COVID-19 facemask rule, public distrust and artistic interventions in Nsukka, Nigeria

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Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 in Wuhan, China claimed over six million lives globally, according to the report of World Health Organization (WHO), by 27 July 2022. The pandemic necessitated public health protocols such as social distancing and face mask-wearing, among others, in the absence of a proven cure. However, the degree of compliance to the face mask rule appears significantly low in many African countries on account of low state capacity, poor governance and the consequent public distrust. Drawing on analysis of text items such as Facebook conversations, interview quotes and photographic images, this study explores public responses to the COVID-19 face mask rule that exemplify public distrust and the concept of social responsibility. Utilizing Taro Yamane formula, we determined a sample size of 278, selected systematically from 912 Facebook comments on an official post by Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Personal observation and in-depth interviews with six purposely selected artists were conducted in Nsukka, Nigeria. The study argues that the apathy towards the COVID-19 face mask rule was a product of public distrust while the rule was a source of inspiration to the artists.

Subjects: Art & Visual Culture; Graphic Arts; Design; Visual Arts

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
COVID-19 pandemic shook the already fragile political and economic systems of Nigeria remarkably, more than other contagions witnessed in the present century. The consequent facemask rule and other health protocols were as contentious as the sharing of COVID-19 palliatives from the government, charity organizations, civil society and philanthropists as both elicited accusations and counter accusations from those concerned. Such is the manifestations of public distrust over perceived government’s weaknesses. Thus, in Nigeria, the Federal Government through the Federal Ministry of Health and the National Centre for Disease Control faced dual battles of trust and confidence on the one hand, and strict adherence to the various protocols of COVID-19 on the other. This paper, therefore, explores some issues surrounding the face mask rule. One of such is public distrust. Both the facemask rule and public distrust informed some artistic interventions which this paper reflected.
1. Introduction
COVID-19 started in Wuhan, China and was first reported on 31 December 2019. By 27 July 2022, there had been over 570,000,000 confirmed cases and 6,000,000 deaths globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022a). Nigeria is reported to have over 259,000 confirmed cases and over 3,100 deaths at the time (WHO, 2022b); the first case reported in Africa was on 15 February 2020 (African Population and Health Research Center [APHR], 2019). Growing number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths (Iddi et al., 2020) necessitated various health protocols and other interventions from the government, health agencies and civil society.

Some of the various ways Nigerian artists have creatively responded to COVID-19 were presented during ‘The Art and Politics of COVID-19: West African “Conference” that held virtually between 27 and 28 July 2020, and the College Art Association (CAA) Conference also held Virtually in February 2021. This study is an updated version of the paper presented at these conferences. Other similar presentations were “Mask Against COVID-19: Facebook Expressions in Creativity,” by Kehinde Adepegba, “In the Spirit of Passover: A Graphic Response to COVID-19” by Krydz Ikwumeresi, and Kanso Ogbolu’s “Animated COVID Memes and Instagram—Creative Responses”. Papers expressing personal, political, humorous COVID-19 cartoons and the economic constraints on COVID-19 in Africa and African Diaspora visual communities were also engaged with by participants of the conference.

Drawing on analysis of text items such as Facebook conversations, interview quotes and photographic images, this study explores public responses to the COVID-19 face mask rule that exemplify “public distrust” (Patterson & Balogun, 2021) and the “social responsibility” (Boas, 1947). The essay is structured along the following sub-headings: conceptual and theoretical approach, methodology, facemask rule, public distrust, face mask business, the artists, the explorations and the conclusion.

2. Conceptual and theoretical approach
This study's conceptual and theoretical approach derives from several texts. Patterson and Balogun (2021) essay on African Responses to COVID-19 is basically about the efforts made by the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other supporting civil society organisations to stop further spread of the COVID-19 in Africa. While writing about “four general patterns in the state civil collaboration,” the authors note that mobilisation using community-based contact tracers became problematic in Liberia because of the “challenges of low state capacity and public distrust” (p. 159).

