"By the way I want to give you some masks": Exploring multimodal stance-taking in YouTube videos

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Abstract

While the effectiveness of facemasks against COVID-19 has now become largely uncontroversial, at the beginning of the global pandemic, wearers of facemasks were often the target of sometimes racially tinged attacks. Wearing facemasks (or not) became not just a question of science, but evolved into a more complex issue of social identity, morality and global citizenship embedded within the "tribal thinking" of mask-wearers and non-mask-wearers. This paper explores to what extent two bilingual YouTube influencers participated in either accentuating or softening of boundaries of the two "tribes" by embedding facemasks in their videos. Based on multimodal transcriptions of the two videos (Ho 2021), three moments were identified where facemasks were employed by the social actors to perform everyday activities, such as grocery shopping and family brunch. I then examine the interactional stances (Dubois 2007) taken by the actors towards facemasks through language and other semiotic resources. By exploring their multimodal stance-taking, it is argued that the two YouTubers' intercultural trajectories, their performances of authenticity, and their established influence on social media provided them unique means for participating in tribalizing discourses around facemasks by making perceived differences between different groups materials for cultural consumption. The paper concludes by discussing the opportunities and challenges of vernacular health communication through social media influencers.

1 Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic threw the world into uncertainty. The widespread use of digital communication technologies provided the possibility for a diverse range of voices with varying opinions. On the one hand, digital media allowed for the rapid dissemination of knowledge with potentially life or death consequences. For instance, governments around the world actively utilized digital media to disseminate health messages such as those advocating handwashing, facemask wearing, and later, getting vaccinated. On the other hand, digital media also fuelled the spread of misinformation, resulting in what the World Health Organization called an "infodemic" (World Health Organization 2023). A study conducted in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that up to 28.8% of social media posts contained misinformation, which could potentially spread fear, or downplay the severity of the pandemic (Gabarron, Oyeyemi & Wynn 2021). At the same time, digital media provided a space for social media influencers to play a role in creating discourse around the pandemic, and these influencers often had a profound effect on what people believed about the pandemic and how they behaved in response to it. Influencers are influential not merely because of the way they portray themselves aesthetically, but also through the "moral credibility" they garner through performing their "authentic selves" and displaying "honest" (and sometimes controversial) stances towards important social issues and debates (Tolson 2001; Valentinsson 2018).

This paper focuses on two YouTube influencers who waded into the controversial topic of mask wearing and its relationship to culture and race. It argues that the two YouTubers' intercultural trajectories, their performances of authenticity, and their established influence in social media provided them unique means for participating in tribalizing discourses around

facemasks by making perceived differences between different groups material for cultural consumption. The paper concludes by discussing the opportunities and challenges of vernacular health communication through social media influencers.

2 Facemasks and "tribal thinking"

Not long after the novel coronavirus, originally identified in Wuhan, China, began to spread across the globe, facemasks became one of the most visible semiotic objects associated with the pandemic. Tateo (2021) asserts that facemasks evoke both safety and fear which involves a "dialectic between ordinary and extraordinary" (p.136) -- ordinary for healthcare workers, and extraordinary for the general public. When facemasks become mandatory for the general population, they crossed the boundary from extraordinary to ordinary as people started to include them in everyday lives (Tateo 2021). This trend was particularly salient in East Asia, where the use of facemasks was already widely accepted, and where they even evolved into a fashion accessory that served the purpose of individual identity expression (Wang, Feng & Ho 2021).

In the United States, however, facemasks came to signal not just civic responsibility and individual identity expression, but also one's affiliation with particular political positions and partisan groups. An article published in *The Atlantic* in 2021 observed that:

> In the past year and a half, masking in the United States has gone from being a point of confusion to a partisan flash point. Republicans who have discovered a special enemy in the specter of masking often point back to the morass of conflicting information from the beginning of the pandemic [...] (Thompson 2021: para. 13)

Whereas wearing facemasks (or not), especially in the US, potentially indexed different political cultures, it also came to be seen as indexing different national cultures. In some studies, the "individualistic-collectivistic" divide and its relation to mask use was drawn. For example, Chang, Min, Woo, and Yurchisin (2021) compared mask-wearing behaviour in the US and South Korea and posited that countries that are more "individualistic", such as the US, are less receptive to facemasks compared to countries that are more "collectivistic", such as South Korea. These studies appear to point to the fact that there is a "individualist-collectivist" dichotomy[1] when it comes to facemask usage, which is often further extrapolated as an "East-West" dichotomy. Similarly, in his paper on the semiotics of masks, Leone (2020, 2021) contrasts "Western" and "Eastern" cultures of masks through examining the history and mask use and their social functions. He observes that masks were commonly used in East Asian countries long before the pandemic. For instance, in Japan, people wear masks not only to protect themselves against diseases, but also to protect others. He further explains that this indicates "a different idea of the individual in relation to society", and that "protecting oneself and protecting the group were indeed seen as one" (Leone 2020: 48). This way of thinking about masks is different from the "Western" cultural semiotics, which he classifies as "one of exceptional medicalization" which creates "deep-seated aversion to this object" (Leone 2021: 2). These different ways of conceptualizing masks have resulted in an apparent "East-West" dichotomy in understanding mask wearing practices, where the "East" is seen to be more receptive, and the "West" appears to be less receptive to wearing facemasks.

