

## Identity, lifestyle, and face-mask branding: A social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis

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### Abstract

The massive introduction of face-masks across the world after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how they are designed and branded. Instead of merely focusing on functional qualities, face-mask producers have started to draw upon symbolic values in their branding discourse. Against this background, the present study investigates how face-masks are branded in Hong Kong by analyzing the design, packaging and websites for face-mask products, as well as the design of offline franchised stores using a social semiotic approach. Analysis of the multimodal data of four leading Hong Kong brands, with a focus on the use of verbal evaluation, iconography, typography, color, and materiality, reveals three symbolic meanings that are used in face-mask branding: (1) professionalism, which refers to the representation of facemasks as a symbol of advanced technology, (2) Hong Kong identity, which includes evoking pride in the past economy and exploiting the cultural symbol of the Lion Rock, and (3) fashion lifestyle, in which face-masks are associated with the values of stylishness, individuality, and luxuriousness. The exploitation of symbolic values and multimodal design in face-mask branding reflects the influence of the neoliberal ideology in the highly marketized Hong Kong society.

### Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, face-masks, emotional branding, multimodal analysis, Hong Kong

### Introduction

Mask Lab, a stylish face-mask franchised store, was opened at the Central district in Hong Kong in December 2020, in the neighborhood of high-end condominiums, luxury hotels, and upscale shopping malls. Being tailored toward a lifestyle theme, Mask Lab can be regarded as a new form of “concept stores,” which blends “art, design, and fashion into a shop” so as to create a “destination shopping experience” (Pavel, 2015: 225). Different from regular blue or white colored surgical masks, masks sold at Mask Lab are of different colors and styles, appealing to personal qualities of discernment. Similar popular mask stores, self-branded as Mask Factory, Mask Gallery, Face-mask Closet, and so on, are popping up in commercial districts in Hong Kong, which would have been unthinkable before the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of these stores suggests that the role of face-masks has evolved from functional to symbolic, which not only serves the purpose of protection, but also that of individual identity expression and lifestyle choice.

The functional and symbolic distinction can be used to categorize the proliferated studies on face-mask in the past year or so. The majority of studies investigate the wearing of face-masks as a protection and precaution measure from the perspective of science and focus on the functional values of the practice such as protection efficacy and

effectiveness (Cheng et al., 2020) and public health measurement (Wu et al., 2020). In comparison, research of the symbolic values of face-masks is still in its infancy. Only few studies focus on the meaning potentials of face-masks, and how they are used to perform cultural identities. For example, Leone's (2021) study of the anti-COVID-19 mask developed a cultural semiotics of the medical mask in the West and discussed the evolving functions of face-masks from "traumatic medical intervention on and in the body" to a sign of "potential contagion by the environment" (p. 1). Another attempt to explore the semiotics of face-masks is Ho (2021), who investigated how the practice of wearing face-masks indexes cultural identities in YouTube videos and gave an example of Chinese learners from "western" countries filming videos in Chinese as a means to align themselves with "East Asian" face-mask cultures.

In the context of Hong Kong, as citizens are entering the second year of mask wearing, it is interesting to investigate the symbolic meanings face-masks have acquired and how the meanings are exploited by local face-mask producers to promote their products. Premised on the assumption that the design of products can communicate clear messages about identities (Eriksson and Machin, 2020; Ledin and Machin, 2019; Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017), we attempt to analyze how face-masks are branded as a vehicle for self-expression in Hong Kong. Specifically, we address the following three research questions: (1) what symbolic meanings are designed by local face-mask brands to promote their products, (2) how are the symbolic meanings realized through the deployment of linguistic, visual and material resources, and (3) what do these symbolic meanings reveal about branding practices in the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong. In what follows, we will first introduce our theoretical foundation of neoliberalism and emotional branding. We will then describe our data and analytical framework, which will be followed by a multimodal analysis of the branding discourse of facemasks. Finally, the results will be discussed in relation to the neoliberal socio-economic context of Hong Kong.

### **Neoliberalism, emotional branding, and face-mask branding in Hong Kong**

The face-mask branding practice under investigation is situated in the neoliberal socioeconomic context in Hong Kong. Seeking to recontextualize all parts of society to the logic of the market and trade, the neoliberal ideology is "fundamentally the drive for marketization as the principle basis for social organization" (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017: 185). Harvey (2005: 2) argues that neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." In the particular context of Hong Kong, which this study is concerned with, there has been a high commitment to neoliberal economic models since the 1980s (Wong, 2021). It is widely believed that Hong Kong is a land of entrepreneurial opportunity where hardworking and talented neoliberal subjects (e.g. professionals, managers, and elite bureaucrats) can succeed in business (Wong, 2012). Under the influence of neoliberalism, capitalist market principles, especially free competition, have penetrated into all spheres of social life in Hong Kong. As Harvey (2008: 24) points out, "the coercive laws of competition [...] force the continuous implementation of new technologies and organizational forms, since these enable capitalists to out-compete those using inferior methods."