We find “low state capacity and public distrust” as the dominant thread that runs through the various sub-themes of Patterson and Balogun's essay. The mention of “public distrust” holds a great significance for this study as a conceptual frame. Public distrust tends to undermine opportunities to seek external support created by the fact that several African states appear incapable of fighting the spread of COVID-19 independently. Although this systemic dependency on foreign aids has been criticised by African intellectuals, the greater challenge is damaging effects of public distrust occasioned by security challenges, corruption, political instability, and the ‘government’s administrative incompetence. The #EndSARS protest that started in 2017 and peaked in October 2020 with the notorious Lekki tollgate shooting in Lagos illustrates these weaknesses.

Boas (1947) text explains that the artist’s social responsibility is not about his work’s medium but his [productive] existence among men. What we consider as one of the best definitions of social responsibility, is, “to tell the truth” … “whether one does anything about it or not,” is seen in the text (Boas, 1947, p. 276). Metaphorically, “to tell” could mean “to produce”; “the truth” could be
represented by an artwork. This is a theoretical and illustrative understanding of “social responsibility”. For George Boas, a socially responsible artist is aware of the “currents of changes” of a given time (p. 275). The assertion applies to the four groups of artists Boas identified and discussed. For instance, the Italian Renaissance fresco painters whose works incline towards story-telling exemplify the narrative group. The emotion-laden subjects and themes of the “lyrical” group, the impressionist works such as Monet’s *Apples and Grapes* as well as works that tend to capture tragic events, all illustrate the social responsibility of the artist.

Studies on the use of facemasks during contagions provide insights into the just mentioned theoretical and conceptual frames—public distrust and social responsibility. Some of them present and discuss context-specific data that relate to history, culture, economy and politics and other behavioral factors. For instance, how certain contagion’s chaotic effects led to the compulsory face mask-wearing and its consequent debates occupies the thematic thrust of Luckingham’s (1984) paper. It explains the rule and how this was seen as an infringement on an individual’s civil right in Tucson in the late 1918. One citizen of Tucson, the paper notes, however advised that those who do not believe in the mask should be ready to wear it to assuage the fears of others who do (p. 198). The narrative also calls to mind some debates against and in favour of COVID-19 face mask rule in Nigeria.

Nancy Rockafellar’s (1986) article explores controversies surrounding the public use of gauze face masks during Spanish influenza in Seattle between 1918 and 1919. She relied on various historical accounts to engage public anxieties associated with the use of facemasks. The article features several figures; six layers of gauze masks, among other things, were recommended for all citizens (pp. 105,109). Some people, especially women, reportedly donned stylish facemasks, believed to be truly protective. However, unmasked citizens were reported to be everywhere, even at the peak of the epidemic. This, perhaps, explains threats of arrest and fines issued against the unmasked individuals (p. 109). Clearly, the narrative somewhat connects to COVID-19 facemask-wearing experiences in Nigeria.

Inspired primarily by their travel experiences from Manchester to Chiang Mai in Thailand at the peak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, Syed et al. (2003) looked at contrasting reactions of the public to the disease. Notwithstanding the debate about the protective advantage of wearing face masks, the face mask-wearing public constituted the moral majority and the practice was reported to have probably surpassed “official guidance” (p. 855). This level of compliance contrasts with that of Nigeria during COVID-19 as the greater majority of Nigerians exhibited some level of distrust that affected the facemask practice.

Cowling et al. (2010) systematically reviewed some scientific texts under controlled and natural conditions to support the effectiveness of facemasks in reducing influenza virus infection in 2009. The twelve articles reviewed show little data on the efficacy of facemasks as a good source of control of large droplets (p. 453). Another discovery was the experimental evidence that face masks could reduce infectious droplets under controlled conditions (p. 455). The authors also observed that there is scanty evidence on whether or not facemasks work in natural settings. The findings tend to favour the use of face masks during COVID-19 and justify a later, comparative study on recommendations of facemasks in both public and community settings (Feng et al., 2020).

However, Lazzarino et al. (2020) argued that there are possible dangers of wearing surgical face masks in the context COVID-19. The problems identified include a false sense of security, abnormal use of masks, speech impediment, breathing difficulty, the possibility of self-infection and the weakening of the immune system. The authors did not entirely oppose the use of surgical masks to control the spread of COVID-19; they simply highlighted their side effects. Their argument aligns somewhat with the rhetoric of certain anti-maskers seen in YouTube videos during COVID-19.
These cautionary views of the authors could not be substantiated with examples though it presents another perspective to the face mask rule and public distrust.