[1] The 'individualist-collectivist' scale came from Hofstede's model which explains cultural differences between countries using the following criteria: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. (Hofstede, 2021). It is arguably an essentialist way of understanding cultural differences across countries, but this model is influential in the field of organisational communication.

Despite the potentially problematic nature of this essentialist view of "East" and "West", which reduces the two to homogeneous entities, such conclusions, in both academic studies and in popular discourse, point to the ways mask wearing during the pandemic became (and remains) a tool for drawing distinctions between cultures. The question of whether or not to wear a mask been interpreted by some as evidence of "cultural" differences between the "East" and the "West", taken as an opportunity by some in Asia to position their culture as more "sensible" or "socially responsible" (although the reasons for the slow uptake of facemasks in the "West" was motivated by different reasons[2]), and as an opportunity for some outside of Asia to position Asians as overly conformist and their own cultures as more respectful of the rights of the individual. While in places like the United States, the positioning of mask-wearers and non-mask-wearers as different "tribes" seemed to divide along political lines, internationally they seemed to divide along "cultural" lines.

At the start of the pandemic, the severity of the pandemic was not yet known in many "Western" countries, therefore mask mandates were not immediately instituted even when countries and regions in the "East" had already embraced, or in some cases, mandated the use of facemasks. During that time, and even after "Western" governments embraced mask mandates, there were numerous cases in "Western" countries of people who wore masks being stigmatized by "anti-maskers", a phenomenon that came to be known as "maskphobia" (Weale, 2020; see Kwon, 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2022, etc. for studies on stigmatization of mask-wearers during the pandemic). In some cases, these attacks were racially tinged, with, for example mask wearing Asians singled out for abuse (see Jones, Jaworska and Zhu, this issue). At the same time, people who did not wear masks found themselves targets of censure

[2] Nevertheless, as mentioned in Jones (2021), the slow uptake of facemasks in the UK was based on 'civic responsibility', with civilians refraining from wearing facemasks in order to save them for healthcare workers.

in “Eastern” countries and regions. Jones (2021), for example, documented a case where “Westerners” in Hong Kong were ridiculed in the form of graffiti (which referred to them using the racist term *Gweilo*) for not wearing masks.

Complicating this dynamic is the fact that, in some contexts, cultural understandings about wearing facemasks came to be entangled with the ideological projects of nations or political parties. In Han’s (2023) study of Chinese anti-COVID-19 pandemic narratives on facemasks, she observes that the spread of knowledge about facemasks by the government constructed them not just as “scientifically proven” tools for physical protection against the virus, but also as a “semiotic line of defence” (p.280) which created psychological comfort through aligning with values such as “collectivism, patriotism and, to a certain degree, nationalism” (p.278).

While much of the social media content around mask wearing, both in the “West” and in the “East”, served up clear messages about the moral correctness of wearing masks or not wearing masks, positioning the creators of this content squarely in one tribe or another, some influencers delivered more nuanced messages and positioned themselves in more ambiguous ways. This is the case in the two videos that I will analyse here, created by white bilingual speakers of Chinese who filmed their lives under lockdown in their home countries, positioning themselves as cultural go-betweens between different “tribes”. Their use of their multilingual repertoire to claim cultural affinity with cultures receptive to facemasks, together with their familiarity with their home cultures, in some sense gave them the authority to portray themselves as cultural mediators who could playfully turn mask wearing into material for cultural consumption. The result of this positioning, however, was not necessarily to reduce the distance between the two tribes that they claimed membership in, and, in some respects, their efforts ended up reinforcing stereotypes and rearticulating tribal differences.

3 The authority of social media influencers

In times of uncertainty such as global pandemics, "tribal thinking", or, as is discussed in the other articles in this issue, "tribal epistemologies" can play an important role in influencing how people behave. One important aspect of "tribal epistemologies" is the role of tribal leaders, spokespeople or influencers in articulating the position of the tribe and rallying members around that position. One need only think of Donald Trump as an example of a leader whose prime communication strategy consists of accentuating 'tribal' differences, separating "us" from "them", often through disseminating "versions of reality" designed to undermine the worldview of the opposing tribe. At the same time, it is important to consider what sorts of leaders, spokespeople or influencers might have the "authority" to break through tribal epistemologies and speak convincingly to members of different tribes.

