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People trust black COVID-19 masks more than others. But why?

If you want someone to feel safe around you, go with a black (or white) mask.



[Source Image: Husam Cakaloglu/iStock, Mizu/iStock]



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Since COVID-19 struck, companies have made masks in every shape and size—ranging from the **classic N95 respirator** to **clear masks** for the hearing impaired to cloth masks **in endless patterns and colors**.

For safety, you should use **an N95 respirator** if you can source one, or even consider **doubling your mask**. But if you want people around you to feel safe, your best option is a black mask, according to research led by professor Cihan Cobanoglu at the University of South Florida Muma College of Business.

After testing around 4,500 subjects across the U.S. using Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, Cobanoglu found that black and white masks made you appear slightly safer, and slightly more attractive, than other options. (His team is sharing this data before it goes into a peer-reviewed publication in hopes of helping people during the pandemic.)

Cobanoglu's research is aimed primarily at the hospitality industry, and he says a restaurant or hotel looking to appease customers would be smart to take these findings to heart. But the research is also compelling because it deconstructs these strange, shifting social norms about PPE and what wearing it signifies to other people.

To run the study, Cobanoglu's team built a questionnaire. It started by asking subjects to picture themselves sitting in one of several public spaces, such as a bank, casino, or grocery store. Then, it showed a photo of one of many different people, wearing one of many different masks. Subjects then rated these people on all sorts of different categories—including gratitude, attractiveness, anxiety, and trust.

Many takeaways were encouraging. "A lot of people say masks make people ugly. You can't see people's smiles," says Cobanoglu. "What our research showed us is people don't care if they wore a mask or not—a person is of the same attractiveness in a mask or not. It doesn't make someone more handsome or ugly." Black and white masks did have slightly higher scores than blue surgical masks, colorful patterned masks, or clear masks. But for the most part, those differences were a wash. Wearing a mask shouldn't hurt your dating game.

As for perceived "trust" (or what you might think of as how safe you'd feel around someone during COVID-19 times), black masks edged out all other options by a slight margin in scoring, with white coming in close behind. If you change the weights for statistical significance, Cobanoglu isn't sure there's any benefit to a black mask over a white one. And while both colors edge out colored masks or patterns and blue masks by a nose, the difference in day-to-day perception between any of these options isn't so large that you should sweat it.

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Indeed, the real red flag was with clear masks. While clear masks share your smile and have been **championed by people with hearing impairments** since they make it possible to read lips, Cobanoglu's research found that people trusted the safety of clear masks significantly less than other options. Clear masks scored 4% lower in trust and made subjects feel 5% less gratitude than other mask options.

"We always say people are the business—you need to see their face. Some restaurants in my area, in Florida, use invisible masks. I always disliked them for whatever reason. They look unsafe to me. They give me the impression they don't even protect," says Cobanoglu. His research proved this phenomenon out.

Still, the question remains, why did black and white masks score the highest in perceived safety? Cobanoglu says it's a topic rich for speculation. Perhaps black masks hide their folds better, appearing to be a better fit. Perhaps we think black makes for a less permeable, and more solid, object. As for white? "Maybe people think it's more pure," says Cobanoglu.

It's a perfect example of how our instincts around products aren't necessarily in line with efficacy. Because, of course, a mask's color doesn't make it any more or less safe. Its **fit and materials** are what matter.

"I came up with this research idea initially because I bought a bag of 50 blue surgical masks," says Cobanoglu. "I said to myself one day, 'You know, this black color looks better than blue. Maybe I should try a black one?'"

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