

TRENDS OF POST-COVID FASHION MASKS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

After Covid-19, the function and formation of face masks in Pakistan shifted from being a protective item to a statement of personal style. This change is visible in the emergence of masks with diverse designs, embroidery, printed text, vivid patterns, motifs, colourful fabrics, and surface adornments. A qualitative research method is employed to analyse these masks in terms of their aesthetic features and design orientations. This study observes the design and embellishment trends of post-Covid fashion masks produced in Pakistan, with a particular focus on their transformation into fashionable and popular objects. It also identifies fashion masks as part of material culture where ordinary objects become symbols of style and identity. The theoretical framework of this study is based on Richard Hamilton's key criteria of Pop Art, with emphasis on three points: popularity, youth appeal and affordability. The findings reveal that post-Covid Pakistani face masks embody Hamilton's framework by achieving popularity among the masses, strong appeal among youth, and affordability that makes them available from street stalls to designer boutiques. Overall, the study contributes to the fields of art, design and fashion by positioning post-Covid face masks as both fashion trends and cultural objects.

Keywords: *Design, Pop art, Richard Hamilton, Face mask design, Embroidery, Pakistan, Material culture, Embellishment*

Introduction

The Covid-19 brought an unprecedented shift in face masks, converting them from mere protective devices into symbols of necessity and fashion. Historically, masks have served various utilitarian and social roles. The term "mask" in English derives from the Mediaeval Latin word "*masca*," meaning "*spectre* or nightmare." Afterward, influenced by Italy, France, and Arabic, the term advanced to signify facial coverings in mid-16th century in England (Ike et al 2021). However, during Covid -19 the pandemic highlighted the mask's dual role as an implement for survival and a canvas for creative expression. In Pakistan, this transformation took on unique dimensions, culminating in an intersection of utility and aesthetic appeal. This study thus aims to explore masks not only as health protective items but also as creative and cultural symbols within Pakistani fashion trends.

Present research examines the rise of fashion-oriented face masks in Pakistan via the framework of Richard Hamilton's interpretation of Pop Art. Shanes outlined Richard Hamilton's famous eleven characteristics that define Pop Art: popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business (Hamilton, as cited in Shanes, 2009). Out of these eleven, the present study concentrates on three points which include: popularity, youth appeal, and low cost to examine how fashion masks in Pakistan can be recognized as manifestation of Pop art in Pakistan. In post-Covid Pakistan, the fashion industry, from high-end brands to small-scale designers, began to integrate masks into their collections and making them an indispensable part of everyday style. This trend is popular with younger people, as shown in the use of modern patterns, embroidered accents, and printed slogans that fit with their

quest for self-expression and flair. The mask's change exemplifies Pop Art's tenet of accessibility and pertinence to the routine experiences of the general public.

In Pakistan, fashion-oriented masks have become a way for people to express themselves and show off their style. They include traditional patterns, symbolic writing, and design aspects that are specific to the area. These characteristics serve as markers of customers' creative sensitivities and their increasing preference for designer masks within current fashion trends. Since the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, it has been common for ladies to match their masks with their costumes and gowns (APP, 2021). Women are more and more likely to wear trendy, color-coordinated masks as part of their outfits instead of plain surgical masks, which they see as unattractive or unfashionable. However, the scholarly documentation of this shift in Pakistan is still few. Fashion masks serve as cultural artifacts, according to a few research, but there is a gap in linking this transformation to more expressive theoretical frameworks. This study provides a fresh perspective on the traditional and artistic significance of fashion masks in post-Covid Pakistan by aligning with Richard Hamilton's concept of pop art.

By applying a qualitative research methodology, this study examines the application of embroidery, text, designs, and prints on fashion masks. It observes the popular and youth-oriented fashion trends on face masks which are also available in affordable range for majority of people. The significance of this study lies in its ability to bridge art, fashion and culture in the context of Pakistan. It contributes to art and design, material culture studies and fashion by documenting how a temporary medical necessity turns into a symbol of style and fashion trend. The study contributes to scholarly debates on material culture, Pop art and the history of design by revealing how a temporary health accessory evolved into a permanent symbol of personal style, artistic expression and fashion in post-Covid Pakistan. However, this study is limited to urban contexts in Pakistan where fashion and media trends are more accessible. It does not examine medical efficacy or rural practices in depth, nor does it provide a quantitative market analysis. The focus of this study is design and embellishment while aligning it to Richard Hamilton's pop art criteria.

