirrel in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to conceal the fact that Voldemort is possessing his body and his face has manifested itself on the back of Quirrel's head. Levi is very pleased with his assembled look. He has taken the *Harry Potter* mask as a starting point and 'villiainified' it with his accessories. He agrees to my taking a photograph, which I do, and says that I can share it with our family in our WhatsApp group. My sibling Ash [name changed], who made the face mask that inspired the look, replies with the tears of joy emoji.

It was via a message on 5 May 2020 that the prospect of home-made face masks was first mooted in the family WhatsApp group chat by one of my siblings, Ash. In the message, Ash self-identified as 'Guardian of the Sewing Machine', an ancient behemoth of apparatus passed down the family generations. If I (Yinka) am a family archivist, Ash is the family maker, who works in the creative industries, more recently becoming a potter and the designer and maker of last-minute costumes for school events. Attached was a photograph of them wearing their first prototype, a tight-fitting black cotton mask very much in keeping with their usual clothing aesthetic. The message stated that more material was being ordered and invited requests. I felt huge relief and much gratitude. During these early months of the pandemic I had seen a flood of information wash across my social media feeds on the topic of home-made cloth masks. Knowing that I am someone with absolutely no ability to sew, I had experimented with a version I had seen on Instagram, where a sock, a cotton filter and some hair ties could be improvised into a mask, but found it loose fitting and clearly not likely to be effective, especially for children, and I had felt a rising tide of panic. In a second WhatsApp message, Ash stated, 'I am intending to make some for everyone […] Should get delivery of some groovy materials tomorrow […] Place your orders folks'. Discussion followed and ideas for materials were suggested, enabling Ash to curate a selection of materials that applied to the adults in the family (for example, a deep purple slightly patterned material for our mother and me) and another selection that appealed to the children, drawing on some of their interests (such as planetary

science) and fandoms. After delivery delays, ten days later another WhatsApp message arrived with a photograph of five materials and Ash asked the children in our extended family to make their selections for their first custom-made masks. I texted them my children's choices and Ash replied, 'I'll get sewing—quite looking forward to doing something different and a little less messy than pottery'. Looking at the image again in autumn of 2022, Levi remembers being 'excited' to get his first face mask. He chose the *Harry Potter* design for his first one and a *Star Wars* design for his second one. He observes, 'If I was choosing today I'd have the *Marvel* one'. We lament together that now in 2022 we do not wear the cloth masks any more. Although he chooses to mask indoors still, Levi now wears black disposable N95 masks and has never been moved to accessorize them.

Popular media franchises play a significant role in my (Cath's) immediate family's life as something all of us—me, my husband, and our sons—can enjoy together. The release of a new *Marvel* superhero movie routinely heralds a trip to the cinema or we pile onto the sofa to rewatch old favourites together at home. My sons boast a staggering collection of toy lightsabers and LEGO sets tied into both fictional worlds, while Frank loves dressing up as his favourite heroes (and villains), including Spiderman and Darth Vader. While the pandemic curtailed cinema trips, we were able to sustain our interests during social distancing, gifted as we were with increased family time together to catch up on films and spin-off series, and to play and create together around our shared media interests. The continuity of these habitual activities was comforting, as was, perhaps, the predictable but no less enjoyable narratives of good triumphing over evil these franchises provide.

When my mother-in-law, anonymized in this chapter as Brenda, began making masks for her grandchildren, she sought out fabric which reflected their own interests, including media interests, inviting (by various remote means) the children in our extended family to pick something they would be happy to wear. Jeff who turned fourteen in 2020, requested a simple blue and white mask made from cloth but reminiscent of the clinical, disposable masks worn by medical professionals, a familiar sight by that time in televised news reports on the pandemic. Frank, meanwhile, opted for home-made masks in *Star Wars* fabric, in his favourite colour of Jedi Blue. The masks seemed to me an extension of the artefacts, toys and other ephemera related to the

franchise he already owned—soft toy plushies of 'baby Yoda' from *The Mandelorian* and the droid BB8, lightsabers galore, and a range of picture books and guides to the *Star Wars* universe.

