

Performing Identity and Concealment: Kim Mo-Mi's Shifting Selves and the Illusion of Freedom in *Mask Girl*

Saranietha Kadang¹, Liliek Soelistyo²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: a11210046@john.petra.ac.id¹, lsyuwono@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study explores the shifting identities of Kim Mo-Mi in the South Korean psychological thriller *Mask Girl*, focusing on how the protagonist uses literal and symbolic masks to navigate societal beauty standards and reclaim agency. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Anthony Giddens' agency theory, this research analyzes the meanings behind the masks Mo-Mi wears across three life stages—online performer, surgically altered persona, and prisoner—and investigates the reasons she chooses to keep them. Using close textual and visual analysis, the study finds that Mo-Mi's masks serve distinct functions: performance, transformation, and survival. The findings reveal that while each mask appears to offer her empowerment or escape, they ultimately reflect the constraints imposed by societal structures and her struggle to assert her identity. The study concludes that the mask, rather than merely concealing appearance, becomes both a tool of agency and a symbol of entrapment within social expectations. In the end, the story shows that real freedom comes not from wearing a mask, but from having the courage to live as her true self without hiding.

Keywords: agency, beauty standards, performing identity, shifting identity

INTRODUCTION

South Korean popular culture has long captured global audiences. This spread of Korean culture is known as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu," a term first used by Chinese news outlets in 1998 to describe the growing interest among Chinese youth in Korean cultural items (Kim, 2019). It has since expanded to include a wide range of media and lifestyle products such as K-pop music, films, fashion, food, and cosmetics. In Indonesia, the Korean Wave began to emerge in the early 2000s and has since become a prominent part of everyday life (Jeong et al., 2017). Korean restaurants, fashion trends, and language learning have grown significantly in popularity. Institutions such as Petra Christian University have responded to this rising interest by opening centers like the King Sejong Institute to support the study of Korean language and culture (*ANTARA News Agency*, 2015).

Among the many products of the Korean Wave, Korean dramas (K-dramas) have become a dominant cultural force globally. Their emotionally rich and genre-blending storytelling appeals to a wide range of audiences. The global success of series like *Squid Game* highlights the increasing appeal of Korean dramas (Burt, 2023), which often incorporate a mix of romance, thriller, psychological, and social commentary elements. The psychological crime thriller genre in particular has gained significant attention for its complex characters, suspenseful plots, and exploration of identity, trauma, and moral ambiguity. These features have contributed to its rise as one of the world's most consumed genres in books, films, and television (Nangia, 2019).

The psychological thriller genre explores the complexities of human behavior and often reflects darker societal realities. Korean psychological thrillers, in particular, are known for their intricate plots, unexpected twists, and thought-provoking themes (Purna, 2023). Korean thrillers

like *Parasite*, *Stranger*, *Save Me*, and *Mask Girl* have gained global acclaim for their gripping narratives and critical social commentary. *Mask Girl* (2021), directed by Kim Yong-hoon, stands out as a series that blends crime, psychological thriller, and social critique. Known for his dark, character-driven narratives, Kim Yong-hoon continues to solidify his place in the genre through this series. *Mask Girl* has received numerous awards and international recognition, thanks to its compelling storyline and the performances of its lead actors.

The story of *Mask Girl* centers on Kim Mo-Mi, a woman whose insecurities about her physical appearance drive her to adopt a masked online identity. The series critiques Korean beauty standards, known as *lookism*, which prioritize physical attractiveness and often lead to discrimination against those who do not meet rigid societal ideals (Hu, 2023). This beauty-centric culture, supported by the booming cosmetic surgery industry in Korea, has created immense pressure, especially on women. Through Mo-Mi's journey, the series explores how identity can be shaped by external expectations and internalized shame. The authors are particularly interested in analyzing the use of the mask not only as a tool of concealment, but as a symbolic representation of layered identities and the psychological struggles that unfold behind it.