To succeed in a competitive neoliberal environment, it is far from enough to satisfy consumers' functional needs, and brands have resorted to forging emotional linkages between products and potential consumers, which constitute one of "the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984: 66). The

notion of “emotional branding” is proposed to describe the creation of “a holistic experience that delivers an emotional fulfillment so that the customer develops a special bond with and unique trust in the brand” (Morrison and Crane, 2007: 410). In other words, emotional branding is concerned with the exploitation of symbolic meanings that appeal to consumers’ “emotional states, needs and aspirations” (Wu and Li, 2018: 229) and inspire their personal life stories, memories, and passion. For example, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) introduce the concept of “brand love” to highlight the importance of establishing emotional connections with consumers. This concept includes the territories of mystery (building legendary, aspirational stories), sensuality (stimulating the senses), and intimacy (generating empathy, commitment, and passion). In the analysis of US brand culture, Gobe (2009) has identified three stages of emotional branding, that is, the Pragmatist Age (1940–1967), the Evangelist Age (1968–1989) and the Sensualist Age (1990–2009). Emotional branding in the Pragmatist Age emphasizes the performance of certain products or services; the Evangelist Age branding practice is underpinned by the philosophies of social justice, economic equality and sensitivity to the environment; the Sensualist Age is lifestyle-oriented and tends toward hedonism, glamor, and self-expression. Wu and Li (2018) argue that instead of exhibiting a developmental divide as suggested by Gobe (2009), all three characteristic appeals of emotional branding (Pragmatist, Evangelist and Sensualist) co-exist in global corporations’ emotional branding discourse, and they observe the hybridity of these appeals, which indicates “the extent of multi-valued emotional branding” (p. 238).

Emotional branding is realized not just through language, but also through multimodal semiotic resources like visual images and music. Multimodality and social semiotics have been effectively used to analyze emotional branding strategies adopted by multinational companies (e.g. Dong, 2018; Eriksson and Machin, 2020; Ledin and Machin, 2019). For example, Saviolo and Marazza (2012) explored how Apple had transformed from a technology company to a lifestyle brand through using the famous “bitten apple” logo, post-modern store design, and visionary leadership stories. Faiers (2017) investigated how a luxury perfume brand exploited the “eternally lucrative myth” to feed into middle-class aspirational fantasies. The study found that the symbolic values of desire and aspiration constituted the “fragrance’s rarest of ingredients, their linguistic riches far surpassing the supposed costliness of its chemistries” (p. 310). Ledin and Machin’s (2019) social semiotic analysis of kitchen designs in IKEA catalogs over a period of 40 years suggested a shift from function to lifestyle. Their study illustrated how the domestic space has become increasingly codified into indexical meanings which form a neoliberal ideal, with highlights on self-management and innovation.

The branding of face-masks in Hong Kong has also shifted from an emphasis on functions to an emphasis on symbolic cultural characteristics during the COVID-19. Developed as a biomedical response to the SARS outbreak in 2003, the practice of mass-masking has gradually become a socially-embedded, protective practice “that responsabilize[s] individual health protection” (Burgess and Horii, 2012: 1184). After the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, face-mask wearing has become a form of social obligation, rather than personal choice (Cheng et al., 2020). According to the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation promulgated by the Hong Kong government, a person who contravenes the requirement of not wearing mask at public place commits an offense and is liable to a penalty of \$5,000 HKD. As facemasks

are worn by everybody on a daily basis, they have become an accessory for identity performance and a way of constructing distinction. The ubiquity of face-masks also motivates brands to exploit the symbolic meanings of face-masks in branding their products. Like high-end fashion retailers, local mask brands routinely search for new trends in the field, introducing new items and replenishing stocks on a weekly basis.

### **Data and analytical method**

The data we analyzed were selected from the four most popular local face-mask brands, that is, OxyAir Mask, LionRock Mask, MaskOn Gallery, and Mask Factory (Cosmopolitan, 2021). As the symbolic meanings associated with face-masks are expressed through complex semiotic resources in various discourse forms, we conducted a holistic multimodal analysis of face-mask design, e-shop websites, product packages, and offline franchised stores, rather than just focusing on face-masks themselves. This complex signifying process involves an orchestration of resources which forms a multimodal ensemble. In Kress' (2010) conceptualization of multimodal ensembles, he referred to his multimodal and multisensory experience of crossing the road and watching inflight safety demonstrations, both of which required him to take in sound, sight and gestures to form a holistic experience. This is also the case for purchasing face-masks, which we argue involves an orchestration of different signs to form a holistic whole. These different signs, as we will demonstrate in the analysis, work together toward the symbolic branding of face-masks. The whole experience of purchasing face-masks from visiting the shop, to unpacking face-masks from their packages and reading about them on the Internet, is a result of careful orchestration of resources—a multimodal ensemble which is also a multisensory, transmedia experience. Face-masks are designed in different colors and different print patterns. The face-mask websites always include the brand's corporate missions (or what they refer to as "our/brand story"), details of their products, and links for purchase. Product packages include instructions on how to use the facemask, quality standard, and marketing slogans. As for offline franchised stores, they are always interspersed into downtown commercial districts, alongside or inside upscale shopping malls (such as Harbor City, Times Square, and Queen's Road Central).