Among the most influential figures in today's media environments are not politicians or public figures, but social media influencers, whose "epistemic authority" comes from the reputations they have built among groups of loyal followers. Reputation on such platforms, is thus an "essential epistemological notion" (Origgi, 2012; Bhatt & MacKenzie, 2019). As Origgi (2012) explains, reputation is "the set of social evaluative beliefs that have been accumulated around a person, an item or an event" (p.231) which "[has] an epistemic value as a cue of reliability" – "a *proxy* of trustworthiness" (p.232; original emphasis). Some social media influencers are also well known for their role in promoting tribal epistemologies, with many of them explicitly making their partisan opinions part of their brand. In fact, some studies suggest that expressing polarising views actually has the effect of making social media influencers *more* influential (see e.g. Garibay et al. 2019).

Even for influencers who do not explicitly engage in polarising discourse, in-groups and out-group dynamics often play a role in their popularity and reputation. One way for influencers to enhance the trustworthiness of their message, for example, is by performing a form of "authenticity" which positions them as part of their viewers' ingroup. Cross-cultural studies have found that people tend to develop generalized trust in people who are already in their social network, i.e. their ingroup (Yamagishi 1998 cited in Igarashi et al. 2008: 88).

The enactment of "authenticity" and "in-group identity", however, is by no means random; it is carefully created through strategic stance-taking which includes 'shifts in footing' and the deployment of different "register(s), genre(s), viewpoint(s) and speaking position(s)". (Blommaert & Varis 2013: 145). In Valentinsson's (2018) study on how Lady Gaga constructs authenticity, for example, she found that Lady Gaga's authentic celebrity persona is constructed through an alignment with "ordinary" people such as her fans, and dis-alignment with the mass media establishment. This distancing of herself from the mass media "[lends] a moral credibility to [Lady Gaga's] celebrity persona that allows her fans to read her as 'authentic'" (p. 720). The same is true for YouTube influencers, for whom authenticity is often constructed by distancing themselves from institutional and commercial interests (Dekavalla, 2020). In Bhatia's (2018) study of a beauty vlogger, for example, she found that by detaching from the corporate discourse such as companies and sponsorships, and by incorporating the vlogger's personal opinion of beauty products using colloquial language, the beauty vlogger featured in her study constructs a sense of authenticity by positioning herself as "an ordinary user", and it is this "ordinarinesss" that creates a sense of trustworthiness, "with subscribers not only conveying their trust in [the vlogger] … but also in her as a person … and as a friend with whom they can share their concerns" (p.117, see also Tolson, 2010; Dekavalla, 2020).

Despite the seemingly straight-forward relationship between authenticity and trustworthiness found in the studies above, health communication presents an interesting scenario to discuss the role of influencers in disseminating health messages. The normal expectation is that health information should come from 'experts' rather than "ordinary people", but research has shown that people show high likelihood to adopt the health behaviours of their peers and often change their health behaviour so that they become more similar to their friends (Montgomery et al. 2020). In expert health communication settings, statistical evidence is usually given to persuade individuals to adopt certain health behaviour. However, in the case of social media influencers, it has been found that they tend to rely more heavily on narrative evidence over statistical evidence to promote health behaviours (Zou et al., 2023).

In the remainder of this paper, I will apply the ideas articulated above to the analysis of two YouTube videos about facemasks by popular bilingual creators who position themselves as mediators between two cultural tribes. My analysis is guided by the following research question: *How is "tribal thinking" associated with facemasks constructed and performed through multimodal stance-taking?* In the course of answering this question, I also reflect on the ways transnational social media personalities have the potential to both accentuate or soften the boundaries of 'tribal thinking' between mask-wearers and non-mask-wearers, as well as on the potentially "double-edge sword" of digital media in the dissemination of culturally oriented health messages.

4 Data and method

4.1 The videos

This study features two videos: 1) Teacher Mike's "American Quarantine Vlog" [3]("Mike's video"), and 2) Max's "Indoors birthday party and giving out masks to the needed, QuaranTime ep8"[4] ("Max's video"). The two videos were selected from a YouTube search conducted between February 2020 to May 2020 using the search terms "facemasks" and "face masks" along with a filter to ensure that results returned were videos uploaded after the pandemic had started. Mike's video was uploaded to YouTube on April 29, 2020. Max's video was uploaded to YouTube on April 15, 2020. As of mid-October 2023 the two videos have been viewed over 174,000 and 22,000 times respectively. These two videos were chosen for analysis, first because of the way they both exemplify how facemasks are used as cultural, semiotic objects, and second, because they both involve bilingual influencers who have in-depth knowledge of both the "East" and the "West" and position themselves as mediators between different cultures. Both videos were uploaded to YouTube in April 2020 when there was a lot of uncertainty about the pandemic, as well as about the efficacy of wearing facemasks. The study does not mean to yield generalizable findings; rather, it aims to show how "tribal thinking" related to mask-wearing can become content for cultural consumption in videos through the ways creators position themselves in relation to different groups in which they claim membership.