The Meaning of the Masks

Throughout her life, Kim Mo-Mi adopts various masks, both literal and symbolic, that reflect her evolving identity across different stages. These masks are not merely tools for hiding her face, but complex mechanisms that allow her to transform, perform, and survive in a society that constantly imposes harsh expectations. Goffman's dramaturgical theory (2021) is particularly useful in understanding how these masks function as front-stage performances, where Mo-Mi continuously shifts her behavior and appearance to align with what society demands or rewards. Her transformation unfolds in three distinct phases, each marked by a different kind of mask that reveals how she negotiates her identity under pressure.

In the first phase, the mask serves as a performative tool for creating an idealized online persona: Mask Girl. This identity allows Mo-Mi to escape her dull, invisible office life and embody a hyper-feminine fantasy constructed for digital viewers.

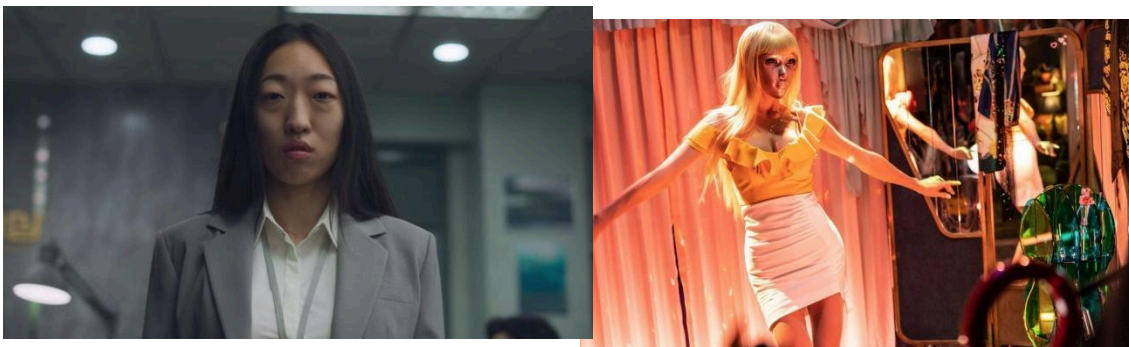


Figure 1. The Look Comparison of Mo-Mi's Real Self and Mask Girl

Drawing on Goffman's front-stage behavior, every element of her live streaming setup is intentionally curated—her lighting, costumes, seductive poses, and vibrant aesthetics work together to form a persona that captivates her audience. She speaks in a controlled, flirtatious tone, performs provocative acts, and hides her real name and personal life, reinforcing the fantasy of the unattainable and mysterious woman. Mo-Mi's mask here is a carefully constructed identity shaped by the need to feel seen, admired, and validated in a performance economy. It is

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not simply a physical disguise, but a calculated act of self-presentation and labor in a networked space.

As Mo-Mi's need for transformation intensifies, her mask evolves into a more permanent form in the second phase of her life. She undergoes plastic surgery and adopts a new identity: Areum.



Figure 2. "Areum's First Appearance" Mask Girl, Episode 4, 28:40

This transition marks a shift from a temporary online persona to an irreversible, physically embodied identity. Unlike Mask Girl, which she could shed at will, Areum represents a full reinvention—a commitment to an idealized version of herself aligned with South Korean beauty standards. Her new name, borrowed from a beautiful coworker who once received praise and attention Mo-Mi never had, symbolizes her desire to step into a life she believed was previously out of reach.

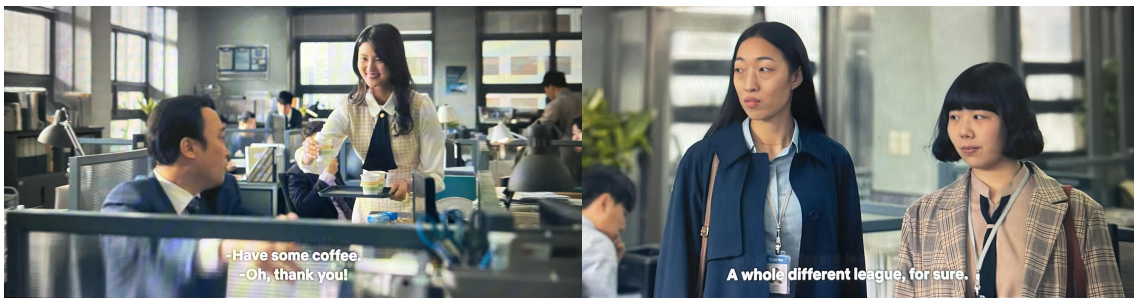


Figure 3. "Mo-Mi is compared to her coworker, Areum" Mask Girl, Episode 1, 08:41

The mask becomes a tool of assimilation and aspiration, reflecting Giddens' duality of structure: while Mo-Mi exercises agency by choosing to change, her choices are shaped by powerful societal structures that dictate the standards of worth and desirability. In adopting the name and face of Areum, Mo-Mi not only transforms her appearance but also assumes a socially accepted identity built on borrowed value and external validation.