Our analytical method draws on the basic principles of social semiotics, which focus on the elements of signification, connotative/cultural meanings and historical contexts (see Leone, 2020; Machin, 2007; Van Leeuwen, 2008). Social semiotics is not only concerned with text-level analysis, but also the understanding of how communicative practices are implicated in broader social processes. From a social semiotic perspective, the symbolic values of face-masks are not "transparent"; rather, they are the result of complex signifying processes, and should be interpreted based on a systematic analysis of the multimodal discourse. Drawing on Ledin and Machin (2018), we will focus on the following five dimensions to map out the multimodal realization of the symbolic meanings of facemasks.

1. Verbal resources of evaluation. We investigate both explicit and implicit evaluative expressions in the local brands' websites and product packages. Explicit expression refers to the use of attitudinal lexis to evaluate face-masks (e.g. "fashionable," "stylish," and "luxury"), while implicit evaluation refers to recounting facts or events that invoke a certain symbolic value. For example, to evaluate a facemask as stylish, the branding discourse may recount the fact that it is designed by a well-known designer or has been exhibited in a fashion show.
2. Iconography. We investigate the images, symbols, and drawings used on facemasks, their packages and websites, and the interior design of mask stores. The iconography can be represented through elements of participants and settings,

which according to Machin (2007: 48) are “particular carriers of connotation.”

3. **Typography.** We look into how the brands’ names, logos, and slogans are designed. To explore their meaning potentials, we particularly focus on the features of weight (how bold the typeface appears), regularity (whether the typeface is arranged in a regular form or has some specific irregular features) and flourishes (whether the typeface includes iconographic imagery and other types of flourish additions).

4. **Color.** We investigate how the color scheme is adopted in both the product’s packaging design and the store’s interior design. The values include hue (ranging from the warmth of red to the coldness of blue), brightness (light and dark), and saturation or dilution.

5. **Materiality.** Materiality refers to objects that can be touched, how they are arranged, and the textures we infer from looking. We particularly look at the furniture, decorations, and light fixtures in the mask stores. As noted by Ledin and Machin (2017: 5), materiality allows us to “combine the visual with the haptic, with seeing and touching,” and communicates aspects like manufactured versus natural, timeless versus transient, and solid versus fragile.

## **Analysis**

Based on a detailed analysis of four local face-mask brands’ products, websites, product packages, and offline franchised stores, we have identified three major values associated with face-masks, namely, professionalism, Hong Kong identity, and fashion lifestyle. In what follows, we will analyze how these branding appeals are constructed through verbal, visual and material resources.

### ***Professionalism***

Professionalism refers to local brands’ emphasis on their expertise in face-mask production by framing their products as a symbol of advanced technology. Professionalism is mainly realized through technical explanations on product packages and the exhibition of the manufacturing process in face-mask stores.

First, to highlight face-masks as an outcome of advanced technology, local brands offer technical explanations on product packages. They technologize the language by adopting a dizzy array of scientific-sounding terms (e.g. “ergonomic technology,” “antimicrobial design,” and “super hydrophobicity”) and highlighting the result of technical measurements. To further increase the salience of the technical explanations, typographic resources of boldface and heavy fonts are used. As noted by Machin (2007: 127), with the association of “taking up spaces,” the weight is closely associated with the meanings of authority and assertiveness. For example, in Figure 1, on the mask package, the letter “Type IIR” and the figure “99%” apparently carry more weight than other information, which reinforces the impression that the face-mask production is of high scientific standard. This branding strategy reflects a middle-class consuming ideology (Eriksson and Machin, 2020) which associates “good masks” with precision and technology. In other words, technical jargon is used symbolically to communicate a sense of “sophisticated knowledge production” that goes beyond pragmatic functions.

Second, in their face-mask franchised stores, local brands exhibit the process of manufacturing face-masks in professional, sanitary conditions. Situated in a noisy commercial site in Tsim Sha Tsui, Mask Factory is one of the most popular local face-mask stores in Hong Kong, often with

shoppers queuing up for entry. Despite its modest-sized space, it has an on-site “factory” and invites its consumer-visitors to have a mini-tour and learn about the face-mask production process. The presence of machines and technical staff for visitors to see distinguishes Mask Factory from traditional mask stores. Serving as the “more-than-representational” materiality (Ledin and Machin, 2017: 324), the machines make symbolic references to the technology involved in the face-mask production. The technical staff who are in anti-bacterial medical uniform also speak volumes about the professionalism involved in the face-mask production. For example, although the technical staff in Figure 2 are fully aware that they are under the surveillance of consumer-visitors (possibly with numerous shots being taken), they still appear to concentrate on their production task and “perform” professionalism. Aside from machines and staff, the store also displays technical data on the wall-screen. As shown in Figure 3, all the data are projected on the store’s wall, revealing the clean room live status in terms of temperature, relative humidity, air quality, and productivity. By offering viewers “the greatest number of ideas in the shortest time and smallest space” (Kostelnick, 2007: 116), the data display is closely associated with the notion of clarity, precision, and efficiency. The transparency associated with the whole production process is novel to consumer-visitors, something most of them would not have access to in the consumption of other goods. They potentially act as free word-of-mouth advertising agents that bring networks of friends and relatives to visit the store and monitor the process of professional mask-production.