"Teacher Mike" is an English teacher who grew up in the US and has lived in China for a number of years. From watching his earlier videos, it was found that he regularly posts videos in Mandarin Chinese and English, and the content of his videos ranges from discussing his daily life, intercultural differences between the US and China, and teaching English. At the

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9IS1OPslII&list=PLNXW1mx0qgEfVMiqD7lm5y3NPKRp3vNHS&index=3

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ydOqP99big

time of filming the video, he was in the US for a family visit and therefore his videos were about life under quarantine in the US.

Max is a professional YouTuber based in the UK. He and his family are regularly featured in a media channel which operates across China and the UK (英国 OMG[5]; translation: UK OMG). "Max's Adventure" is a series featured on the media channel, which includes clips of Max and his family's life in the UK, and the videos sometimes feature the family's attempts to find Chinese food in local restaurants, or to cook Chinese food in their own kitchen. In most of their videos, there is constant switching between English and Chinese, and bilingual subtitles are provided. From watching their earlier videos, it was found that Max spent his childhood in China with his family. Max and his parents can speak Mandarin Chinese fluently.

From each of these influencers, I chose one video that features the use of facemasks to accomplish social actions, such as grocery shopping in Mike's video, and family brunch in Max's video. While permission has been obtained from Mike to include still images from his video in this paper, permission could not be obtained from Max as there was no response to the researcher's request. Based on the concept of fair use of publicly available data for research purposes, still images from Max's video are also included in the study, but faces are blurred to protect the identity of the participants in the video[6]. Some faces in Mike's video

[5] https://www.youtube.com/c/OMGXIAOBA

[6] The American Educational Research Association (AERA) Code of Ethics (2011: 151) stipulates that "[e]ducation researchers may conduct research in public places or use publicly available information about individuals (e.g., naturalistic observations in public places, analysis of public records, or archival research) without obtaining consent". Since the data is used for academic publications, I therefore decide to de-identify Max's video in publications in order to strike the balance between fair use and ethical considerations of using online data in academic publications.

are also blurred to protect the identity of people who appeared in his videos without their consent.

Although not explicitly mentioned in the two videos, based on a preliminary observation of the comments, it can be inferred that the intended audience of Mike's video is Chinese-speaking English learners, and the intended audience of Max's video is Chinese-speaking people who are interested in knowing about life in the UK in general. Such inferences are generated based on the fact that there is a preponderance of Chinese comments compared to English comments for the two videos, and there is an absence of other languages in the comments. This is particularly so in Mike's video in which the target audience is learners of English (Mike is an English teacher). An analysis of the target audience can help the researcher make informed interpretations of the purpose of the video. At the time of filming the videos, there were social distancing and quarantine measures in place in both countries amidst the shortage of facemasks globally (OECD 2020). Neither the US nor the UK yet had mask mandates for supermarkets and other public places when the videos were filmed[7].

4.2 Method

This study employed the concept of *stance* (Dubois 2007; Jaffe 2009) to understand how the two influencers align or dis-align with facemasks and those who do or do not wear them by mobilizing the multiple linguistic and semiotic resources available to them. Short episodes were identified by the author through repeated viewing based on "moment analysis". Moment

[7] Face coverings were made mandatory in supermarkets from 24 July 2020 in the UK, from gov.uk: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/face-coverings-to-be-mandatory-in-shops-and-supermarkets-from-24-july#:~:text=statement%20to%20Parliament-,Face%20coverings%20to%20be%20mandatory%20in%20shops%20and%20supermarkets%20from,supermarkets%20from%2024%20July%202020.
Face coverings were recommended in public places on 3 April 2020 in the US, from LATimes: https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-07-27/timeline-cdc-mask-guidance-during-covid-19-pandemic

analysis requires the analysts to move away from "frequency and regularity oriented, pattern-seeking approaches to a focus on spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances of the individual" (Li 2011: 1224). It highlights the instantaneity and transient nature of human communication (Lee & Li 2020: 397). Selected "moments" from the videos were transcribed multimodally. The transcription system used here is a modified version of previous works on multimodal text and interaction analysis (see e.g. Ho & Li 2019; Li & Ho 2018; Sindoni 2013; 2014) which attend to the temporal and modal unfolding of the event. The multimodal transcript offers a moment by moment, mode by mode analysis of how actions related to facemasks unfold chronologically. Based on the multimodal transcripts, micro-moments related to facemasks were identified for further analysis.

4.3 Stance-taking in multimodal interactions

The micro-moments that were identified in the videos allowed for an analysis of the stance-taking of the two influencers in relation to facemasks. Stance is defined by Dubois (2007: 163) as

> a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of value in the sociocultural field.