A fabric facemask, somewhat comparable to the N95 respirator in terms of design, form-fitting quality and filtering efficiency is the product and focus of Park and Jayaraman (2020). The design process is said to have followed engineering design and scientific methodology derived from Quality Function Deployment. The face mask illustrates a thoughtful effort to solve the problems of efficiency and of comfort associated with face mask-wearing during COVID-19. However, emphasis on the facemask and protection practically undermined some moral issues that might affect the public reception of such face mask in a country like Nigeria.

Stylish masks made and worn in response to COVID-19 pandemic form the thrust of Kandarkar’s (2020) article. Five photos of masked female “models” animate the article. Facemask as a visual statement that could relate to health, fashion, politics and solidarity seems to dominate the central theme of the article. It explores some psychological impacts of the mask using various theories. Kandarkar notes a sense of alienation inherent in the mask and its obscuring impact on women’s face make-up. The conclusion hints on the possibility of normalising the use of the mask beyond the COVID era.

Greenhalgh et al. (2020) explored arguments for and against the public use of facemasks during COVID-19. The authors reviewed seven randomised trials conducted at different times, mostly in the US and Australia, to ascertain the effectiveness of surgical face masks (respirators and other health-induced face barriers). Though the results did not basically favour the use of facemasks, the authors recommended the use of masks as a precautionary approach. The recommendation was based on some circumstantial findings, indirect evidence from Hong Kong and what they described as the “collateral damage risk” (p. 3). Their arguments cohere with those shared by some mask-wearers—Nigerians—during the pandemic.

Martin et al. (2020) engaged the controversial public use of facemasks in the COVID-19 era in their essay. They criticised the change in the health policy initiated by some scientists under the guise of policy advocacy and offered five cautionary pieces of advice in this regard. One of such is that the gap between science and society should be bridged by the coming together of policy makers and scientists, to examine relevant factors associated with any epidemic or pandemic to offer well-reasoned advice on how to mitigate against the spread of viruses among the people. The authors did not consider possible interventions by artists to downplay the controversy.

Edet et al. (2020) investigate how facemasks were utilised during COVID-19 in Nigeria. The result of their web-based cross-sectional survey carried out around mid-2020 shows that over 90 percent of their respondents were both aware of the usefulness of facemasks in reducing the spread of the virus and thus favoured the use and reuse of homemade fabric masks. Their study, however, tends to have captured the responses of certain homogenous classes of people, notably enlightened young Nigerians who surf the internet regularly. We find this as the plausible reason the survey result appears incongruent with the findings of other studies such as those of Akande and Adenle (2020), Anyanwu et al. (2022), and Anyanwu et al. (2022) analysed headlines and front-page news of two prominent newspapers in Nigeria to determine, among other things, how Nigerians perceived COVID-19. They report that Nigerians, including politicians, criticised certain federal government approaches to stopping the spread of the disease. The paper shows that many people held negative perceptions about the Covid-19, describing the West’s claim of medical sophistication as “empty” (p. 9). So complex is the matter of distrust, implies the authors, that most people regarded WHO as an accomplice, one ingeniously “playing a script handed in by the sponsors” (p. 9).

Akande and Adenle (2020) examined the degree of responsiveness certain Ibadan-Nigeria dwellers exhibited towards the Covid-19 Face mask rule. They identified and analysed five types of conventional face mask and three designs of extemporised types made of plastics and other
materials. Out of the people involved in their survey, only 13 percent appeared to have complete trust on messages about the reality and health protocols of the pandemic. This number surpasses the number of those who doubted the reality of the disease and those who saw it as a mark of divine judgment.

Most of the studies on COVID-19 acknowledge face mask-wearing as a recommended health protocol. However, these studies and others tend to gloss over some rich subjective details associated with COVID-19 pandemic in Nsukka, Nigeria. Specifically, scholars have not given adequate attention to some issues and developments associated with the COVID-19 face mask rule in certain parts of Nigeria. One of such is the issue of public distrust in the Nigerian context and some creative responses to the COVID-19 face mask rule in Nsukka.