Intergenerational Mask Gifting

Vignette 2: Masks and Celebration (Cath)

It's a warm summer's day during the global pandemic. For the first time in many months, some members of our wider family are together, playing catch-up on missed celebrations. It feels so familiar except some things are undeniably different. Even before we get together, there's Covid-19 tests to be taken, doors and windows are slung open, and hand gel is massaged into palms at every opportunity. We adults loiter in the garden and gingerly skirt round each other, eschewing the habitual hugs and kisses, mindful of space. The house has been decorated—this is a celebration, after all—and on the balcony a string of inscribed paper hearts documents missed family landmarks due to social distancing restrictions—birthdays and wedding anniversaries that would normally trigger family gatherings instead celebrated over the phone, through WhatsApp or on Zoom calls. What has not changed is how my children and their cousins crash back together as though never separated, laughing and chasing, checking each other's smartphones, or playing shop in the shed at the bottom of the garden.

It's a celebration for them too and, to mark it as such, Brenda, my mother-in-law, has created that traditional celebratory staple of children's party bags, each containing some sweets and a healthier snack of raisins, a balloon, some blowing bubbles, and a more recent salient material artefact, a cloth face covering. The notion of Covid-19 party bags tips me into surprised laughter at first but on reflection these paper bags encapsulate some of the discourse around children and Covid-19, subverting notions of children's isolation and mask wearing as a potentially detrimental practice for youth. The masks have been hand-made by Brenda, our family's self-appointed seamstress, in what could be interpreted

as an act of care for her eight grandchildren. Furthermore, each mask reflects each child's personality, their taste or special/media interests, from dinosaurs to *Star Wars*. Placed in bags brimming with tiny treasures, these masks become reframed as treats and as playful, and my youngest niece is excited to try hers on immediately without adult prompting.

Figure 18.1 Child trying on a home-made fabric face covering, gifted in one of the party bags visible (2020)

Reflecting later on her mask-making and gift-giving, Brenda acknowledged the play potential of masks, even as our wider family had adopted mask wearing for all ages as a protective safety measure during Covid-19. Furthermore, she recognized the inclusive element in ensuring the children had masks of their own. 'They wanted to be part of it', she said, adding, 'I made them for them to play in.' She continued, 'The children didn't have to [wear masks] but I made them so they would be grown up and have their own masks. They liked them, actually. They wore them a lot'. She recalled how, when childminding her then four-year-old grandson (my nephew), he had placed masks that she had made on the cuddly toy customers to his 'café', mimicking adult behaviours in his play, but also protecting and caring for the toys.

Masks and Maker Identities

Sharing and critically reviewing our respective images and stories from our emergent family masking practices in 2020 from the vantage point of 2022 was a catalyst for another round of family conversations. We were interested in those who claimed and enacted the role of 'family maker' and the ways in which they had centred children, their interests and identities. For Ash, my (Yinka's) sibling who we encountered earlier in this chapter, making face masks for children and adults began as something aimed at family. However, from the impulse to share potentially life-saving information about mask construction, via social media, emerged a new accidental identity, 'community maker'.

Vignette 3: 'Family Maker' to 'Community Maker' (Yinka)

It is early May 2020 and Ash has spent a great deal of time in recent weeks online, on sites such as Pinterest and Instagram, seeking sewing patterns for making cloth face masks in the home, including ones that will fit children. Having sourced a site that provides different adult- and child-sized patterns, and identified the technical types of material needed to construct safe and effective masks, Ash's attention turns to the look of the masks. Again Ash searches the internet this time for colours and patterns that will appeal aesthetically (for adults in the family) and that reference favourite fandoms (for children and adults alike!). In the meantime, Ash sets up the family sewing machine and sets about creating a first prototype.

On 5 May 2020, having finished this first mask, Ash tries it on, takes a selfie and shares it with the family via WhatsApp (as discussed earlier in this chapter). Ash then opens up Facebook and posts the link to the pattern alongside the same selfie with the caption 'Seeing as every other country on the planet is recommending the use of face masks in public [...] I thought I'd get out the sewing machine and see what I could knock up. This one has a pocket for a filter and a nose wire for a close fit. Pattern and instructions here if anyone's interested'. Within hours there are over thirty comments on the post, many of them from friends,

asking if they can place orders for Ash to make masks for children and for adults. Requests are also made for masks in other fabric patterns, such as skulls, and Ash begins to realize the scale of demand that has inadvertently been uncovered. As well as being part of a creative circle of friends, via the neurodivergence in Ash's own family, their online social media community has come to include many similarly neurodivergent families whom Ash realizes they want to help. By 23 May 2020 Ash has completed making the first set of masks for family members and has also used the intervening period to devise a way of responding to this demand, and so Ash makes a new Facebook post (Figure 18.2).

Finally - first set of masks completed! These have 4 layers of material (2x100%cotton, 2x non-woven lining fabric), filter pocket, and wire pocket for shaping around the nose.