This paper follows a sociolinguistic approach to stance, which is concerned with how speakers and writers position themselves in relation to their words and texts, their interlocutors and audiences, and in relation to the context (Jaffe, 2009: 8). As Jaffe explains,

"speakers project, assign, propose, constrain, define, or otherwise shape the subject positions of their interlocutors", and stance is "interactional, emergent, and co-constructed" (p.13). This paper analyzes three kinds of stance: epistemic, affective, and relational. Epistemic stance is "the stating of facts, knowledge, or beliefs towards certain stance objects" (Barton & Lee, 2013: 92); affective stance is "concerned with expressions of the stance-taker's personal feelings, attitudes or judgements towards a stance object" (ibid: 94); and in this paper relational stance is added to indicate the use of stance to perform relational work: to appeal to, or create distance from certain stance objects.

Studies on stance tend to focus on written or spoken discourse (e.g. Hyland, 2005; Jaffe, 2015; Myers, 2010; Snell, 2018). For example, Hyland (2005) studied how academic writers draw on linguistic devices to express stance and engagement, such as the use of hedges and boosters to indicate a stance, and the use of directives and questions to show engagement. As indicated in Li, Lei and Cheng's (2020) bibliometric analysis of research trends in the field of evaluation, appraisal and stance, the examination of evaluative language has mostly focused on academic contexts, though there has been an increase in research in other professional genres (see, e.g. Poole, 2017; Fuoli, 2018). Nevertheless, the multimodal expression of stance, which is particularly evident in online genres of the type I am analysing, has only received scant attention (e.g., in Mills et al., 2020). Barton and Lee (2013) assert that "stance-taking has become a key discursive act in online interaction" (p.87). In their investigation of Flickr, they analysed the multimodal elements of the site such as images, hyperlinks, comments, and language to unpack the multimodal stance-taking of users and how they positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* their viewers. They found that actions such as uploading a photo, giving the photo a title and a description, and choosing of language, all contribute to indexing the users' stance, and through analysing these actions, researchers can understand

the users' and commenters' identity positioning. In an example of the analysis of multimodal stance taking in face-to-face interaction, Olinger (2011) studied the stance-taking of academic writers in a collaborative writing session, using both video recorded interviews, 'screencasts' of text being typed, and other related documents such as handouts and notes used in the session. She identified different stance positions taken by students associated with the word "discourse" and found that the use of the word indexes multiple discoursal identities. My analysis will follow similar principles, focusing on how participants in the videos I analysed draw on multiple modes to perform stance taking, and how the way they deploy and combine these modes sometimes allows them to take multiple or ambiguous stances and to index multiple epistemologies related to facemasks.

5 Mike's multimodal stance-taking

The multimodal transcript of the selected segment of Mike's video is reproduced in Appendix 1. It begins with Mike looking for different groceries in the supermarket. As he puts his shopping into the trolley, he shows the products to the camera, and in the video editing stage, he has added the name of the products in Chinese characters, and their price in US dollars. While his intention in doing this unclear, it does at least signify that the video is created with a transnational audience in mind who may not be familiar with the prices of US grocery items, or may be interested in knowing what kind of grocery items are available in US supermarkets and how much they cost. This could also be seen as an English teaching moment, given Mike's background as an English teacher: the audience can match the Chinese translation of the items in the subtitles with the product name printed on the food packaging.

Interspersed with this activity of shopping, however, is another activity, that of noticing people in the supermarket who are not wearing masks, and, similar to his labelling of his

shopping with subtitles, here he superimposes red arrows pointing at the people not wearing face masks and the words "沒戴口罩!" (No mask on!)[8]. These two activities – calling attention to the items he is putting in his trolley and calling attention to the maskless shoppers – are alternated within the first 41 seconds of the video, Mike placing an item in his cart, and then pointing out a maskless shopper, followed by placing another one or two items in the cart, which is again followed by the "intrusion" of another maskless shopper. This alternation between the two actions serves to contrast them, constructing one (placing items in the cart) as "unmarked" and the other (noticing maskless shoppers) as "marked".

Apart from simply creating this contrast sequentially, Mike also creates it through the way he deploys different multimodal resources to perform epistemic, affective, and relational stances (Ho 2021). For instance, the big, the red arrows and Chinese characters superimposed on the frame which read "沒戴口罩!" (No mask on!), together with the alarm-like sound effect that interrupts the soft background music suggest a kind of emotional response. The arrows pointing at the maskless faces give them the status of "evidence" that is pointed to support a negative evaluation of the situation, a form of epistemic stance taking. And the way the arrows serve to "single out" those who are not wearing masks, making them objects of public "shaming", a shaming that is made visible only to viewers of the videos, not to the people who are the objects of the shaming, constitutes a kind of relational stance taking: Teacher Mike aligning himself with the audience in regarding the behaviour of the maskless shoppers as marked and somehow "foreign".

[8] The mosaic effect in the transcript is added by the researcher to protect the identity of the people featured in the video.