3. Methodology
This study relies on unstructured interviews, personal observations and others such as writings and visual images of facemasks worn by the artists who made them. It also examined and subjected to analysis a post by Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC, 2020b) on its official Facebook handle. The post was made by 7 July 2020, to announce the arrival of some COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment, donated by the Association of Nigerian Physicians in the Americas (ANPA). By 23 July 2022, it had generated 912 comments and some follow on comments. Using Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967), \( \frac{N}{1 + \frac{N}{n}} \) (where “n” is the sample size and “N” the population of the study), we determined a sample size of 278, selected systematically from the 912 comments to minimise the chances of making biased choices. The formula has a minimal percentage of error of 0.05.

Facebook conversations, admittedly, are hard to particularise to a specific location as people could comment from any part of the world. However, field observations suggest that the typical (negative) and the atypical comments (positive, neutral and beside the point comments), hold true in Nsukka. Although Facebook contents display elements of artificiality and “facelessness,” NCDC official page features authentic posts and the public responses to such posts tend to provide an understanding of local perceptions about NCDC, COVID-19 and interventions by the government to halt the spread of the disease.

The works of six artists were examined in this study. These were purposively selected for two reasons—convenience and the fact that they, except one, graduated from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The Department, hereafter regarded as Nsukka School, is the oldest art department in the list of local universities in the country. It has a reputation for promoting new art traditions in Nigeria (Ottenberg, 1997).

Procedures for analysing and interpreting vary. Texts such as Facebook data were subjected to descriptive statistics and content analysis. Interviews were analysed using a thematic narrative approach. Literature was analysed discursively and paintings iconographically, to allow for some “common sense” deductive interpretation (Rose, 2001).

4. The face mask rule
Public use of facemasks during contagion is unusual, as studies have shown. The outbreak of COVID-pandemic in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, in the absence of a proven cure, necessitated using facemasks as one of the recommended health protocols. However, the degree of compliance to the face mask rule differs in the affected countries globally. It seems that in developed countries the rule is stricter than in many African countries. One can easily identify low state capacity, poor governance and the consequent case of public distrust as the cause of the seeming apathy towards masking in the region. WHO supported Africa, and at time of this writing still shows support, in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. The organisation has contributed to the millions of medical masks, N95 respirator masks and face-shields and other Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) so far shipped to some countries of Africa since the outbreak of the pandemic.
The gesture was to tackle the problem of shortage of medical face masks, especially when US-China relations seemed to be at a low ebb.

The politics of keeping safe played out during the COVID era and was characterised by a disregard for principles of honesty and justice. Aware of the tendency to appear in public without face masks by some individuals, some security personnel decided to engage in exploitation, extorting money from defaulters, under the guise of enforcing the facemask rule. Hence, there have been several complaints of individual civil right violations and killings. For instance, a male motorcyclist (locally called Okada man) was reportedly shot dead by a police officer for not paying an illegally imposed penalty for not wearing his face mask in a part of southeastern Nigeria (Alozie, 2020, July 1). Security forces have reportedly killed 18 people in such circumstances. All these happened before late 2020, when Nigeria had only recorded 400 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 12 deaths (Omilana, 2020). In other words, the recorded fatality figure from COVID-19 was less than the number of those killed by the security operatives. Corruption, abuse of power, and failure to observe best practices and rules of engagement in firearms tend to fuel public distrust.

Little wonder, Akande and Adenle’s (2020) study reports that 87 percent of their respondents from Ibadan expressed some doubt about the supposed facts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently, NCDC, other government agencies, civil society partners and individuals tried hard to change the narrative through Facebook posts, Instagram posts and Twitter feeds with hashtags such as #CoronaVirusNigeria, #StaySafe, #TakeResponsibility and #TheLockdownNigeria. Billboard advertisements such as shown in Figure 1 could be seen along urban streets.

