

## **Vacation From Reality: The Influence of Tourist Privilege on the Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Isla Mujeres**

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### **Abstract**

Tourism is known to reinforce global inequalities as economically vulnerable people are pressured to reconfigure their spaces to better conform to tourist expectations. Differing understandings of social responsibilities can further alienate tourists from locals. On the island of Isla Mujeres, Mexico, COVID-19 is a catalyst for a discussion of the benefit and harm that tourists pose to the local community, demonstrating that many tourists value their vacation experience over the lives of the locals. Through participant observation, interviews, and an online survey, we consider meanings communicated through decisions to wear or forgo masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masks have become a symbol of personal freedom for many tourists, but they remain a symbol of respect and social responsibility for locals, suggesting that disparate mask usage has exacerbated social tensions on Isla Mujeres.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, symbolic anthropology, social solidarity

I (Dominique) find my seat in the main cabin on a full flight. Even fully vaccinated and masked, I'm anxious to get away from the swarms of people I encounter in TSA lines, at ticket counters, and on the plane itself. As the plane jerks into motion, I try to tune out the people chatting and sniffing around me. The flight attendant briskly passes through rows, checking that tray tables are up, seats are in the upright position, and masks are in place. The overhead speakers crackle to life and the pilot curtly informs the passengers that we cannot take off until everyone is wearing their masks properly. The pilot states that he is as tired of the mask situation as anyone but rules are rules and the plane will continue to sit on the runway until everyone complies with the mask mandate. Upon arrival in Isla Mujeres, I realize that my experience is eerily similar to that of my fellow researchers, Lindsay and Eleanor.

We were told that college was an opportunity to study in community, travel abroad, and jumpstart our careers through research and networking. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic kept people grounded, isolated, and afraid to see other people face-to-face. When we heard that there was one program that would allow us to complete ethnographic fieldwork in spite of the pandemic, we packed our bags for Isla Mujeres. Only five miles long and a half mile wide, with a population of approximately 13,000, Isla Mujeres sits off the coast of Cancun and welcomes over 17,000 tourists a day. In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a three-month lockdown, significantly threatening the livelihoods of many tourism-industry workers on the island and placing heavy financial stress on those unable to work. When we arrived in the summer of 2021, Isla Mujeres was designated a high risk location. Face masks were obligatory indoors and outdoors. Beaches, hotels, and commercial centers were allowed to open but only at

30% to 50% capacity (Gobierno de México). According to one public health official on the island, Isla Mujeres should have been designated a maximum risk location, halting all tourism and non-essential business. However, economic dependence on tourism incentivized officials to label the state as high rather than maximum risk.

Through interviews, we sought to glimpse the emotions, motivations, and actions of tourism industry workers. During the months of June and July of 2021 we conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with people working on Isla Mujeres, along with a series of informal interviews with street vendors and tourists. In addition, we conducted a series of directed observations, counting the number of masked and unmasked pedestrians or golf cart passengers passing by particular locations. Golf carts are an extremely popular form of transportation for tourists, in contrast to motos that are mainly used by locals, so we calculated the percentage of people wearing masks in various locations and compared the number of people wearing masks in golf carts to the number of people wearing masks on motos. Finally, we collected over 600 responses to a qualitative online survey launched across a series of social media groups populated both by tourists and locals. We then compared common themes in formal interviews.

Tourism itself is a symbolic practice that reinforces globalized systems of inequality through privilege based on economic standing and mobility (Thurlow & Jaworski 2012). Tourists who are able to travel due to their nationality, presumed health, and economic standing can be ignorant of the privilege they exercise over people who cannot travel- especially those who live in the areas they are visiting. We too formed part of this privileged group, as American students with vaccine access and the funds to travel. While we studied the effects of tourist presence on the island in the midst of COVID-19, we were participants in the same tourist economy we were observing. Our ethnographic fieldwork became a reflective exercise where we were confronted with privileges we had taken for granted when arriving on the island.

Symbols allow people to codify and communicate meaning and values within a social group (Geertz 1973: 89). During the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks became a multilayered symbol of social status, fear, health, government control, and human rights (Tateo, 2020). Mask mandates and regulations are entangled with broader conversations of individual liberty and communal responsibility. By analyzing the symbolism behind discrepant mask use, we examine how tourists' wilful ignorance of local COVID-19 regulations and repercussions demonstrates a broader disregard for the socio-economic inequalities that underlie tourist-local interactions.