The final stage of Mo-Mi's transformation occurs in prison, where the mask becomes a tool for survival rather than fantasy or aspiration. Now designated as Prisoner Number 1047, she sheds both her previous identities and adopts a hardened psychological mask to navigate the

brutal reality of incarceration. Unlike her earlier masks, this one is not a product of choice but of necessity. In the rigid power dynamics of prison, Mo-Mi learns to perform toughness through emotionless expressions, confrontational behavior, and a refusal to display weakness. This survival mask functions as a front-stage performance aimed at asserting dominance and protecting herself from being targeted. The shift is visually emphasized through the show's stark, desaturated cinematography, which contrasts sharply with the vibrant lighting of her past lives. Her cold smirk after a prison fight marks the solidification of this mask—what was once a performance has now become her second nature.



Figure 4. "Mo-Mi After a Fight" *Mask Girl*, Episode 6, 14:25

In sum, Mo-Mi's journey is marked by three distinct masks—each revealing how identity is performed, shaped, and constrained by different societal expectations. Whether performing as Mask Girl in a digital fantasy, becoming Areum through surgical transformation, or surviving as Prisoner 1047 through hardened behavior, Mo-Mi's masks reflect a complex negotiation between personal agency and external pressures. Her story illustrates that masks are not only tools of concealment but also of transformation, resistance, and endurance in a world that demands women to be someone else in order to be seen, accepted, or safe.

The Reasons Why She Keeps the Masks

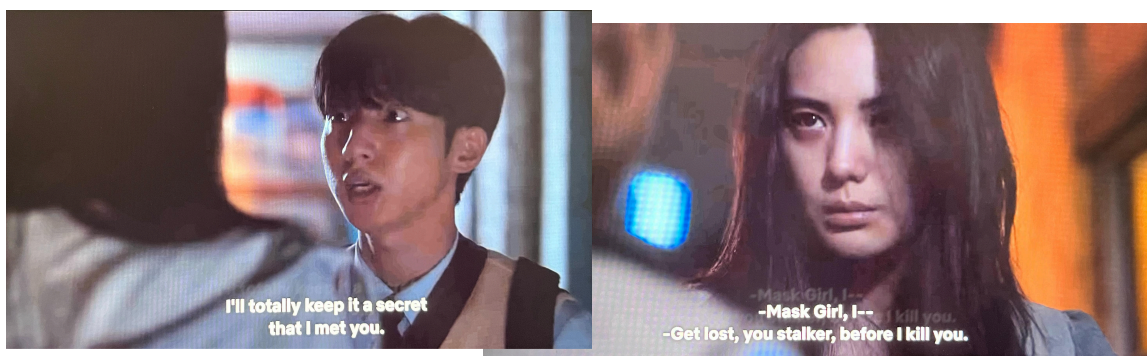
Mo-Mi's decision to continue wearing each of her masks is not just about hiding, but about survival, control, and reclaiming agency in a world that repeatedly limits her. Each mask responds to a specific need shaped by personal trauma and societal pressure. Using Giddens' agency theory (1986) and the three structural dimensions, signification, legitimation, and domination, this section explores how Mo-Mi navigates and negotiates her identity within these constraints. The masks she keeps reflect a strategic response to the systems that define, confine, and often erase her. They offer different forms of escape, empowerment, and protection, allowing her to maneuver within rigid structures while attempting to take control over her life and how she is perceived.