Perhaps, based on the level of people’s carefree attitude towards COVID-19, Gever and Ezeah (2020) wondered if Nigerian media provided sufficient warning messages on coronavirus disease prior to its spread in Nigeria. The result of their study was negative. However, our observation is that the Nigeria government utilised the mainstream media and the social media to issue some COVID-19 advisory. Through such channels, the government and networked responses to the pandemic were made public. WHO and other foreign civil society partners have also helped Nigeria in this regard. Nevertheless, the advisory on facemask-wearing has not been taken seriously by many. This attitude contrasts with that of the Chinese public who largely approached COVID-19 face mask-wearing from a patriotic standpoint. Ji’s (2020) study on China’s anti-
epidemic promotional videos and face mask-wearing highlights the moral undertone of face mask-wearing in the country with such expressions as “bigger love” for Chinese people transcending “smaller love” for an individual family. In China, masking behaviors served as a token of submissiveness to the local authority.

5. Public distrust
It is probably in an attempt to tackle the issue of public distrust that NCDC posted several pictures and messages on social media about the pandemic.

For instance, NCDC made a post in their official Facebook page about the donation of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by the Association of Nigerian Physicians in the Americas (ANPA), to cushion the effects of the virus. PPEs are highly recommended as airborne precautionary wears worn when aerosol-generating procedures are carried out on those diagnosed with coronavirus. The post reads:

We are grateful to Association of Nigerian Physicians in the Americas (ANPA) for the donation of personal protective equipment as support for the #COVID19 national response. We commend the efforts of all public and private entities as we jointly #TakeResponsibility in the face of this pandemic. (NCDC, 2020a)

To substantiate their claim, they posted four photographs, one of which is Figure 2. The post elicited 912 comments, mostly discourteous, from Facebook users. People reacted variously to the posts. Analysis of a total of 278 comments (Table 1) reveals three patterns: positive, negative, and neutral cum irrelevant comments.

| Type of Comment          | Number | Percentage | Remark                                           |
|--------------------------|--------|------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Positive Comment         | 33     | 12         | Encouraging and cautionary statements            |
| Negative comment         | 207    | 74         | Scarcistic, insulting, doubtful and condemning expressions |
| Neutral/irrelevant       | 38     | 14         | Expressions of praise to the donor but lambast NCDC or the Nigeria state; extraneous comments |
| Total                    | 278    | 100        |                                                  |

In the 33 positive comments indicated in Table 1, some commentators lauded NCDC while some users praised ANPA. To further illustrate types of comments, here are examples. A user wrote: "Other international associations that relate with Nigeria should follow suit while I joined millions of Nigerians in thanking ANPA for a job well done". A typical negative comment reads:

Stupid fellows that called themselves NCDC, only God will judge you people. You people cannot send money to reach us, but you people can send messages all over the world just to reach everybody.

The reference to “messages” refers to short messages (SMS) in the form of COVID-19 advisory which NCDC often sends to different network subscribers. Impliedly, it alludes to the call for foreign aid from possible donors by NCDC. Some tangential and beside-the-point comments include: “It is a free word [sic] … You can do whatever pleases you but remember judgment day is at the door … Knocking one after the other”. “… my people, Jesus is coming very soon, you need to fear God’s judgment, not COVID-19."
Although the above commentators’ identity has been anonymised here, these comments clearly demonstrate public distrust. They arguably reinforce the view that wherever power is found, there exists some form of resistance (Rose, 2001). The pivotal post by NCDC was intended to announce the outcome of the government’s efforts towards fighting the pandemic. One would have ordinarily expected an applause for being thoughtful and timely. Nonetheless, over 70 percent of the comments were negative, indicating public distrust. This figure aligns somewhat with Akande and Adenle’s (2020) study which reports that 87 percent of their respondents had reservations about COVID-19 pandemic.

The preceding conversations illustrate Patterson and Balogun’s (2021) comment about the “challenges of low state capacity and public distrust” (p. 159) that tend to frustrate the anti-COVID-19 efforts of Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as those of different supporting civil society organisations. One could imagine the difficulty involved in community-based mobilisations in Nigeria following the level of public distrust exemplified in the post.

Public distrust has practically affected the COVID-19 face mask rule because of the tendency for Nigerians, or those living in the country, to disobey state authorities. We therefore argue that public distrust, more than anything else, undermines the efficacy anti-COVID-19 initiatives in Nigeria. The problem is further complicated with absence of surveillance cameras, facial recognition technologies and clearly defined stringent penal codes linked to COVID-19 regulations.