### ***Masks as a Symbol of Economic Status***

On Thursday evening, we are sitting at a palapa covered rooftop bar with live music. We watch as an unmasked tourist group strikes up a conversation with their server, asking if she is afraid to get COVID-19. The server responds that she is not, even as she re-adjusts her mask to cover her mouth and nose. One woman from the tourist group remarks that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu, and laments that they make servers wear masks. The group doesn't notice as the waitress returns to the back of the bar and whispers to three other masked workers who surreptitiously steal glances at the table.

The obliviousness of the tourist group to the discomfort of their server points to a common disconnect between tourists and the locals they engage with at their vacation destinations. Food, shelter, and job security are competing interests that may interfere with people's attentiveness to the spread of COVID-19. Concerns that may supersede pandemic fears are "intersecting precarities" that complicate people's compliance with public health protocols (Macgregor et al. 2022). Many of the locals on Isla Mujeres continue to work during the pandemic despite fear of sickness because they have no other choice. Meanwhile as the pandemic continues, tourists seek normalcy, including pre-pandemic travel practices. Because physical space is endowed with meaning through social interactions and is (re)constructed to conform to people's needs, vacation spaces are built to feel safe and inviting for consumers, according to the means of providers (Massey 2005: 9-15). Pandemic safety constraints, including mask regulations, disrupt the construction of vacation space as an escape. Where a worker may feel economically coerced into agreeing with a customer, the customer may see their agreement as proof that their vacation is safe from the reality of the pandemic.

Tourists' nonchalance and intermittent anger toward COVID-19 safety regulations have exacerbated existing tensions between tourists and tourism industry workers. When we asked whether any waitstaff had ever seemed uncomfortable or anxious about COVID-19, 231 out of 388 tourist respondents said no. One even wrote that no one seemed worried, "just resigned to enforcing mask rules." There is a dissonance between this response and the stated perspectives of local informants, who recounted incidents of degradation, anxiety, anger, and despondency. According to one participant, every time she saw a tourist without a mask or heard a tourist remark that they were glad to be in a place where they didn't have to wear a mask, all she could think about was a physical tally that her friend kept of every local that died as a result of COVID-19.

FIGURE 1 HERE

To observe the marked difference in mask diligence between locals and tourists, we need look no further than golf carts and motos. The mask mandate in place on Isla Mujeres requires that masks be worn when in golf carts and motos, even while the vehicles are in motion. When we observed 2433 people drive by six different locations across Isla Mujeres, 83% of the people on golf carts were unmasked, while only 30% of the people on motos were unmasked. The incongruity in masking cannot be reduced to tourists' ignorance of the law as roughly 75% of the 519 tourists surveyed were able to correctly identify that masks are required in any indoor or outdoor public space.

Because a significant portion of locals rely on tourism to generate income, many workers do not feel that they have the agency to define their own boundaries in following COVID-19 protocols. Frontline food service workers and shop vendors cannot economically afford to be afraid of Covid-19. One woman selling shells on the beach explained that, "We know that we need the people to keep coming...but with more people comes more danger." Similarly, one taco

vendor stated, "Of course we are scared but we have to eat." As these vendors indicate, the decision to work with tourists during the pandemic can feel like the only available option, even if it puts workers at risk.

The privilege that tourists experience because of their economic situation makes it difficult for many locals to criticize tourists who ignore laws and safety protocols. Part of this economic privilege includes disposable income to spend on new foods, experiences, and souvenirs. The same sales that are nonessential luxuries for tourists are the main source of income for the people working in the tourism industry, which creates an unequal power dynamic. One research participant clearly outlined the connection between mask mandates and sales to tourists, explaining the reasons why he might hesitate to ask a tourist to follow the mask laws. "When I was working I wasn't [vaccinated] and I have to tell people, 'Can you please put on the face mask?' But that is a risk because some people [say] 'Oh. Should I wear it? I will not enter and I will not buy.' So you want to sell. You always want to sell something. So it's tricky." This sentiment explains a critical point of miscommunication between tourists and tourism-industry workers on the island. Where a local worker may choose not to enforce the mask mandate for fear of economic repercussions, a tourist may interpret that lack of enforcement as a mutual contempt for the regulation. Potential loss of business makes it difficult for many locals to express any concerns about masks to tourists, even if they feel unsafe around unmasked people, allowing tourists to navigate the island unhindered by mask rules. Masks therefore take on a symbolic meaning as an indicator of economic status, delineating the people who can afford to 'take a break' from COVID-19 from those who continue to work through the pandemic.