Figure 1. An example of the standardized measuring units on the package (Source: <https://maskon.com.hk/zh/wicked.html>).

### **Hong Kong identity**

A remarkable feature of the face-masks under investigation is the exploitation of Hong Kong identity in their branding. This symbolic value is associated with what Gobe (2009) and Wu and Li (2018) call the “Evangelist” theme in the emotional branding discourse of global corporations, which draws upon shared social values of a community to build a positive brand image. The face-mask producers brand themselves as responsible entrepreneurs who started their business to serve the community during the crisis. This was partly prompted by the shortage of masks in Hong Kong at the start of the pandemic in the early 2020. The identity features that are drawn upon include the economic aspect of

achieving self-reliance and the cultural aspect of promoting the Hong Kong spirit.



Figure 2 Machine and technical staff at Mask Factory



Figure 3 Display of technical data at Mask Factory



Figure 4 An example of mask package featuring "Made in Hong Kong"

**Face-masks as a symbol of economic identity.** The local face-mask brands advocate that setting up face-mask production lines in Hong Kong is an act to achieve self-reliance of resources in times of a global crisis. This view of self-reliance is deeply ingrained in the

economic identity of Hong Kong, as many people, especially the older generation, witnessed the rise and fall of Hong Kong's manufacturing industry in the last few decades. To re-evolve consumers' pride in Hong Kong as a manufacturing hub between the 1960s and the 1980s, the origin of the locally produced face-masks is emphasized in the design of product package. For example, as shown in Figure 4, featuring the phrase "Made in Hong Kong under the Lion Rock," the mask brand implies a sense of pride in goods produced in Hong Kong. Apart from package design, the face-mask brands also use verbal storytelling to emphasize the glorious past in their "brand story" on their website. For example, as indicated in Extract 1, by suggesting that "the reputation of Hong Kong manufacturing has spread all over the world," the local brand celebrates the developmental success of the past, conjuring up a powerful sense of nostalgia among potential consumers. It also serves to justify setting up local face-mask factories, which is framed as an attempt to revive the past glory and to achieve self-sufficiency. The phrase "finding the past smile" in the extract has particularly interesting connotations related to Hong Kong identity that make the branding unmistakably emotional. On the surface, it can be argued that this phrase does not make sense because, ironically, when wearing a face-mask, one's smile is concealed; however, reading it in the context of Hong Kong's past economy, it can be interpreted as associating face-masks with the search for the self-reliance and pride in the past.

Extract 1. Since the 1950s, the reputation of Hong Kong manufacturing has spread all over the world. At that time, Hong Kong was internationally hailed as one of the "Four Asian Tigers"... Recently, due to the epidemic, we notice that Hong Kong has been too dependent on imported supplies. In times of crisis, it has no self-sufficiency at all, which forces us to rethink the possibility of reviving the manufacturing industry in Hong Kong... We hope to find the past smile with other Hong Kongers despite the difficulties. 從五十年代開始香港製造的聲譽影響遍佈世界各地，當時被國際稱譽為亞洲四小龍之一...最近因為疫情的出現，我們發現香港一直太過依賴進口供應，在危急時刻，完全沒有自給自足的能力，讓我們重新思考香港製造的可能性...在迷茫的路上與香港人一起尋回昔日的微笑。(Source: [https://mymaskfactory.com/index.php?route=information/about\\_us](https://mymaskfactory.com/index.php?route=information/about_us))

**Face-masks as an expression of cultural identity.** In their brand stories on the website, facemasks are often associated with the collective spirit shared by Hong Kong people, that is, the Lion Rock spirit, which has long become a dominant historical narrative in Hong Kong. The Lion Rock (獅子山) is a famous mountain in Hong Kong. It is named as such because viewed from the side, the mountain range resembles a resting lion. This spirit has been popularized by the theme song of a long-running TV series between 1972 to 2016, called "Below the Lion Rock." Featured by the "go-getting" spirit and the "can-do" attitude, it values "Hongkongers' sacrifice, self-reliance, perseverance, and social mobility" (Mak, 2013: 62). The Lion Rock spirit is highlighted in two face-mask brands' stories on their websites and in their product design. For example, as shown in Figure 5, the brand story contains a long-shot photo of the Lion Rock, which has become an icon of "the localized and decolonized narrative of Hong Kong's history" (Mak, 2013: 76). The accompanied text in Figure 5 highlights that the brand's endeavor is motivated by the Lion Rock spirit, that is, "逆境自強" (to make oneself stronger during adversity). It then urges consumers to carry forward the Lion Rock spirit with them which emphasizes perseverance, self-reliance, and self-actualization. A particularly emotional strategy is