The propensity to disregard COVID-19 government orders tends to come “naturally”. People protest poor governance everywhere. Such weakness fuels distrust. This is beyond cultural conditioning. For instance, in the traditional Igbo society to which Nsukka belongs, submission to local authority and the fear of taboos were instilled in the locals early in life. Breaking civil codes attracted appropriate sanctions. The Igbo believe that an offender will be “caught” by their earth goddess, Ani, even when an act has been committed in secret (Thomas, 1913). People would usually seek the help of seers to know the sources of “unusual” troubles. If an abominable act is the causal factor, one may be required to perform some ablutionary sacrifice. Certain sickness, misfortune or disturbing experiences are taken as symptomatic signs that someone has transgressed.

6. Face mask business
The shortage of medically treated PPEs during the pandemic was worrisome to the Nigerian government. To mitigate this, Lagos State government flagged off the production of the first certified medical facemask in the country in late July 2020 (Premium Times, 2020). NCDC on the other hand regularly released online information about how one could use cloth face masks to
curtail the spread of COVID-19 (NCDC, 2020a). Perhaps, the advisory served as a boost to the commercial cloth facemask business in Nigeria. The face mask business boomed as people began to engage in street hawking. Vendors engaged in displays of facemasks in strategic areas such as the entry points of banks, schools and hospitals (Figure 3). The face mask business and the wearing of face masks were further promoted as people commissioned facemasks with certain promotional prints. The face mask in Figure 4 reveals a sticker containing texts and a female figure.
Facemasks bear a variety of visual elements purposefully designed and created. Figure 5 exemplifies a face mask fashion practice of ensuring that the face mask surface design is in consonance with the accompanying outfits. Our interaction with the wearer and artists from Nsukka School who produced facemasks in commercial quantities or painted figures a direct response to the facemask rule affirms this.

Amuche Nnabeze, an artist and lecturer at the Nsukka school, produced face masks for commercial purpose during the COVID time. During an in-depth individual interview, she shares how she found pleasure in using tailors’ offcuts (N. Amuche, personal communication, 14 July 2020). She began sewing facemasks by March 2020, the month the government introduced lockdowns in several states. Nnabeze shares that she simply advertised sample copies of her face masks online, particularly on social media when the facemask business started. People began to comment on them, some indicating interest in getting them.

She equally expressed that many women brought pieces of cloth, including scarves, to her for making facemasks. Some people who came to her studio offered to help her in the making process as she had no paid workers. Such people could freely participate in sewing, others in adding elastic thread, while others simply packaged the sewn ones. The first set she produced, about 100, were given out as gifts. Nevertheless, she sold many to sustain herself. This was when the government withheld the salaries of Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU) members following an industrial dispute that paralysed academic activities for several months.
During the interview at her studio, we surveyed Nnabeze’s face masks in the making. Most of them were being sewn for a school in readiness for resumption. The government had just announced that schools would be reopened as soon as feasible. However, the decision was later rescinded with a rise in the infection rate of COVID-19. She sewed different styles for the school using the same material as the school uniform. Two basic styles were evident. One variety has an inbuilt elastic thread (for looping around the head or ears). Another type had no rope except holes for inserting removable elastic bands. The idea was to identify students in different schools.

She narrated how some people appear careless with their masks, the reason for the littering of public spaces with abandoned facemasks. To ensure the filtering efficiency of the materials used for each mask, she doubled them. According to her, the local means of verifying this quality in a typical mask is for one to position the mask behind a burning candle and attempt to blow it out with one’s mouth. Social media remains her major advertising outlet. Remarkably, she does not see herself as a fashion designer but as an artist whose explorative tendencies lean towards the use of fabric offcuts. This brings into focus the concept of explorations (materials and their efficiency) that characterised Facebook production during the COVID era in Nigeria from an empirical standpoint.

7. The explorations

Although Boas (1947, p. 270) explains that the social responsibilities of the artist do not depend on media or forms, one key factor in the business of producing face masks by artists has to do with material and efficiency. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, several artists have explored different materials and produced some strange-looking facemasks that raise the question of efficiency. Uncommon techniques and materials by artists tend to elevate conventional facemasks, mere crafts or technological artefacts, to a level of art as seen in Figure 6—a crocheted wool face mask, designed after a medical facemask (R. Ubah, personal communication, 20 July 2020).