This distancing is accentuated by the angle of the camera, which frames the unsuspecting shoppers as objects of covert surveillance, and the shift, when the camera "detects" a maskless shopper, from full colour saturation to black and white (see timestamps 03:05, 03:18. 03:20, 03:34, and 03:45). As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) point out, changes in modality in images through alterations in things like colour, contrast and saturation alter the interpersonal relationship created between the viewer and the image. Black and white can invoke journalistic or documentary photography (as well as surveillance camera photography) and serves to situate the maskless shoppers in an alternate modal reality in which they are offered up as "material" to be scrutinized and judged. Throughout these segments, Mike seems to be conspiring with his audience to "other" the American shoppers (which he consistently refers to as "they" rather than "we"), and to align himself with his audience by speaking a common language (Putonghua) with them, and multimodally articulating what he imagines would be their epistemic evaluation and emotional reaction to seeing people not wearing masks in public.

Along with these rather dramatic and unequivocal displays of distancing, disapproval and negative affect in response to the shoppers' mask wearing behaviour, however, Mike also offers a much more nuanced and equivocal set of stances through his verbal commentary of the situation, and his focus on social distancing signs in the second half of the segment. In fact he begins the segment with the statement

> 一进去就看到每个人都是戴口罩，都是戴手套，所以我放心了一点，因为感觉他们都是很看重这个疫情的情况。 就是比较安全的。(*Translation: As I enter, everyone is wearing masks and gloves. I feel reassured, because it looks like they are treating this pandemic seriously. It feels quite safe.)*

Here, and later in the video, Mike's verbal commentary offers a very different portrayal of the situation, one in which "everyone is wearing masks and gloves" ("每个人都是戴口罩，都是戴手套"), and assumes a very different affective stance: "I feel reassured", "It feels quite safe") ("我放心了一点", "就是比较安全的"). Interestingly, though, in the parts of the video that follow this statement, rather than using the visual track to provide evidence for the verbal statements he has just made making (by, for instance, focusing his camera on people who are wearing masks and gloves), he chooses to visually depict the *opposite* kind of behavior, and, through his deployment of the kinds of multimodal resources described above (the arrow, alarm sound, black and white colouring and camera angle), to assume the opposite kind of affective stance (one that is, decidedly *not* reassured).

After around 45 seconds of pointing out maskless shoppers, Mike turns the camera to his own (masked) face and delivers another verbal commentary, which, again, seems to undermine message implicit the images that he has just shown:

> 我感觉美国人在这边……这边的话，他们已经都实行……社交距离，不一定是两米的距离，但是还是不会靠近彼此。 所以感觉不错。 还有一些人没有戴口罩，但是我估计百分之九十的这边的人是戴口罩的。 而且戴口罩的人都是穿手套的，所以算是比较安全，我觉得。 (*Translation: I feel that here the Americans…here they have implemented…social distancing, not necessarily 2 metres, but they would not stand too close to one another, so it feels good. Some people do not wear a mask, but I guess 90% of the people here wear a mask. Those who wear a mask also have gloves on, so it is quite safe, I think)*

In this statement, Mike's more tentative expressions of epistemic stance ("I feel that…" ["我感觉…"], "not necessarily…" [不一定是…], "I think…" ["我觉得"]) differ strongly from the categorical labelling of transgressions seen in the preceding visual track of the video. He follows this with shots of signs which encourage people to "Please Practice Social Distancing", and one shot (4:33) of people standing near the tills, accompanied by the verbal comment: "It looks like people are practicing social distancing when they are queuing, not bad!" ("我看排队的人都是在社交距离，不错不错啊"). Despite this more balanced portrayal of the situation and the more positive affective stance that accompanies it, Teacher Mike nevertheless maintains a distant relational stance *vis-à-vis* the other shoppers, although expressed in more subtle ways through, for instance, his reference to them as "the Americans" ("美国人") (although he is also American) and "they" (rather than "we"), and through portraying them via long shots, as he does with the distant shoppers queuing near the tills.

Overall, then, the video enacts a range of different stances towards mask wearing, towards the "American" shoppers, and towards Mike's presumably Chinese audience through the complex and sometimes contradictory deployment of a range of different multimodal resources. Along with the contrasting portrayals of the situation (i.e. "everyone wearing masks" vs. the numerous maskless shoppers "detected" by Mike's camera), there is also a contrast in the degree of certainty expressed regarding the mask-wearing behaviour of the shoppers, with Mike's verbal equivocations about the extent of mask wearing ("I guess 90% of the people here wear masks" ["我估计百分之九十的这边的人是戴口罩的"] contrasted with the unequivocal visual evidence of maskless shoppers. This ambivalence in epistemic stance is mirrored in the written description of Max's video on YouTube which reads:

美国人终于戴口罩？社交距离？#美国 #实拍 #vlog (translation: Americans wear face masks at last? Social distancing? #United States #live recording #vlog).

Here, by putting question marks after the (grammatical) statements, "Americans wear face masks at last? Social distancing?", Mike calls into question not just the epistemic status of the statements but the epistemic status of the message that we are meant to take from the video.

