

COVID-19 and masking impact emotional labor performance

August 26 2021, by David Bradley



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We are emotional beings and this matters deeply in our personal lives but also in our working lives, perhaps nowhere more so than in the face-to-face service industries. New research in the International Journal of

Quality and Innovation, has looked at the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on what is commonly referred to as "emotional labor performance," the workplace management of emotions that are integral to a worker's performance.

Niamh Lafferty and Sarah MacCurtain of the Kemmy Business School at the University of Limerick in Castletroy, Limerick, Ireland, and Patricia Mannix McNamara of the School of Education there, explain that the emergence of a global pandemic caused by an airborne virus meant that the public and workers alike have been for many months now obliged to wear a face covering, a protective mask, to reduce the risk of spreading the disease and to some extent catching it.

"By the nature of [emotional](#) labor, employees rely on both the ability to read service users' emotions and the ability to express appropriate emotional displays in response," the team writes. "In simpler times, employees could assess non-verbal expressions of emotion through [facial recognition](#) and respond with facially recognizable emotions evidenced in expressions such as a smile or one of concern," they add.

A face covering obviously precludes the normal appreciation of visual cues, such as smiles and frowns that we expect of our interactions with other people. This "new normal" has led to significant modifications to the interactions between service users and the people providing a [service](#).

The new normal represents uncertainty and struggle for so many people. There are major challenges that have arisen in the time since we first recognized the pandemic nature of the virus formally known as SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes, COVID-19. However, from the perspective of those researching emotional labor, the widespread wearing of face coverings actually presents a new research opportunity to better understand the interactions between provider and user in ways that are not possible when facial expressions are wholly visible to each

party in such an interaction.

"This mask-wearing time provides an exceptional opportunity to test [the] relevance, significance, and impact [of emotional labor] in a way that previously could never have been achieved," the team writes.

More information: Niamh Lafferty et al, Donning the mask: the impact of Covid-19 on emotional labour performance, *International Journal of Quality and Innovation* (2021). [DOI: 10.1504/IJQI.2021.117187](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJQI.2021.117187)

Provided by Inderscience

Citation: COVID-19 and masking impact emotional labor performance (2021, August 26)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2021-08-covid-masking-impact-emotional-labor.html>

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