The artist and graduate of the Nsukka school, Ritadoris Ubah, was outstanding in the facemask business in Nsukka. Her facemasks, except the one shown in Figure 6, are done with cotton, in the similitude of a medical mask. Her first experiments were found to be too tight on the face. She therefore explored ways to design comfortable face mask by using more suitable elastic threads. There were a lot of textile materials, rolls of cloth, in her disposal which used for her facemasks.

Figure 6. Ritadoris Ubah in her crocheted wool facemask.
Photo credit: Ritadoris Ubah.
Such include scarves, bedsheets, prints (ankara or African wax). Using the stencil method, she would cut a pattern of facemask and sew it after introducing a piece of gum stay fabric at the center. She produced and sold several face masks for each piece at the price of 0.24 USD. The price was much higher in more developed cities such as Port Harcourt and Abuja. This is because Abuja, for instance, is the Federal capital territory, where the administrative seat of the Nigerian government is located. Residents of such cities are more affluent.

Figure 7. Nandi Wals Vershima in her facemask. Photo credit: Nandi Wals Vershima.

Figure 8. Dotun Popoola in his metallic facemask. Photo Credit: The Artist, 2020.
Nandi Walshak Vershima (Figure 7), another artist from the Nsukka school, started sewing facemasks because of the COVID-19 face mask rule. She felt that such would be a thriving business since it will be part of people’s daily outfits (N. Walshak, personal communication, 20 July 2020). She made styles that would suit people’s clothing. She equally considered the comfortability of the face masks. However, the major challenge she faced was the fall in the price of face masks. The fall was also connected with the effects of public distrust. Reacting to why she used lace fabric to make one of her facemasks (Figure 7), she simply said, “To make it beautiful”. Arguably, such was a strategy to attract customers.

During the fieldwork, Dotun Popoola, a young Nigerian artist and “synergetic metal sculptor” known for his “hybrid welded art” sent us an image of his extemporised facemask with some notes attached (D. Popoola, personal communication, 7 August 2020). The haute couture face mask (Figure 8) exemplifies the height of COVID-19 face mask exploration in Nigeria in terms of materiality and efficiency. Remarkably, he avoided the conventional media used in extemporised facemasks (Akande & Adenle, 2020) such as calabash, wool (Figure 6), plastic and other pliable and breakable objects. We see in Popoola’s face mask an ambitious and audacious move by a young Nigerian artist to make a statement about COVID-19 face mask rule. What is significant with Popoola’s mask is not for the prevention or protection against COVID-19, but a symbolic gesture to protest the “wear a mask regulation”, or a statement to register his creative ingenuity with the current world situation of the time. His approach may also appear remedial. Worn by the artist, the face mask speaks to the need of the moment—the restoration of public confidence not only in the face mask rule or in the entire anti-COVID-19 initiatives but also in the Nigerian government.

Popoola chose a metallic scrap for his “impenetrable,” heavy looking facemask. The weight of the face mask raises the question of comfort. Popoola stated that the face mask is coated with an insulator that regulates internal and outside temperatures to dispel such fear. To accentuate its aesthetics, the artist ornamented its upper border with a short length of bicycle chain. According to him, the face mask has a replaceable filter, so sensitive that it can easily detect smells. Bluetooth and earphones enhance its visual, functional and material quality. Popoola made reference to its capacity to repel flow of electric current and resist radiation. He hinted on his plan to patent the design lest the credit goes to the Chinese. We observed their poor working conditions of some of these artists we interviewed as they managed to remain in the business of producing during the lockdown. Little wonder, they left the business as soon as their face masks appeared less competitive in the market.

8. Paintings
A work of art has multiplicity of values and interpretations (Boas, 1947, p. 276). Artists who produced works that mirror social life in Nigeria during COVID-19 are numerous.