Some of you have expressed interest in them, so if you're still interested DM me. Tell me which material you want and what size (Small kids >7, Young kids 7-12, Teens/women, Men).

I'm NOT doing this as a commercial venture. It's not a side hustle. I'm making for my family but if anyone else wants that's fine. I'm not asking for money but I would ask that if you get one, you give a donation to ██████████████ They're a small, local autism charity who are struggling during this crisis. They've saved my life plenty of times and I'd like to pay them back.
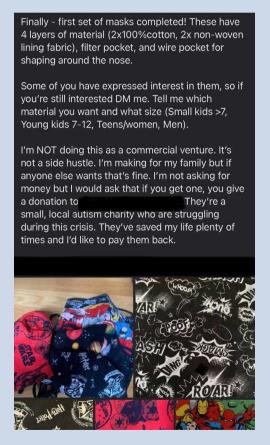
Figure 18.2 Ash's Facebook post offering to make bespoke face masks in exchange for donations to a charity, 2020

This marks the start of what will become something of a cottage industry for Ash in the summer months of 2020. Orders come in and requests for different materials. A downstairs room becomes the centre of operations. Against the auditory backdrop of the clattering of the sewing machine, cut-out materials ready for sewing, constructed masks ready for lacing with ties, and envelopes ready for stuffing and labelling are spread across available surfaces. Online, images of recipients wearing their custom-made masks are shared and the website of a small northern charity receives an unexpected, and much needed, stream of income.

Reflecting on this intense period of activity in autumn of 2022, Ash is clear that they did not initially set out to become a 'community maker'. However, as Ash reminiscences, the particularities of that summer of 2020 made them feel almost obliged to take on the role:

It was the beginning of the pandemic, nobody knew what the hell's going on. You couldn't just go to the shops and buy masks in the same way that you could six months later, so loads of people said, 'Ooh, can I have one? Can I have one?' […] because it was the pandemic, because people (*pauses*) […] it was a safety thing, and because they were friends […] I didn't want to then charge them for it but I also, you know, it IS a lot of stuff, the material alone as well as the actual time to do it, so I was like urgh (*pulls a face*). So that's when I thought, right, ok, well, we'll do this as a fundraiser.

Ash explains to me (Yinka) how this community maker role therefore became a layered one, connecting aspects of self and parental identity and firmly locating this as an ethical as well as caring role.

So, I make the mask, so that will be my contribution to the THT [name of charity], and yours to some degree. You get a mask, they get some money, I get to feel good about a charity that I support. And it just exploded basically (*laughs*).

A sensitivity to neurodivergence and a commitment to working with and centring the child is also apparent as Ash explains the twin starting points for mask making:

Well, that was in terms of the physical construction of it, in terms of the safety, but it was, you know, they [children] need to actually be part of the process. It's always the case, particularly with children with ASD, actually with any kid, but you know particularly with children with ASD, you can't just spring stuff on them, they have to have buy-in and be part of the process, because if you just go to them and go (*claps hands*), 'Put this on! Boom!', you're not going to get anywhere.

This involvement of children takes them and their interests seriously. It also interrupts a dominant societal discourse of masks as utterly alien objects being imposed and tolerated (Halbur et al. 2021), placing them instead within the discourses and practices of fandom, play and self-expression. For one child, Ash's nine-year-old son Jakob, involvement was taken a step further as he became an eyewitness and then a participant in Ash's community making endeavours.

Vignette 4: Intergenerational Transmission of 'Family Maker' Identities (Yinka)

It is June 2020 and Jakob is being homeschooled as the closure of primary schools continues. Jakob finds himself intrigued by his mother's latest creative project, making face masks to order for family and friends and raising money for an autism charity. He has enjoyed working on creative projects involving hand sewing before but this is the first time he has seen a machine for sewing being used. The machine is big, heavy and noisy, and for safety Jakob is not allowed to touch it. He is allowed to watch, however, and to handle the sewn masks that it produces. As his interest in the way the masks are constructed is noticed and encouraged, he eventually becomes involved in the final step of mask assembly, threading ties through the masks so they can be fastened across the face. His contribution to the process is reminiscent of an apprenticeship. He is inducted into enacting a part of the process and getting to watch a skilled person enact the other steps. As the weeks progress, Jakob expresses an interest in using a machine for sewing himself and a plan is made to research sewing machines for children so that he can get one for his next birthday.