the use of a family metaphor to construct consumers as siblings of the producer in the Hong Kong family to appeal to citizens' support (like supporting their family members during hard times). The family metaphor is also used to evoke the quality of "trust," as in "屋企人係最信得過" ("family members are the most trustworthy"). By employing spoken Cantonese in written texts, the brand attempts to build in-group solidarity with its Hong Kong consumers. In the text, the brand also distances itself from large corporations and positions itself as "只是幾位視香港為家的小市民小商人" ("just a few ordinary citizens and entrepreneurs who see Hong Kong as their home"). Aside from the brand story, the Lion Rock is also used as a brand name and printed on face-masks and packages. As shown in Figure 6, the face-mask has been codified into a carrier of the Lion Rock spirit, which is "marketed and sold to the public as a means of perpetuating Hong Kong's founding myth" (Mak, 2013: 286). In terms of typographic design, the name of the Lion Rock is visually presented in the style of old store signs, typically seen in "pawn shops" across Hong Kong. The repetitive verbal and visual reference to the Lion Rock spirit distinguishes local face-mask brands from imported ones and develops a special bond with Hong Kong consumers who identify with the values.



Figure 5 Lion Rock spirit in face-mask's brand story (Source: <https://oxyairmask.com>)



Figure 6 Lion Rock as brand name of face mask (Source: <https://shopdaily.com>)

### ***Fashion lifestyle***

Fashion lifestyle refers to local face-mask brands heralding a fashionable aesthetics in their product design. This symbolic value is related to the "Sensualist" theme in emotional branding, which promotes "individual lifestyle and self-expression, hedonism, glamour and fame" (Wu and

Li, 2018: 232). To cater to consumers' unique lifestyles and satisfy their desire to be different, the local brands deploy different multimodal resources in product design, package design, website design, and store design to associate their products with three prominent symbolic values, namely, stylishness, individuality, and luxuriousness.

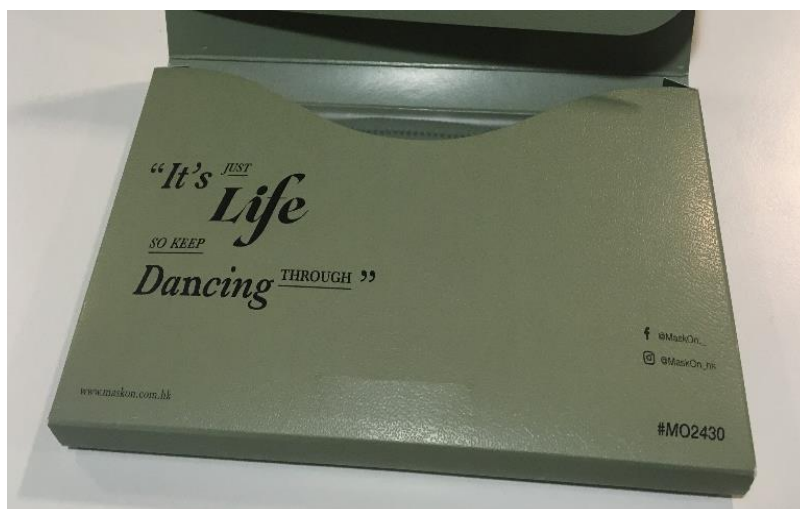


Figure 7 Quotation on the face-mask package

**Stylishness.** To construct the symbolic value of stylishness, local face-mask brands mainly draw upon the resources of evaluative expressions, aspirational quotations, and creative typographic design. First, expressions related to fashion lifestyle, such as “時尚(fashion),” “潮流(stylish),” and “飾品(accessories),” repeatedly occur on the face-mask websites. Here the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic is constructed as a heavy burden for citizens, and the local face-mask brands advise citizens to wear masks of different colors and styles to overcome their pandemic fatigue and frustration. For example, as shown in Extract 2, the brand claims that its mission is to “transform its masks into fashionable accessories.” Apart from making an explicit reference to fashion design, the brands often use aspirational quotations to associate their face-masks with philosophical, poetic, or artistic values. As pointed out by Musolff (2020), as a special case of “echoic utterance,” the employment of the quotes to a particular situation also indicates the speaker’s attitude and wisdom. For example, as shown in Figure 7, the lyrics “It is just life, so keep dancing through,” which is taken from Stephen Schwartz’s song *Dancing Through Life*, is used on a face-mask package to inculcate a sense of lighthearted stylishness and wise life attitude during the pandemic. It is interesting to note that different mask packages feature different quotes so as to cater to different consumers’ needs, such as “Remind you the mellow breeze over the Lavender fields.”, “A smile washes away the dust of everyday life.”, and “Be the sunshine to brighten the brand-new day!”. These aspirational quotes present a stark contrast to the negative discourses about the pandemic, and clearly direct consumers’ attention to the positive spirits associated with face-masks.