### ***Masks as a Symbol of Individual Liberties***

A group of tourists approach the hostess stand at the entrance to a local bar. The man at the front of the group raises his eyebrows and glares at the server who asks for him to put on a mask and insists that he must have his temperature taken before he can go to the bar. First, the tourist rolls his eyes and tries to haggle with the server, asking whether the masks are really necessary. When he is told that masks are mandatory, the man replies that "I have been coming here every summer for years now, but I am not gonna do it. I am not gonna do it." He turns, prepared to stomp off and find somewhere else to drink, but the rest of his group convince him to stay. Turning back to the server, the man argues again, "Do you really have to wear a mask to the bar just to take it off?" Gesturing to the bar, he confronts the server, asking "who is wearing a mask there? Huh? Nobody." When the server holds his hands up in surrender and reminds the man that he is just doing his job, the response is "I know it's your job, but I don't have to like it." Eventually, the man is convinced by the rest of his party to buy a mask at the front table, telling the server to just put it on his tab. When he gets to the bar, the first thing the man does is hold up the mask, never worn, while turning to his neighbor and loudly proclaiming, "They made me buy a mask but I'm not gonna wear it, I'm not."

As this vignette indicates, the belief that wearing a mask is a matter of personal choice and liberty is popular among tourists on the island, echoing many of the debates that have

plagued American politics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masks have been constructed as burdens that fundamentally decrease personal freedom and quality of life (Lynteris 2021). On Isla Mujeres, tourist respondents explained why they shouldn't have to wear a mask and why the rules in Mexico didn't make sense. The influence of the western biomedical model of illness results in the tendency to think of individual suffering in mechanical terms (Kleinman 1988: 28). In the United States, the ideals of individualism lead many to think of suffering as the purview of a single individual, rather than a problem to be addressed by society. Individualistic and entrepreneurial thinking resulted in the U.S. framing COVID-19 strategic responses as a matter of personal responsibility, which caused devastating discoordination and destabilization (Mendenhall 2022: 241-246). If a person contracts COVID-19, the focus is often on what that individual did wrong, rather than what the surrounding community could do to protect the individual. During the pandemic, mask regulations have been dismissed by many as ineffective and inconvenient, which focuses the conversation on an individual's choice and comfort instead of social responsibility. Antonio, a server on the island, observed that tourists, particularly Americans, decide whether to wear a mask based on their personal beliefs and pride.

I always tell them like yes just to be respectful of the place you have to wear it. But people are on holidays, and people are stubborn. I don't want to say that Americans are stubborn, but I think that they are and they are very proud. And they think that they are smarter than Mexican people. So yes, they don't want to use [masks]. And they don't even if you tell them, they don't really. Maybe they will put it on for a little bit and remove it.

Many tourists are not aware that a lack of resources and adequate medical care on the island changes the issue of contracting COVID-19 from an inconvenience to a life-threatening risk. As John, a local restaurant manager who moved to Isla Mujeres four years ago, stated, "We don't care about your politics. They mean nothing to me. This is a health crisis here. We just don't have the capacity to handle a crisis like this and it can go sideways really fast." The dissociation between tourists' perceptions of tranquility and the raw emotions of locals have caused many on the island to feel that tourists care more about having a good time in Mexico than they care about the lives of locals.

### ***Masks as a Symbol of Respect***

As a tourist joins his group of friends at their overpopulated table, they welcome him and ask him what took him so long to arrive. The man complains that he had to dodge the police to get here because there was a roadblock with police checking for masks. He was stopped by an officer asking whether he had a mask. When he said no, the officer told him to buy a mask from the pharmacy. He responded, "I don't need one of those things; I have the vaccine," but the officer required a mask regardless. Instead of complying, the man found a way around the roadblock, which surely required driving the wrong way on some one way roads, since there is only one road leading from the northern part of the island to the cafe's southern location. The

man concludes his story by reminding his friends that "we all know the masks don't do anything. They just don't have the science behind them."

For the people who lived through the island lockdown, the return of tourists, and the ensuing loss of community members to COVID-19, masks can serve as a physical symbol of community and respect. When tourists ignore that symbol, it deepens the rift between tourists and locals. The emotional toll of working in the tourism industry threads every conversation we have with Maria, a local business owner. In our first meeting, Maria shared, "COVID has shown me how shitty, selfish, and entitled people can be. Dealing with tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the worst experiences of my life." For Maria, the stress and anxiety surrounding COVID-19 has been compounded specifically by tourists' behavior. While tourists see their vacation as a ticket to escape restrictions, locals are disheartened, frustrated, and angry with the presumptuous behavior of tourists.