The government has already announced how the country will come out of lockdown and so, by July, Jakob and his mother know that he will be returning to school in September, after a gap of five-and-a-half months. Jakob becomes very anxious at the idea, dreading being separated from his mother during the school day. Together they embark on a sewing project to help Jakob with his anxiety over the summer and with the transition back to attending school every day in September. Ash purchases two kits to make small, handheld soft dolls. The facial features and hair for the dolls can be customized and bespoke clothing made for each doll. The Mini Me project allows Jakob to spend time with Ash making miniature versions of themselves. Together they hand sew the dolls, design the facial features and make the clothes. Attention to detail is important to him. A hoodie is designed for each doll to match clothes they wear in real life. They use a felting kit to make the hair for each doll—long curls for Jakob and shorter black hair for Ash, with a white streak at the temple. On the arm of Ash's Mini Me, a tattoo is carefully reproduced in miniature form. Finally, a blue quilted pouch is made to transport the Mini Mes inside Jakob's school bag, so that they are there with him in school, ready to be held, looked at and cuddled when he needs them.

Figure 18.3 Hand-sewn and hand-felted parent and child Mini Mes made by Jakob and Ash, 2020

For Ash and Jakob, working together on mask making facilitated an intergenerational 'master' and 'apprentice' (in inverted commas due to these being historically gendered terms) exchange of knowledge and skills, and a passing on of a claim to being a 'family maker'. Looking back on this in 2022, Ash states:

> I think the masks was a watershed, so to speak, I mean the idea of using a machine was very sort of 'Mmmm!' (*mimes placing a hand on the face as though in thought*) for him.

Jakob is now an accomplished maker with numerous projects under his belt. When I (Yinka) ask him why he chooses to make something, rather than just buying a version someone else has made from a shop, he explains that what he likes about sewing is that 'you can customize it more […] if you can't get the shape that you want, you can just make it the shape that you want'. Customization, he continues, is complex, involving 'functionality […] Maybe a big pocket and a side pocket […] Sometimes it's with the material'.

Ash also explains how Jakob connected the learning of these practical skills to his digital literacies:

> We've done loads of projects together, just making things. So he's got various bags and cushions and stuff he's made, and Banarnie of course—the banana for his monkey […] He made a production video of the making of Banarnie.

Ash reminds Jakob of the plan for the video: 'You were going to share it with your friends at school, or your teacher, to prove we were actually doing some work (*laughs*)'.

Our discussion now moves forward to 2022. Jakob has now started in middle school and has been having his first design and technology lessons. This first term the focus is on sewing and our discussion uncovers how Jakob's maker experiences of summer 2020 seem to run counter to the dominant discourse of 'learning loss' that has tended to frame discussions of children and the pandemic:

> Yinka   And now that you're in middle school, and you're doing design and technology, is it helping, the fact that you know about sewing?

Jakob	Yeah
Yinka	How does it help? Have you been having any lessons about sewing?
Jakob	(*Pauses and looks at his mum and then whispers*) I get to be smug! (*Smiles and laughs*)
Ash	(*Looking at Jakob—giggles then turns to camera*) He gets to be smug, that's how it helps him!

Brenda, now in her seventies, is the 'maker' and crafter in my (Cath's) husband's family, a role which she inherited from her own mother whose knitted jumpers and cardigans kept my children snuggly when they were small and which are still treasured items in the family, passed on to each new arrival. Brenda knits, but prefers to sew, and since retirement has taken up patchwork and quilting as a hobby, producing cushions and quilts for our whole family, sometimes for special occasions such as landmark birthdays or for new babies. When the practice of mask wearing began to become established, Brenda turned to her skills and the materials she already had in her home to make masks, in the face of a shortage of manufactured protective garb. 'When you are a patchworker, you have a "stash"', she explained. 'Everyone talks about what you've got in your stash. I didn't understand it then, but I do now'.

Brenda's stash provided some of the material for her mask making and she ordered further material online, although she struggled with a shortage of elastic to hook the masks in place. She derived the pattern for masks, meanwhile, from a crafting charity which was founded in 2020 and local to her area of North East Derbyshire. 'They made [masks] because all the care homes round here couldn't get PPE', said Brenda, 'so these ladies were tearing up sheets and aprons to make masks'. Brenda estimates that she made around thirty masks for members of her family. Brenda's gifting of masks, and other homemade items including patchwork quilts made in lockdown, was also, she revealed, an attempt to neutralise anxieties about the pandemic, and to remind her grandchildren that—while they couldn't meet—they were still present in their lives. Describing how she made some purses in *Harry Potter* fabric to post to her granddaughters living in a different city, Brenda said:

I'm hoping they [the children in our family], that with the Covid thing, the little ones didn't feel frightened, because we were playing it down, sending them barmy things to remind them that grandma and grandad are still here.