Extract 2. Kick away the fatigue of fighting the virus with fashion style. The new “Facewear” concept transforms face-masks into fashion accessories.

以时尚魅力踢走抗疫疲劳全新Facewear 概念让口罩蜕变时尚饰品 (Source: [https://mymaskfactory.com/index.php?route=common/home\\_color](https://mymaskfactory.com/index.php?route=common/home_color))

Apart from verbal resources, the creative typographic design of the brands’ names, logos, and slogans also constructs a sense of stylishness. The most salient feature lies in

the irregularity of the typography, which involves the innovative use of dots, exclamation marks, underlines, slashes, quotation marks, and so on. Seemingly falling outside typical and standardized conventions or context of use, this kind of irregular and flourish typeface is associated with “creative,” “artistic,” and “spontaneous” meanings (Machin, 2007: 138). It belongs to a postmodern type of aesthetics, catering for “an aspirational marketing-consumer stance, a (commodified) cosmopolitan philosophy or worldview” (Jaworski, 2015: 221). For example, in Figure 8, the quotation mark, ellipsis and the left brace are symbolically added to the marketing slogan “let the mask speak.” With an emphasis on the embellished, artful design, the traditional letters shift their function from referential to decorative (Machin, 2007). Such new, artful, creative ways of using nonstandard typographic resources add stylishness and modernity to face-masks.



Figure 8 An example of nonstandard typographic resources (Source: <https://maskon.com.hk/zh/story.html>)

**Individuality.** Instead of producing monotonous blue/white-colored surgical masks which erase personal difference, local face-mask brands make great efforts in the visual design of face-mask products to respond to the need for self-expression of individuality. The face-mask websites categorize the themes of their products in terms of different wearing occasions (e.g. commuting to work, going on a date, and visiting parents), relationship status (e.g. single, and in a relationship), and cultural aesthetic styles (England style, Japanese style, etc.). By categorizing masks into different themes, the brands allow consumers to discover their own preferences and to express their personalities on different occasions. As noted by Chernev et al. (2011), consumers tend to prefer brands that are more similar to their ideal self-concept or identity. To represent different themes, the most salient feature lies in the use of symbolic iconographic design. The represented images, according to Ledin and Machin (2019: 168), “tend to be stripped back of all clutter, in regard to things like daily objects and artifice, to allow culturally salient objects to play symbolic roles.” For example, as shown in Figure 9, one of the brands introduces the “London style” with the iconic image of the “Great Bell” and the “party animal” theme with the portrait of a bunny girl.

Apart from adopting different iconographic designs, another salient feature lies in the use of a maximally varied color palette in the face-mask design. In the store of Mask Factory, we can feel the different affective properties of face-masks, where our gaze could

not but linger on the colorful mask-cladding across the store's entire wall. As shown in Figure 10, being suffused with incandescent light, the visible colorfulness compels us to carefully scan face-masks in different hues. Here, the color scale of face-masks changes from red to blue, and from high to low saturation, which stands in clear contrast to regular monotonous blue/white-colored surgical masks. As noted by Van Leeuwen (2008), such color continuums have many correspondences and uses: while the red end of the scale is associated with warmth, energy, and salience, the blue end with cold, calm, and distance; while the high saturation connotes positivity, exuberance, and adventure, the low saturation connotes subtlety and tenderness and may create a brooding atmosphere. The use of different iconographies and changing scales of colors invites consumer-visitors to both express their individuality and experiment with different personalities for different situations. For example, during the Chinese New Year, many brands produced red facemasks and red packages as the color symbolizes celebration and good luck in the Chinese culture.

**Luxuriousness.** Some face-mask brands imbue their products with a sense of exclusiveness, promoting them as “precious, highly desirable and—to many—unattainable objects” (Jaworski, 2015: 221). The symbolic value of luxuriousness goes hand in hand with stylishness, as luxury brands are always associated with fashion and style. Luxuriousness is mainly constructed via high-end and artistic interior design, including furniture, lighting, and the use of local artists' original works as decorations (McIntyre, 2009).

A typical example is MaskOn Gallery, located on the ground floor of Times Square (an upscale shopping mall in Hong Kong) in Causeway Bay. The store uses simple, metallic and reflective space design, which evokes the allusion to post-modern art museum culture. The dominant color palette is the metal gray, which together with low lighting and deep shadows, adds to the material “weight” of the store, suggesting a “cool” space that allows for reflection and relaxation (Jaworski, 2015). The in-store lighting is also carefully designed: instead of using an incandescent lightbulb, the store uses the spotlight to foreground its mask products, which are set out on the shelf available for purchase. Unlike traditional face-mask stores in Hong Kong with an emphasis on sales and discounts, in MaskOn Gallery, price tags are small and backgrounded. As shown in Figure 11, the masks are displayed for appreciation on the site, which reminds consumer-visitors of visiting an art gallery (the brand is named MaskOn Gallery). In an art gallery, paintings are displayed in prominent positions, whereas the price tag of each painting is usually backgrounded so that customers are encouraged to appreciate the art value of the paintings first, before paying attention to their price. Moreover, the grey metal plaque lists information including the usage and functions of the mask-artifacts, and sources of designing inspiration to aid visitors' appreciation of the products. Like the latest fashion items or high-tech gadgets, these face-masks construct a similar sense of luxuriousness and high-end fashion for consumers.