Mo-Mi's first mask, Mask Girl, is driven by her need for empowerment in a society that constantly devalues her due to her appearance. As someone deemed unattractive in a beauty-obsessed culture, Mo-Mi faces exclusion and ridicule despite her talents. She is mocked for her stage performance not because she lacks skill, but because her face fails to meet the beauty standard. This rejection, reinforced even by her own mother, pushes her to seek

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validation through concealment. According to Giddens' signification structure, Mo-Mi's appearance becomes a symbol of inferiority—her body carries cultural meanings that determine her social value. The mask allows her to bypass these judgments and redefine how she is seen. As Mask Girl, she receives admiration, not for her face, but for the performance, mystery, and confidence she curates. The mask becomes a tool of impression management, echoing Goffman's dramaturgical theory, where she controls lighting, angles, and narrative to shape how she is perceived. Here, the domination structure is visible as she uses digital resources to gain power and influence. Although her control is conditional and limited, it is still meaningful. The legitimation structure also plays a role; society's rules about beauty and value become internalized, shaping Mo-Mi's belief that she must become someone else to be respected. Mask Girl is not a rejection of these norms. It is a strategic obedience disguised as rebellion. Even when mocked online, Mo-Mi does not retreat. She defends her mask, showing that it functions not just as a shield, but as a form of expression and resistance. Her insistence on keeping it, even when the admiration she receives is filtered through objectifying standards, reveals how deeply she longs for empowerment in a world that has always overlooked her. It is not full freedom, but it is the only space where she can assert herself.

Her second mask, Areum, represents her desperate need to escape the painful past that her Mask Girl identity has left behind. After becoming involved in scandal, violence, and irreversible mistakes, including the murder of her obsessive stalker and the abandonment of her unwanted baby, Mo-Mi attempts to erase all traces of Kim Mo-Mi through plastic surgery and a new name. This transformation is not only about avoiding consequences, but also about reclaiming agency and starting over. In line with Giddens' agency theory, Mo-Mi reshapes her reality through structural adaptation. However, Areum becomes her most deceptive mask. Even with a new face, she cannot escape recognition or the emotional weight of her past. When a former fan recognizes her, despite the change in appearance, Mo-Mi is overwhelmed by panic, showing how deeply she clings to her disguise. Her physical reaction, vomiting in distress,



shows that her new mask is fragile and constantly under threat.

Figure 5. "An Old Fan Recognizes Mo-Mi" *Mask Girl*, Episode 4, 38:30

Her transformation also reflects domination: she internalizes beauty standards and uses them to regain control over how others treat her. She believes that through conventional beauty, she can finally achieve the life she always wanted. But while the mask allows her to avoid judgment and appear desirable, it also traps her in another performance. Areum may seem like freedom, but it is built on fear, shame, and the illusion that erasing Kim Mo-Mi is the only way to survive. Even though she continues to wear this mask, it is a constant reminder that she is still negotiating her identity within the same structures that once oppressed her. Her dependence on this illusion only deepens, showing that she believes survival requires complete reinvention—even if it comes at the cost of her emotional truth.

In her final stage, as Prisoner 1047, Mo-Mi's mask is no longer about empowerment or reinvention—it is about truly breaking free. After her identity is exposed and she is imprisoned, she is stripped of fame, autonomy, and recognition. The mask she now wears is built for survival in a violent, hierarchical environment. At first, she adapts out of necessity, but when her daughter's safety is threatened, her motivation shifts. Her purpose becomes clear: she must escape no matter what.

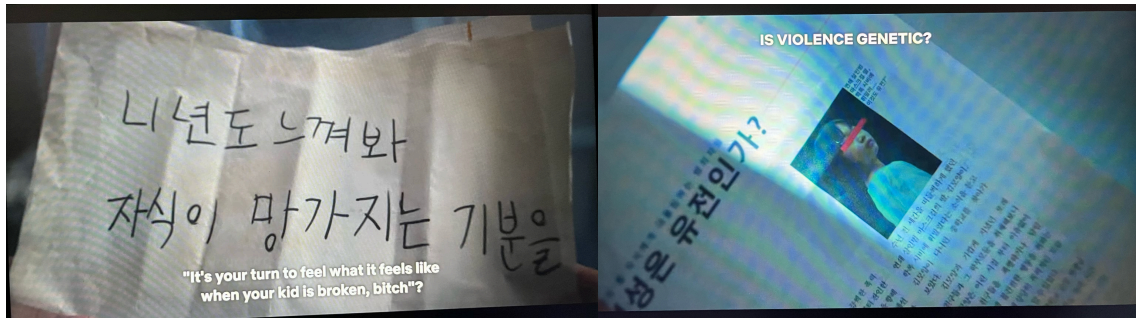


Figure 6. “Mo-Mi Learns that Her Daughter is in Danger” *Mask Girl*, Episode 6, 24:06