Digital Play and Virtual Masks

During the pandemic children's digital technology use increased, with 'digital play […] actively encouraged as a measure for slowing the spread of the virus' (Cowan et al. 2021: 9). Children's social relationships, such as friendships, were also supported and sustained through technology use and were enacted in virtual settings (Quinones and Adams 2021). This, we suggest, had an impact on their own identity-constructing practices and meaning-making play in a pandemic context. Hafner writes that 'virtual worlds provide an opportunity for users to create a "second self" (Turkle 1985), with the potential to establish a "fresh" identity (or set of identities) online' (2015: 98). In relation to children's play, Marsh has observed that virtual worlds offer children opportunities to 'play with identity representation' (2010: 33). While our own children used technology and apps to maintain contact with friends and family as their real-life selves, such as WhatsApp which became a key means of communication between children/parents and grandparents, aunties and uncles in Cath's extended family, we both observed our children's tendencies towards inhabiting online spaces over more extended periods of time, and further developing their virtual/online identities as their physical spatial worlds and face-to-face play opportunities receded during periods of social distancing and lockdowns.

A favourite online game of my (Cath's) children was *Minecraft*, a virtual-world building videogame in which players can construct their own landscapes using a range of materials portrayed by blocks. Players may insert themselves into their landscapes in the form of avatars which embody players in virtual space (c.f. Marsh 2010: 33), and can customize their appearance using the tools made available to them, a feature available across a range of videogames and platforms. Hafner notes that, in designing an avatar, players may incorporate aspects of their real-life identities into their virtual selves (2015: 99).

During the pandemic this customization began to include opportunities for players to adopt face coverings for their virtual selves. McKinty and Hazleton's account of Australian children's play during the pandemic researched via their Pandemic Play Project observed a trend in online gaming during the pandemic whereby 'in many online games, players opted to join or create groups to combat Covid-19, and a wide variety of masks made by developers and players themselves were made available and worn in-game' (2022: 26). Xin Tong et al., for example, note that some adult players of the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* chose to 'mirror' offline behaviours in virtual spaces, as they 'tried to embody their real-life identities in their virtual avatar' (2021: 16). This included 'putting masks on their avatars much as they did in real life to combat COVID-19'.

Not only were my children apparently content to wear cloth face masks when entering indoor physical spaces such as shops, but they began playfully adopting mask wearing in virtual spaces as well, kitting out their avatars in face coverings when playing online games. While playing *Minecraft* on a server which my sons co-developed in elaborate detail with their friends online during the pandemic, both my boys added masks available through character customization to their *Minecraft* 'skins'. Their virtual selves wore them when they were out-of-doors (in the game) battling their way across the vast, and Covid-19-free, plains of their worlds. When I asked Jeff, now sixteen, about how masks came to be a feature of his *Minecraft* play, he explained:

> Around the start of the pandemic in early 2020 *Minecraft* added a face mask cosmetic to the Bedrock Edition character creator. Me and my brother used that for a bit. Around the same time they added title screen 'splash texts' with advice such as 'don't touch your face!' and 'prepare, but don't hoard!' to encourage people to follow Covid rules.

However, as Jeff also reminded me, there was no Covid-19 in *Minecraft*. So why wear them? 'Masks are cool', Frank informed me about his choice to adopt a blue face covering for his 'skin', suggesting that, for him, the mask he sometimes wore in-game was a stylish addition to his virtual appearance rather than a practical item and preventative measure. Masks were also a free accessory within their version of the game, I

was told. And with the four friends' play in *Minecraft* often taking the form of battles for territory as part of their co-created storyline, their skins often clad in armour and helmets, a mask was perhaps an exciting supplement to battle dress.

Discussion

Masks as a Means of Identity Expression Reflecting Digital/Media Interests

The above discussion demonstrates how children were able to engage with their interests including fandoms and digital play through mask wearing by selecting masks that related to their literary and media preferences, and by adopting masks in the digital realm. In a sense, we could consider fandom face masks a type of fan merchandise or 'merch', even though in these instances the 'merch' was gifted rather than purchased. Godwin observes that not only does merchandise—'mugs, t-shirts, décor, and other items'—signal fans' appreciation of a franchise, but these materials act as 'interfaces' that 'display both fan interests and aspects of a fan's identity' (2018). Describing such merchandise as 'liminal', she notes that it can function to blur the boundaries between the storyworld and the everyday. In light of this, Frank's *Star Wars* face mask can be seen as much more than simply a protective measure, due to his strong connection to the franchise and his regular immersion in its storyworld through play, reading and viewing. Wearing his homemade 'merch' connected him to his interests and also affirmed and signalled to observers his identity as a fan of the franchise, as well as perhaps offering him a foothold in a reassuring, imaginary world.