Research Objectives

1. To study how face masks in Pakistan change from protective use to fashion after Covid-19.
2. To examine the design and embellishment of masks as fashion trend in post-Covid Pakistan.
3. To evaluate Pakistani Fashion masks using Hamilton's Pop Art features of popularity, youth appeal and affordability.

Research Questions

1. How did masks in Pakistan shift from protection to fashion after Covid-19?
2. How designs and embellishment of face masks represent fashion trends in post-Covid Pakistan?
3. How do Pakistani fashion masks fit into Hamilton's Pop Art criteria of popularity, youth appeal and affordability?

Review of Related Literature

Masks have had many uses throughout history, and they have changed throughout time and between cultures. In ancient cultures like Greece and Rome, masks were utilized in plays, ceremonies, and rituals to show identity, authority, and change. In the Middle Ages, masks became linked to medicine, especially during pandemics like the bubonic plague, when "plague doctors" were said to wear beak-shaped masks packed with medicinal chemicals (Matuschek et al., 2020).

Historians argue about how well these early medical masks worked and how widely they were used, but they are an essential step toward linking masks with protection and disease prevention. As time went on, masks changed from spiritual and ritualistic objects to useful medical tools, especially as surgical hygiene and public health procedures improved. Ike et al. (2021) say that this change set the stage for following cultural and aesthetic changes. This historical progression illustrates that masks have never been immutable entities; instead, they have perpetually evolved in response to societal demands, cultural significances, and technical advancements. This kind of flexibility made it possible for masks to be reinvented as cultural and fashion items during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Material culture theory offers an essential framework for comprehending fashion masks beyond their utilitarian use. Woodward (2013) says that material culture looks at how people design, utilize, and interact with items. It also stresses that artifacts have an active role in shaping social life. Things are not dead; they hold values, feelings, and identities that are formed through daily activities. McDonell (2023) contends that cultural items possess both tangible form and symbolic significance, arising from collective experiences and social engagement. In this context, face masks can be seen as cultural artifacts that influence identity, social behavior, and artistic expression. During the Covid-19 pandemic, masks became very prominent objects that people wore in public places. They became strong symbols of dread, care, resistance, inventiveness, and self-expression. So, fashion masks are at a special place where material, visual, and social aspects all come together.

Historically, pandemics have had an effect on fashion and material culture. Budiak and Lahoda (2020) show how health crises have changed the way people dress. They give examples such the "pouffe à l'inoculation" hat that came out after the smallpox vaccination in France in the 1700s and the "tuberculosis chic" style that was popular in Europe in the 1800s. The Spanish flu of 1918 helped create a unique "mask culture" in Japan, where wearing masks became a normal part of social life. In the same way, the Covid-19 outbreak caused a major change in fashion systems over the world. Sibel et al. (2021) note that fashion businesses used internet platforms, stories about sustainability, and flexible design tactics to stay relevant. In this setting, face masks changed from being required protection gear to being fashion accessories that show resistance, individuality, and cultural expression. Tomovska (2020) points out that cloth masks quickly started to include seasonal colors, company logos, patterns, and other decorative aspects. This shows that they were more than just medical equipment; they were also fashion pieces that people could express themselves via.

The rise of fashion masks is strongly tied to how people build their identities and popular culture. Schönweitz et al. (2022) show that people wear masks not only because they are worried about their health, but also because of their social identity, cultural standards, and how they want to appear themselves. Martinelli & al. (2021) assert that in the initial phases of Covid-19, masks evolved into culturally significant artifacts infused with social meanings.

Digital platforms have helped make masks a normal part of everyday life in popular culture. Vyomakesisri et al. (2020) characterize popular culture as a collective assemblage of concepts, visuals, and behaviors influenced by mass media, young participation, and quotidian consumption.

In this setting, fashion masks turned into ways to communicate visually, letting people show off their sense of humor, activism, patriotism, or personal style. Punk-inspired masks show how fashion design may combine revolt, artistic expression, and usefulness (Chen Mat et al., 2022).