This ambivalence is also evident in the way Mike positions himself in relation to the Americans he is commenting on and displaying to his audience: They are both "objects of "shaming" and people who are mostly doing the right thing – "treating the pandemic quite seriously" ("很看重这个疫情的情况"), and these contrasting portrayals is accompanied with similarly contrasting affective stances -- the "alarm" implied by the sound and the red arrow versus Mike's verbal assessment: "it feels good…it is quite safe, I think.".

Part of what can explain this complex and sometimes contradictory set of stances is Mike's positioning of *himself* as a kind of "mediator" between what he is constructing as two different "cultural tribes", simultaneously taking on the role of explaining the behaviour of "Americans" to his Chinese audience from his privileged "insider" position (as an American himself), and taking on the role of "outside observer" performing the "alarm" that he imagines his audience must feel at behavior that they would consider marked, transgressive, or dangerous. Rather than dismantling the boundaries between these two "tribes", with this performance Mike ends up reinforcing the idea that the mask-wearing behaviour of "Americans" and "Chinese" is somehow a matter of "culture". He does this not just by accentuating the instances of shoppers not wearing masks (i.e. acting *differently* from his

imagined audience) (although in his verbal commentary he notes that this is only a small minority), but also by framing shoppers who *are* wearing masks and engaging in social distancing (behaviour that is framed as more similar to that of his imagined audience) as somehow remarkable and worthy of positive assessment ("Not bad!" [不錯不錯啊"]). In short, simply by positioning himself as a "mediator" *between* "cultures", Mike ends up reinforcing "cultural" boundaries.

6 Max's multimodal stance-taking

The multimodal transcript of Max's video is presented in Appendix 2. Two moments from the video are analysed. The first portrays Max having brunch with his family in the UK. Although the video was filmed in April 2020 when the lockdown was in place in the UK, this is only mentioned briefly in the video when Max's father comments about the limited ingredients available at home because they have not been outside for a week. The shortage of masks is also mentioned when Max presents a stack of masks for his mother's birthday and comments that he "thought these [facemasks] are more valuable [than money]" (02:18). In this moment, the camera remains on Max's mother for the whole time, showing her reaction when she receives the masks. There is no verbal commentary directed towards the audience, and all of the dialogue is in English, although Chinese subtitles are supplied. In this video, the focus is mostly on Max's mother's positive affect upon receiving the gift, as well as his father's alignment with that affect ("perfect timing!"), and although the promotion of mask-wearing is implied through this positive affect and the value that the participants assign to the masks, there is no didactic commentary (as in Mike's video). Rather, masks are "domesticated", seamlessly integrated into the everyday activity of a son showing affection for his parents.

The second moment in the video, showing Max going to the grocery store looking for peppers, in many ways, resembles Mike's videos, beginning with a shot of Max wearing a mask and speaking Chinese directly to the camera, followed by shots of the food items, with Max commenting on them. While the camera focuses on the bins of produce, Max engages in a conversation with the shop staff, first asking them if they have any peppers, and then offering them some masks, the camera focusing on his outstretched hand holding a pile of masks. The shopkeeper accepts them, saying, "Ah, thank you. Thank you very much!" after which Max comments, "Coz I see you guys aren't wearing masks."

Despite the similarities with Mike's video – the trip to the grocery store, the shots of the food items, and the presence of other people (in Max's case the shop staff rather than fellow shoppers) who are not wearing masks – there are key differences, especially in the way stance is enacted. First of all, the presence of unmasked others is not greeted with alarm—there are no red arrows, loud sound effects, or alterations in the colouration of the footage. In fact, there is no visual evidence provided of the lack of masks, and the fact that the shopkeeper is not wearing a mask is not revealed until the end of the clip right before Max leaves the shop via Max's verbal comment. Overall, Max's affective stance can be characterised as calm and friendly, and his reaction to the absence of masks is an offer rather than a rebuke.

The relational stance enacted in this clip is also very different. Interestingly, Max does not point his camera at the other participants in this video, so the audience is unable to see their (maskless) faces. The presence of the shopkeeper is performed almost entirely through her voice, though there is a brief instant when her hand appears to accept Max's gift. This is, of course, a sharp contrast to the full facial shot of Max's mother in the previous clip, and, in some circumstances, such a lack of on-camera presence might have the effect of creating

distance. Here, however, this visual technique actually creates *dignity* by sparing the shopkeeper the potential embarrassment of being photographed and refraining from using the image of her as evidence of her (inappropriate) behaviour. This is dramatically different from Mike's video in which the maskless faces of fellow shoppers, photographed without their consent, are offered up to the scrutiny of the audience, constructing them as "others" to be judged. In Max's video, rather than an object to be held up for ridicule, the shopkeeper is positioned as a person in need, (or, as Max's describes her in the title of the video, "the needed' [sic]), and, rather than shaming her, Max responds with generosity.