This moment marks a turning point where her agency transforms from passive endurance to active resistance. Her initial attempt at physical escape fails, but in solitary confinement, she realizes she must navigate power through influence, not force. She reinvents herself again—this time as a devout, repentant prisoner, embodying the language of faith and salvation. Religion becomes her new stage, and repentance becomes her new performance. This aligns with all three dimensions of structure: she reframes her identity through religious signifiers (signification), aligns with moral norms of redemption (legitimation), and builds influence within prison dynamics (domination). Her most strategic act—donating a kidney to the prison boss's child—is not a selfless sacrifice, but a calculated move to reduce her sentence. Yet when the promise of release is broken, she seizes her opportunity and escapes during a hospital visit—not as a persona, but as a mother.

This final act of escape is Mo-Mi's most powerful declaration of agency. No longer performing for admiration or survival, she acts solely out of love. She is no longer *Mask Girl*, *Areum*, or 1047. She is Kim Mo-Mi, a mother risking everything for her daughter. This moment strips away all performance and reveals her raw self, unfiltered by societal expectations. Her escape is not just physical; it is emotional and existential. She rejects all the roles that once confined her, choosing authenticity over survival strategies. Her journey ends not in reinvention. This final moment lays the foundation for a deeper reflection on identity, liberation, and what it truly means to take off the mask.

CONCLUSION

Mask Girl is not just a story about one woman's struggles. It is a critique of how societal pressures, especially those rooted in beauty standards, shape identity and define self-worth. In Kim Mo-Mi's life, the masks she wears are not just tools of concealment but of survival. Each mask carries a specific purpose: she becomes *Mask Girl* to gain a sense of empowerment in a society that devalues her because of her appearance; she transforms into *Areum* to escape the traumatic consequences of her past and to reconstruct her life through a more desirable identity; and she becomes *Prisoner 1047* to break free from institutional control and protect the one thing that still connects her to humanity—her daughter. These shifting

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identities show how Mo-Mi continuously negotiates her agency through strategic reinventions, each motivated by the need to survive in a world that offers her very limited choices. Her decision to keep the masks is not out of delusion, but a deeply conscious act of reclaiming control, even if only temporarily, in a society that continuously tries to strip it away.

While each mask offers Mo-Mi a form of agency, they are all shaped by societal structures that continue to constrain her. Through Giddens' structuration theory, we see how her identity is shaped by the tension between signification, legitimation, and domination. Goffman's impression management further reveals how Mo-Mi performs versions of herself not for freedom, but to survive, to be seen, or to escape. Yet none of these roles fully liberate her—they only create new conditions she must endure.

It is only in her final act—escaping prison to save her daughter—that she stops performing. For the first time, she acts not out of fear, shame, or need for validation, but from unconditional love. This decision becomes her most authentic act of agency. No longer hiding behind a mask, she reclaims herself not as a constructed identity, but as a woman choosing to live on her own terms.

This study finds that Mo-Mi's identity is not fixed but performed under social pressure. Her journey shows that transformation does not always lead to liberation. In fact, it often deepens the illusion. Real freedom, as *Mask Girl* ultimately argues, is not found through masks, but through the courage to remove them and live truthfully in a world that constantly demands otherwise.

For future research, Mo-Mi's journey could be compared with other female characters in Korean media who also navigate identity through transformation. Using feminist or psychoanalytic lenses may reveal how trauma and internalized oppression shape these shifts. Studying male characters through similar frameworks could also highlight gendered differences in societal pressure. This study aims to contribute to cultural and media discourse on how women navigate selfhood in a world that demands constant reinvention, reminding us that real freedom is not found in wearing a mask, but in the courage to live without one.

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