A general disregard for mask mandates on the island has been exacerbated by disparity in vaccination access between places such as the U.S. and Mexico. When asked whether masks should be required, multiple survey respondents claimed that anyone who is vaccinated should be exempt from wearing a mask. Once vaccinated, it appears that many vacationers believe that the laws in Mexico should not apply to them. The entitlement displayed by many tourists is not lost on locals. Maria explained that more health conscious tourists at the beginning of the pandemic would pester locals by asking "where is your mask?" and telling locals "you have to wear a mask for us." Once vaccinated, those same tourists complained about wearing masks when returning to the island. "Now, if you ask them to wear their mask, they say 'we're vaccinated, we don't need to wear masks.'" Maria has one thought central in her mind when hearing these complaints. "Well, WHAT ABOUT US?!" For many locals, tourists' disregard for COVID-19 mandates has moved beyond general rudeness to blatant disregard for the wellbeing of the locals on the island.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Rather than outright condemning tourists, several locals discussed factors that keep tourists from fully understanding the situation on the island. One major barrier was "the fallacy of travel," which John described as the mindset that people have when they go to a new place and assume that the rules, social expectations, and manners will be similar to the place where they usually live. Tourists typically travel to take a break from their normal lives, meaning that they may be more lax about the social rules they would follow in their day-to-day routines (Simpson 2017: 22-23). Simultaneously, John is describing a secondary mindset, where local regulations feel less apparent because they are different from a tourist's normal life. Together, these two mindsets cause tourists to think of themselves as temporary sovereigns, keeping tourists from realizing that circumstances and opportunities might be different on Isla Mujeres. Tourists don't recognize the privilege they exercise while locals feel disempowered by that same privilege. Tourists choose to travel around Isla without a mask because they have grown

accustomed to the lax mask regulations in the United States. In the summer of 2021, vaccine access was still restricted to more at-risk populations in Mexico, meaning many locals were unable to get a vaccine. The maskless tourist assumes that what is expected and safe at home is what is expected and safe on the island, but these assumptions and resulting actions harm the very people who are welcoming tourists onto their island.

## **Conclusion**

While it can be tempting to view the COVID-19 pandemic as an unfortunate but inevitable spread of disease, such a construction is not entirely accurate. COVID-19 may be spread unintentionally but the resulting suffering can be mitigated. Our actions impact the ways that illness and disease are experienced (Farmer 2003: 29-43). Because tourism cultivates unequal power dynamics, we must critically examine its impact on communities. In our research, we considered this privilege through the symbolism of mask usage.

Three prevalent symbolic meanings of masks affect interactions between tourists and locals on the island of Isla Mujeres. As symbols of economic privilege, masks highlight how tourists, who can afford to travel, have economic leverage over many locals, who may have to sacrifice personal boundaries regarding the pandemic in order to attract and sustain business. Masks also represent perceived individual liberties, particularly for tourists who are looking to escape the physical and emotional repercussions of the pandemic. Lastly, masks serve as a tangible expression of respect and communal solidarity for those trying to protect themselves and others from increased exposure to COVID-19.

COVID-19 has left the world more fragile, but structural inequalities have left some people increasingly more vulnerable than others. The use of masks on the island of Isla Mujeres highlights this vulnerability and its social repercussions. While it is not feasible to address socio-economic hierarchies and problematic perspectives on the pandemic overnight, there is still hope for improvement. As one respondent shared, “After taking this survey I feel really stupid for not researching more about the rules in Mexico with masks...At home, we don’t have to wear a mask outside anymore...I didn’t think about it being different in Isla.” This comment resonates with us, as students who had vaccine access, finances, and the opportunity to travel during a world-wide pandemic. Putting on a mask, whether on a plane, in a restaurant, or on a golf cart, can be the first step toward acknowledging that we are not isolated autonomous individuals but people with the opportunity to respect and protect one another as we navigate a worldwide pandemic and its aftermath.

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FIGURE 1 Caption: Sign positioned in front of golf cart tallying local COVID-19 deaths and reminding tourists to wear their mask. The cart owner eventually took down the sign because the daily reminder of his friends’ deaths was impacting his mental health. June 2021

FIGURE 2 Caption: Sign Maria placed at the front of her restaurant. She eventually removed the sign because visitors were harassing servers about the message. July 2021