

Top Trending

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Behind every mask there is a face and behind that, a story. (Photograph by Ali Rizvi)

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This New Year brought with it the pandemic of the social-media age, COVID-19. The pandemic that has totally upended lives has led to an increase in the changes around the globe.¹ This most stressful time ever have changed in a number of aspects, the trends in health care, sociology, psychology, economics and many other domains of our lives. Who could have thought, when they counted down to zero and screamed out 'Happy New Year' on the midnight of December 31, 2019, that the year 2020 would be what it has become. Who could have known that face masks would become the most significant part of daily routine in the recent year? If Coronavirus pandemic and the surreal 'new normal' that it has foisted upon the world prove anything, it is that life is really uncertain. One could have never predicted that this year one would be skipping out on Eid dresses, deflect a splurge-out on new spring and summer outfits, turn a blind eye towards the latest wedding gowns and instead, spend a fair enough amount of time contemplating over the face mask that you will be wearing. The mask needs to be breathable, comfortable and most essentially, protect one from potential infectious agent when one inevitably venture out into the world after the ease and uplifting of lockdown around the world.

Medical experts and World Health Organization have repeatedly stressed on how important face masks are for controlling the spread of COVID-19,² and certain parts of our own country, finally awakening to the real danger posed by the pandemic now that numbers are increasing, have at last started masking up. The use of masks is a part of the prevention package that can limit the spread of the present, in particular, and many other respiratory infectious diseases.³ Face masks have their own limitations.⁴ They can be uncomfortable, until on gets used to them. Not to talk about the medical personnel working on front line of health care who have to protect themselves unavoidably

during their duties, the face masks for the use of general public come in basic and bland colors, mostly covering the face untidily. The joy that comes with dressing up to go out or even to purchase groceries, fizzles out when ones face is half-hidden by an unkempt, boring mask. Fashion and dress designers know this now. That's why so many of them, over the world have zoned in on this latest accessory, borne out of necessity and an important part of our sartorial lives for the next few months or year/s at least. Necessity is the mother of invention. Some of the clothing used in our daily lives, which we consider fashion, was made years ago for occupational use. Denim was produced as a durable daily wear for the miners and industrial occupational workers. Women started wearing pants when they joined the work force during the World War I, and the Americans were indulged in casual sportswear in the 1970s. The face masks are used in the current pandemic to decrease the viral spread, but they're quickly becoming an everyday trending accessory to be used.

Scattered all around major global fashion websites are a diverse range of masks: sets designed with matching tee-shirts, easy breathing cotton masks, and wedding creations, with embroidery and beads. Are brands cashing in on a major medical crisis with their face mask collections? Yes. But is it unethical to give people the chance to enjoy dressing up during these trying times? No. and aesthetically pleasing face coverings do not trivialize the risk posed by COVID-19. For some people, it may even be a morale booster, allowing them to enjoy a simple walk down the road a little bit more.

Shortly, after the lockdown was implemented, face masks began to surface on the local high street. Some started retailing cloth masks. A virtual fashion week on YouTube featured quite a few masks. Designer showcased their collections. Some created lightweight options in cotton, others brought out more elaborate designs, and still others plunged full-throttle into the embellished terrain of the bridal masks, matching the design with heavy duty wedding-wears. As we begin stepping out, we will want to look good while also 'aiding' ourselves with the right protection. Customers have been

making enquiries for masks for a while now but, apart from creating attractive designs, make sure that they are more than just swathes of fabric. Masks need to fulfill certain scientific requirements in order to protect wearers while also being comfortable. Creating a range that vary from luxury embroidered versions to more basic designs and sports masks. There are filters added in and the fabric is breathable and washable. It needs to do more than just look good in order to really serve its purpose.

Face coverings have become essential in the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ The fashion industry is now making them trendier. As the face masks are medically important for unpredictable future,⁶ many people are searching ways to make them part of their daily dressing. Everyone is into the race including the designers. It is an important fashion statement now and many high-profile people are also using masks that are matching their daily dressings. The social and print media highlighted the news of a man from Pune, who ordered a customized mask for himself made out of gold, worth three lakhs. Fashion journalists have captured number of matching face masks in photos this period. Zuzana Caputova, President of Slovakia, received applause on social media on wearing a matching maroon mask with her dress. The trend is rising and many designers in fashion industry are now creating their own matching mask collections. Some people like a matching look and having a trendy mask that matches their outfits, makes the face mask more easy to put on and that is something important in a serious current situation. When one comes out in a stylish colorful mask, it doesn't seem as it's a burden or we are against a war with Coronavirus. It becomes more accommodating with essentiality. People will need more than one face masks as the lockdown begins to ease. Having a matching mask is a fun move, but matching through designs, stories will start to appear as well. Planning a mask to wear will become a part of considering an outfit. Many famous global fashion brands announced earlier that they would be assigning parts of their businesses to making face masks and medical gowns, a number of comments and memes started floating on the media. Different patterns like

gingham, Black Watch tartan, rep tie, Glen plaid, and little sailboats appeared on the face masks. Since human beings on this planet will be using face masks against the viral spread more or less everywhere over the next couple of years, they're going to become the trendy new fashion accessory.