Meanwhile, masks added to videogames and apps, we suggest, contributed to normalizing mask wearing for young people during the pandemic, blurring the boundary between on and offline by reflecting this new 'irl' practice in virtual environments, thus supporting their transition to habitual mask wearers. However, in an immersive, imaginative game such as *Minecraft*, masks also potentially acquired new meanings through play—not necessarily related to the pandemic—as children performed their in-game identities.

Families as Networks of Care and Support, Assisting Transition and Providing Spaces for Children to Experiment Playfully with Mask Wearing and Identity Exploration

Mask making activity was a material expression of family networks of care. In our vignettes we have observed how family makers centred their practices both on the safety needs, but also on the identity needs, of the children. Masks were not merely viewed as medical devices or measures against disease that children should be trained to 'tolerate'. They were also positioned as vehicles for self-expression and for children's ability to claim participation in communal caring practices. The huge increase in the use of digital platforms for instant communication was a feature from the earliest days of the first 2020 lockdowns and became an important means of maintaining familial networks of care across households and generations. In the making and sharing of masks, however, there was also a contrasting slowness and a return to the physicality of the sending and receiving of letters and parcels in the post. As well as providing a mask through the post to protect a loved one, Brenda reminds us that gifts of hand-made masks were also mementos from one generation to another. The physical presence of the mask acts as a substitute for the mask giver, attempting to maintain an emotional connection during prolonged periods apart.

Innovatively Creating New Pandemic Celebrations and 'Passaging' Practices

An emergent theme in this chapter has been that of children's identities and self-expression, and the role that masks have played in that self-expression during the pandemic. Regarding identity as a process of becoming, rather than a static state of being, and furthermore identity as intrinsically social (Jenkins 2014: 18), we can consider how family and peer protective and playful practices around mask wearing supported children's status transition or 'passage' from non-mask wearers to mask wearers with agency, making their own choices about mask design and use. Brenda's comment that the children wanted to be a part of the unfolding situation, hence playing an active role rather than being bystanders excluded from actively protecting themselves

and their community, demonstrates adults' willingness to take children and their pandemic experiences and identities seriously, even while acknowledging the playful affordances of masks. Framing masks as both serious and playful for children supported their adoption of masks and also supported them emotionally by doing so. Furthermore, while the pandemic prevented many families from marking special days in the way they would prefer, it also gave rise to opportunities for new or different celebrations and rituals (Imber-Blac, 2020), such as the family gathering discussed by Cath in Vignette 2 above. Transforming masks into gifts for children as a part of that celebration recognized their status socially as mask wearers, recognized their individual identities through the choice of meaningful fabric designs for each child, and encouraged even the younger children to feel more 'grown up' (a transition in itself) and included.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented an autoethnographic account of the mask-making and gifting practices involving children in two families. In doing so, we have challenged a dominant discourse about face masks during the Covid-19 pandemic as something inherently negative that children were forced to tolerate. Furthermore, we have uncovered a subjugated discourse in which children's initiation into mask wearing was playful, child-centred and empowering. Face-mask making and wearing, as emergent material practices, made family networks of care, understanding and communication visible, linking maker and wearer as participants in both family and wider societal enactments of consideration.

The children in our families were able to choose their masks, to have masks custom-made and to receive these playful and meaningful masks as gifts that reflected their interests. This was possible because the people who had made the masks knew them and consulted them, and took children and their interests seriously. The children were also free to experiment with masks as a new form of self-expression, to accessorize them, to move beyond the mere functionality of masks and towards a concept of the mask as a canvas for self-expression and customization and thus identity. Finally, for the children in our vignettes, face masks were important transition objects as they journeyed through the

liminal space of the early pandemic, navigating their way from their pre-pandemic selves and carving out for themselves their emergent pandemic identities. At the time of writing, we are in the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic and around the world expectations and requirements regarding children's use of face masks remains diverse. However, for people in different places and at different times, as the pandemic continues to unfold, a wider lesson for practice in relation to children and masks is that, whilst the mask is a medical tool, it can also be a playful cultural space upon which children can project and play with identity.

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