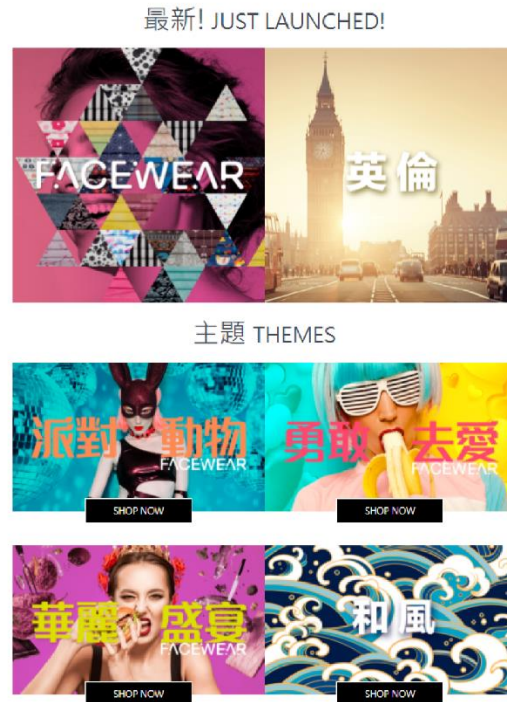


Figure 9 Different themes of the face-masks (Source: <https://mymaskfactory.com>)

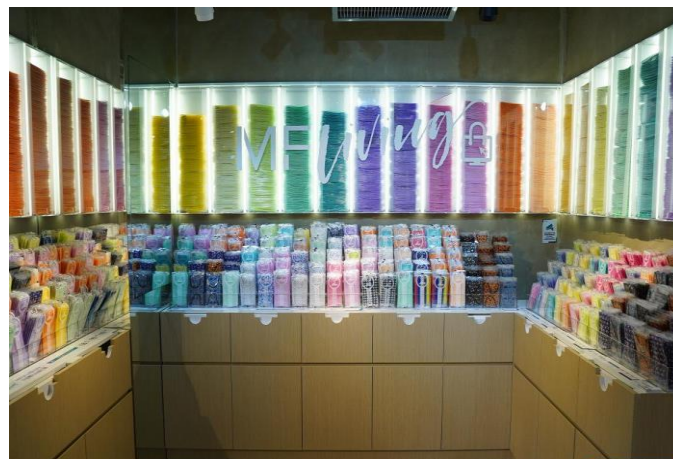


Figure 10 The interior design of the Mask Factory



Figure 11 The exhibition site in Mask-on Gallery



## Discussion and conclusion

The analysis shows that as face-masks have become a daily necessity in Hong Kong, local face-mask brands have started to resort to emotional branding strategies by mythologizing their products as a symbol of professionalism, a token of Hong Kong identity, and a stylish accessory. These symbolic appeals are realized through the combination of multimodal resources in the design of face-masks, packages, websites, and franchised stores. In this section, we will discuss the branding strategies in relation to the neoliberal socio-economic context of Hong Kong.

Based on the analysis, we can summarize three emotional branding strategies that reflect commonality with other fashion accessories under the influence of global capitalism on the one hand, and uniqueness shaped by the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong on the other hand. First, through demonstrating professionalism (e.g. using technological buzzwords, and material display of machines and professional staff), the brands transform face-masks from a mundane, daily necessity into a scientific semiotic-material assemblage. This demonstration of professionalism reflects what Fairclough (1992) calls the “technologization of discourse,” which involves the codification of common sense into specialized knowledge. Secondly, to construct the brand myth, local brands communicate a rhetoric of locality in their storytelling, which includes evoking pride in the past economy and utilizing the Lion Rock spirit. Through making explicit reference to Hong Kong’s economic and cultural heritage, they engage in “performative citizenship” (Isin, 2017), reinforcing Hong Kong identity in their brand stories and appealing to citizens’ emotions. Thirdly, these brands have acquired a set of fashionable lifestyle codes and elitist rhetoric, which include stylish slogans, unique iconographic designs, and artistically designed store space. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2017: 544) explain, elite discourse is characterized by “the need to be elite without being elitist, to be prestigious without appearing pretentious, and the need to be distinctive but attainable.” These artistically designed face-masks thus become an item through which elitism can be enacted by customers. Ordinary objects like face-masks are rebranded to include a bespoke quality, and customers are offered the privilege to escape from the homogeneity of wearing regular blue or white surgical masks. These fashionable lifestyle codes and elitist rhetoric lead to a process of customization and diversification that is typical of fashion accessories. By introducing new trends from luxury designs into face-masks, local brands satisfy young Hong Kong consumers’ continual desires for “ever-newer fashion” (Joy et al., 2012: 274).