Now that some countries have made it mandatory to wear face masks in public areas where social distancing is not possible, the mask industry is going to expand. Medical experts are emphasizing that face masks may need to be used for at least year or so, until a vaccine against COVID-19 is developed and is available for masses.⁷ On the other hand trend seekers are forecasting that, as a result, masks may become a use of our daily life, worn by all with the same passivity as a rain coat and black glasses when we leave our house. And since COVID-19 is not going away any time soon, we just have to go along with it, adjusting our lives to live with it in a safer manner.⁸ One way to do this is by wearing a pretty, protective face mask. But does that mean that masks too should become a personal fashion statement, like any other accessory? Or are the face masks, a sign of something else, rather like solidarity, and the social contracts? As they become part of the daily dressing code, the same tensions begins to apply.

The COVID-19 is a crisis that is not sparing any economic division. Every individual is equally affected.⁹ The white and blue or green medical masks that are presently the most seen individual protective tool are democratizing forces, rendering all the users same under isolation, depicting our communal experience and our collective fear for the disease.¹⁰ Even the homemade face masks that have emerged rapidly, while somewhat idiosyncratic, are collectively equal in their craftiness.¹¹ When the face masks migrates into the realm of fashion they become something else. As with all other accessories, like jewelry, scarves, footwear and bags, they become emblem of not only the health or a social concern, but of an individual identity. However, with the lower part of the face hiding under the mask, and sometimes, eyes shaded by black glasses, the usual sign posts of a character are not visible.¹² The face mask becomes the identity of a person in a first look and that means it will become a point of aspiration, achievement and inequality also.¹³

This kind of evolution is natural and inevitable. It is the type of human nature and fashion is developed to serve people. And since it is not easy to avoid the nagging sense that the fashion designers are exploiting the fear developed in the individuals during a crisis for their own ends and that the customers are making use of what is a health necessity in a decorative way. Opportunities in context to capitalism usually appear from times of crisis and this may be one of them. One can't engage in an argument with the essential need for masks or that many of the industries producing them are doing so because there is a merely other option. No individual is buying the clothes or various accessories they make, and to make something for the sale is to produce an earning for suppliers and employees.¹⁴ In that sense, every face mask also represents hard work and finance at same time when both are in less supply. A sale can help in running a small factory and the labor working in it. Perhaps it is the right time to let the users know exactly how much transparency of sale price is important. There has been a long discussion about how the present COVID-19 crisis situation could change behavior of the population and the fashion industry. In the middle of this pandemic situation, wearing face mask with a top designer logo may rub some individuals in the wrong sense. The same goes for an expensive branded bag or shoes. But with the recommendations from Center for Disease Control that all the population to wear face masks in public places to help prevent the spread of Coronavirus; they've inevitably become a form of an aesthetic self-expression.

From the perspective of public health, it doesn't even matter how your face mask appears, from where you bought it, or how you made it; putting a functionally protective mask is what matters in the first place. Some say that face is the important mode of self-expression. Face is used for communication on every level, where real life or on internet. Face is what people use to recognize each other, and what computerized equipments use to identify us all, but now it has to be covered. Some attempts may be tactless, but for a lot of individuals, using a trendy appealing face mask can be a little protective way to make a terrifying period a bit less terrifying and feeling like an

individual person, and not merely a vector for spreading the disease.¹⁵

In some countries of the world, especially East Asian countries like China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, wearing a face mask is seen as both a civic responsibility and a routine part of their lives. People in these countries wear them not only for medical purpose, but to protect themselves from air pollution also, which is a consequence of rapid industrialization and transportation.¹⁶In the end, face masks are highly encouraged for all whether medical necessity or a fashion statement. It is highly important to adopt the continuous use of masks in potentially high viral transmission areas including the hospitals, clinics and health care services. Staff working in administration, offices do not need to use a medical mask during routine activities, however maintain an appropriate social distancing. Masks, of any type, should never be shared, particularly amongst the health workers, should be properly disposed of whenever removed and disposable one should not be reused after wastage.¹⁸

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The short commentary is not highlighting the use and disuse of medical and non-medical face masks.

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CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

None to declare.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None to disclose.

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Author's Contribution

MI: Drafting the manuscript and final approval of the version to be published.

SAHR: Intellectual input.

TA: Conception of study.