Finally, although there are segments in Max's video in which he speaks directly to his audience, he never speaks *about* the other participants (his grateful mother or the grateful shopkeeper) in the third person as Mike does when he talks about the other shoppers in the supermarket. He does not characterise or explicitly judge their behaviour. Nor does he refer them with any "cultural" labels (e.g. British). Rather, the focus is much more on Max's own behaviour as he tries to promote mask wearing by transforming an object that physically (and symbolically) separates and protects people from one another into an object that creates moments of human contact – a gift (see Jones 2022 for more about masks as "gifts").

In his video, then, Max offers up a very different way of playing the role of "cultural mediator" using a very different set of multimodal resources and a very different configuration of stances towards his audience, the other people in his video, and the object of facemasks. Rather than highlighting how "foreign" people's behavior around facemasks is different from that of his Chinese audience, and distancing himself from them, Max portrays himself as fully embedded in the cultural milieu that he is portraying, and fully aligned with those with whom he is interacting. Most importantly, facemasks in the video are deployed in

the video to highlight behaviours that Max's Chinese audience are also likely to align to – celebrating a mother's birthday and showing kindness to a stranger.

7 Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I argued that the two YouTubers' intercultural trajectories, their performance of authenticity, and their established influence on social media provided them with the authority to position themselves as "cultural mediators", and in many of their other videos they exploit this role, displaying and interpreting the "cultures" of their home countries to their Chinese audience while also engaging in other actions such as showing off their proficiency in Chinese and giving their viewers opportunities to learn English. In the videos that they post on YouTube, they have at their disposal a wide range of multimodal resources with which to perform this role, including spoken and written language, images, clothing and accessories (such as facemasks), and built environments (such as shops). Key to their performance of this role, and their status as influencers more generally, is their ability to appear 'authentic'. Authenticity, as Bucholtz (2003) reminds us, is not "an object to be discovered", but it is "the outcome of the linguistic practices…" (p.399). Furthermore, authenticity is not only constituted in linguistic practices; it is a product of the strategic orchestration of the semiotic resources in one's repertoire (Karrebæk, Stæhr & Varis, 2015).

Given the unique situation in which the two videos I analysed were made, and the "tribal' assumptions about the mask wearing behaviour of "Westerners" and "Easterners" that was circulating through the media and social media at the time, Mike and Max, by addressing mask-wearing behaviour in their videos had the opportunity to use their roles as cultural mediators to either reinforce the boundaries between "cultural tribes" or to try to dismantle them.

In both of the videos, the influencers align to their (Chinese) audience, both through their multilingual repertoire and their positive stance towards face masks. But that is where the similarly ends. In Mike's video, this alignment with the audience is accompanied by a distancing of himself from his fellow Americans, whom he objectifies and holds up as objects of ridicule, even while verbally praising them for their (mostly) appropriate behaviour. Through his combination of epistemic, affective and relational stance-taking, he transforms mask-wearing behaviour into a "cultural" commodity to be consumed by his audience. Max's alignment with his audience, on the other hand, is not deployed as a way to "other" his fellow British. He portrays himself as interacting in positive and intimate ways with the other people in his video. Rather than using facemasks as a tool for highlighting "cultural" differences, he uses them as a tool for highlighting human commonalities such as generosity, empathy and filial love.

While the two influencers featured in this paper are by no means giving health advice, nor do they identify themselves as health influencers, they shed light on the possibilities that digital platforms afford content creators to promote not just certain kinds of health behaviours, but certain kinds of *stances* towards those behaviours. Although it might be argued that promoting mask-wearing to the Chinese audience of Mike and Max's videos is "preaching to the choir", they are potentially valuable in promoting certain kinds of attitudes towards those who do not wear masks, specifically suggesting what might be the best way to confront such people – with contempt and moral superiority, as in Mike's video, or with empathy and generosity, as in Max's video. It is also worth asking what the effect of these videos might be on non-mask wearing members of the American or British publics, though they are certainly not the intended audience. Are they likely to be moved by Mike's shaming or Max's

generosity? The popularity of influencers, as well as their positioning as members of the viewers' ingroup can have positive effect on influencing viewers to adopt desirable health behaviour (Montgomery et al., 2020). On the other hand, they also have the potential to alienate viewers and make it less likely for them to adopt the desired health behaviour, especially if it is held up as an emblem of a "tribe" that they are not part of.

In conclusion, this study shows how two YouTube influencers either accentuated or softened the essentialist ideological positionings of mask-wearers and non-mask-wearers by strategically highlighting or downplaying national and cultural boundaries through the strategic deployment of multilingual and multimodal resources. The examples also show how wearing facemasks or not and the "tribal thinking" associated with these behaviours can become material for cultural consumption, and how transnational social media personalities have the potential to either reinforce or transcend the ideological divide of "tribal thinking".

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