These emotional branding strategies thrive on the tenets of neoliberalism in Hong Kong, where citizens rely on consumerism as a key part of identity and selfhood construction. As Chaput (2018: 198) points out, “in the neoliberal political economy, an affective sense of belonging takes precedence over both use value and exchange value, initiating a shift from an advertising culture based on concrete facts to a branding culture based on communal sentiment.” In other words, the neoliberal ideology motivates a kind of brand strategies that prioritize symbolic values over functional ones. Because of the economic ideological shift in giving more power to private sectors and free markets, neoliberalism creates self-resilient and self-enhancing individuals, and highlights the symbolic values of “professionalism,” “creativity,” “dynamics,” and “flexibility” (Ledin and Machin, 2017). It promotes a society that is subject to the dynamics of competitions and improvements, which results in the preoccupation with “professionalism” in corporate branding discourse, with a particular focus on “technical competence” (Berkovich, 2014). As noted by Berkovich (2014), in the evaluative neoliberal model, with an emphasis on “performative accountability,” the specification of inputs, processes, and outputs has become

increasingly important. To quickly gain social recognition in today's increasingly competitive market, companies are engaged in an endless expertise demonstration and professional pursuit. Aside from highlighting technical details (as in Figure 1 and Figure 3), some face-mask brands also showcase the production process (as in Figure 2). Their "performance" of expertise gives rise to a new form of "professionalism," where "performativity replaces the critical reflection and professional judgment" (Berkovich, 2014: 432).

Apart from demonstrating professionalism, the mask brands draw heavily on the rhetoric of locality, which reflects the neoliberal commodification of values and culture. Empowered by the neoliberal emphasis on market forces, the commodification and consumption of local culture and identity have become the linchpin of the prevailing market society (Esposito and Perez, 2014). As noted by Mak (2013: 282), the commodification of culture entails "the process of emptying everyday objects of their meaning and significance, and affixing a new significance that speaks directly to the founding spirit of Hong Kong." That is to say, local mask brands represent their face-masks as a carrier of shared cultural values and emotions in Hong Kong society, which supersedes the pragmatic values of the products. The values of economic identity (self-reliance) and cultural identity (the Lion Rock spirit) also coincide with the rhetoric of neoliberal resilience, which exhorts people to become autonomous, reliable, and self-improving subjects. It places an emphasis on individuals' ability to "adapt and cope with change and to 'bounce back' from crisis or trauma" (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 97), which is a particularly suitable theme to appeal to the population who are affected in one way or another by the pandemic.

Lastly, the neoliberal ideology also reveals itself through an emphasis on individuality and eliteness, as well as the illusion of an aspirational life. In the highly marketized society in Hong Kong, neoliberal subjects (e.g. corporations and business professionals) place themselves as elites, striving to demonstrate their cosmopolitan attitude and understanding of how to compose their personal styles (Joy et al., 2012; Skov, 2002). Their practice of leading eye-catching fashion trends always forms a "seemingly contradictory mass exclusivity," which could only be understood by those with sufficient cultural capital (Joy et al., 2012: 288). The design of face-masks, as demonstrated in our analysis, produces an "aspirational space" which allows customers to communicate how they position themselves in relation to an activity, their (aspired) relationship status and aesthetic styles (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017). As noted by Ledin and Machin (2017: 325), "the ideas and values of neoliberalism, the identities and forms of social relations which it favors, are infused into these designs." Local mask brands' symbolic production of fashionable lifestyle is also aligned with the neoliberal notions of "creativity," "the rise of lifestyle" (Chaney, 1996), and the "regime of elitist choice" (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017). As such, their branded conceptual and bespoke masks are featured by a sense of variety that celebrates individuality; the reconfigured mask "factory," "gallery," and "lab" can also be seen as part of affective labor that is "bound up with the performance of cultural capital and processes of distinction" (Bookman, 2013: 69).

To conclude, we have shown how face-masks have been transformed from a specialized medical device to a daily accessory during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong, which motivates change in branding strategies from a focus on protective functions to that of symbolic values. Similar to accessories like bags and sunglasses, through the process of signification, face-masks have become associated with professionalism, identity, and fashion

lifestyle. These symbolic meanings are realized through the deployment of verbal resources of evaluation, iconography, typography, color, and materiality in the design of face-masks, product packages, websites, and franchised stores. The study contributes to the field of multimodality in two ways. In terms of its findings, as the first study on the branding of face-masks, it reveals how face-masks are quickly commercialized during the pandemic through online and offline, semiotic and material resources. The analysis provides new understandings of the symbolic values that are exploited in face-mask branding, which reflect the collaborative force of global neoliberalism and the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong. In terms of the approach, this study demonstrates a holistic multimodal analysis which maps out the transmedia ensemble of signs involved in the branding practice. These resources, which work together to construct brand images, cannot be captured by looking at just one mode (e.g. visual images) or one medium (e.g. websites). As communication in various contexts is drawing upon an increasingly wide array of media platforms, this approach is important for unveiling how different resources are combined to achieve particular communicative purposes.

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