However, the paintings of Bede Eze and Moses Ibanga, graduates of the Nsukka school, are illustrative of manifestations of public distrust. They also demonstrate a sense of social responsibility as artists. Caution Abuse (Figure 9), a painting by Eze, depicts a female hawker who dons a facemask that covers the jaw part, a style commonly seen in various local contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The lone girl is captured counting the proceeds (Nigerian currency notes) of her business, the sale of portable drinking water popularly called pure water. Like her, several people wear their facemasks this way shortly after coming out of places with a strict face mask rule while others doff theirs entirely.

Using his painting, Eze criticises such behavior thus:

‘Negligence Culture’ has being [sic] cultivated from ages. It has proven to thrive among the people in their homes and public lives. They have shown a remarkable hatred to be corrected; they are proud in [sic] doing the wrong thing. Yes, its [sic] not just because Corona Virus came. They hated cautionary measures long ago, they hated helmets, seatbelt, face
Figure 9. Bede Eze, Caution Abuse. 36" by 44" Oil on canvas. Photo Credit: Bede Eze.

Figure 10. Moses Ibanga, Trailing the part of human dignity. 4’ X 6’. Mixed media on canvas. Photo Credit: Moses Ibanga.
masks, queues, condoms (sic), etc . . . . We neglect the very little things that makes (sic) life better for all. It has eaten deep into our systems. Today, the wearing of face masks is now a jaw fashion in disguise. People only put up good behaviours on facemasks, hand washing, social distancing only when they [are] being watched; especially before the police check-points or cameras. (B. Eze, personal communication, 8 August 2020)

The foregoing excerpt which captures the artist’s pain over the various significations of “jaw fashion” that trended in Nigeria during the COVID-19 tends to ignore the government’s leading role in fueling the negligence culture. We could discern from the message the offsprings of public distrust: negligence and hypocrisy.

Trailing the part of human dignity, a painting (Figure 10) by Moses Ibanga was produced to interrogate the general deviant attitude to the facemask rule. It features stylised figures depicting a family consisting of both parents and three children who stand against a partitioned background. Moses explains that the left side of the background represents the Garden of Eden (M. Ibanga, personal communication, 6 August 2020). The other side features buildings that house worldly trappings.

Paradoxically, children, rather than adults, donned facemasks in the painting. Explaining the visual significance of the curious representation, the artist remarked that the parents belong to the old and disease-free generation. He was both referring to the period of public trust in the government. The children represent people in whose generation there is public distrust. Such are exposed to harsh realities he described as the consequences of sin. Their facemask signifies distrust and speaks to the imperfection of man in contemporary time.

These paintings “tell the truth” about COVID-19 graphically (Boas, 1947, p. 276). They portray the producers as socially responsible artists, aware of the “currents of changes” in their time (Boas, 1947, p. 275). They tend fall into the category of artists Boas describes as the “narrative” group.

9. Conclusion
The Facebook post by NCDC has shown how disenchanted Nigerians have been with their government with respect to efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Going by the analysis in the paper, over 70 percent of the people, mostly youths are critical of government responses to the pandemic. This analysis has also revealed some dimensions of public distrust and doubts over the reality of COVID-19. The public has some reservations over the perceived government ineptitude in administration and management. These attitudes have been demonstrated online and have been observed during fieldwork in Nsukka, Nigeria. In-depth interviews with artists have helped to clarify their experiences and responses to the face mask rule during COVID-19 pandemic.

As argued here, COVID-19 efforts by the Nigerian government tend to be ignored by many Nigerians. This behavior is, undoubtedly, linked to the public distrust that stems from perceptions of weak and poor governance. Extortion, partiality in the sharing formula of palliatives and other vices, for instance, have negative ripple effects on the fight against COVID-19. These fallouts ultimately tend to undermine the genuine efforts by the governments, civil groups and individuals, to halt the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. They promote what Eze described as “negligence culture”. Moses Ibanga’s painting is a telling metaphor that graphically explores the concept of politics of identity. For instance, adults, according to our observation, are more susceptible to COVID-19 than children and therefore needed to wear facemasks. However, this was not the case. Many went about unmasked while pupils were forced to wear facemasks in schools. Undoubtedly, public distrust is as dangerous as despising COVID-19 health protocols. It is indeed remarkable how the COVID-19 facemask rule has exposed some level of public distrust. Both served as a source of inspiration to artists who demonstrated their social responsibility during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.
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