Design and decoration are key to turning masks into fashion items. Textile design has always included both structural and ornamental elements. Structural design uses patterns to make fabric, while decorative design uses techniques like embroidery, printing, and appliqué to make surfaces look better (Yan & Hussain, 2024). Embroidery, in particular, is a really rich way to show culture. Ramratan et al. (2023) record regional embroidery traditions, such as Kashmiri kashida and Punjabi phulkari, characterized by floral motifs, vivid colors, and symbolic patterns. These traditions had an impact on modern mask designs, notably in South Asia, where ornate styles were altered to fit on smaller, wearable surfaces. Nasr et al. (2016) stress that embroidery techniques change both the look and feel of fabrics, which shows how important it is to choose the right stitches and surface treatment for fashion items. In the context of masks, ornamentation makes them look better and at the same time strengthens cultural identity. Choi's (2013) research shows that masks represent identity, anonymity, and prestige, which backs up their use as expressive fashion accessories.

Pop Art provides a critical framework for analyzing fashion masks as cultural artifacts. Pop Art started in the middle of the 20th century and questioned the usual lines between high art and everyday things. Richard Hamilton said that Pop Art is popular, aimed toward young people, mass-produced, low-cost, and flashy. Angelidou's (2020) dissertation shows how the vibrant colors, graphic images, and references to mass culture in Pop Art have had a big impact on fashion and product design. Liu (2020) contends that the rebellious essence of Pop Art is strongly aligned with fashion innovation, rendering it particularly pertinent to apparel and accessories. According to Hamilton's standards, post-Covid fashion masks can be seen as Pop Art artifacts since they are widely used, look great, are cheap, and are part of youth and popular culture. Masks are both stylish and culturally significant since they include printed slogans, brilliant colors, playful designs, and are widely available at street markets and from designer labels.

In Pakistan, face masks quickly went from being a medical need to a fashion accessory. Media reports show that ladies matched their masks to their attire during holidays like Eid, and tailors made masks out of spare fabrics to match garments (The News, 2020). Local vendors are now selling stitched, hand-painted, and decorated masks, according to reports from Daily Times (2020) and Express Tribune (2020). Major Pakistani fashion businesses released reusable masks with traditional designs, truck art images, printed slogans, and bright color schemes, calling them cheap accessories (Arab News, 2020). These examples show how masks became a part of Pakistan's fashion system, which is based on local tastes, craft traditions, and how people shop. During the pandemic, masks became visible signs of who people are, how creative they are, and how their culture has stayed the same.

Although there is more research on Covid-19 fashion masks around the world, there is still not much academic research on Pakistani post-Covid fashion masks as created, decorated, and culturally important objects. Current research predominantly emphasizes medicinal utility, international fashion trends, or the performance of technical textiles. While media coverage and blogs capture popular styles, there is a dearth of critical scholarly critique rooted in art theory, Pop

Art, and material culture. This study fills this vacuum by looking into post-Covid fashion masks in Pakistan as popular, youth-oriented, and affordable design and decoration items that fit Richard Hamilton's Pop Art standards. By framing masks as material culture artifacts, this research enhances the disciplines of art, design, and fashion studies, providing a culturally informed perspective on the transformation of commonplace protection items into markers of identity and style in post-Covid Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Richard Hamilton's criteria for Pop Art, as outlined by Shanes (2009). Richard Hamilton delineated eleven essential features that enable the interpretation of everyday things as Pop Art, underscoring their connection to popular culture, mass production, and aesthetic appeal. This research utilizes three primary criteria—popularity, young appeal, and affordability—to analyze the evolution of post-Covid fashion masks in Pakistan. These factors are particularly pertinent as post-Covid masks have become widely utilized items, closely linked to youth-oriented fashion trends, and available across various socio-economic strata, from street markets to high-end fashion retailers. Utilizing Hamilton's Pop Art paradigm, this study conceptualizes post-Covid fashion masks not solely as functional medical devices but as cultural artifacts integrated into quotidian existence. In this context, masks are analyzed from the perspective of material culture, wherein commonplace items gain symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural significance through social utilization, visual design, and consumption practices. This paradigm facilitates a critical comprehension of the multifaceted roles of post-Covid fashion masks in Pakistan as safety equipment, fashion accessories, and manifestations of identity influenced by popular culture and modern design methodologies.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with interpretive and descriptive orientation. The research finds out how face mask in Pakistan featuring embroidery, motifs, inscriptions and other ornamentation, have transitioned from medical objects into fashion artefacts. The research design focuses on understanding that masks embedded with fashion have connection with Richard Hamilton's Pop Art's features.

Data Collection Method

Primary data is collected through visual analysis of masks and field observation from fashion outlets, local markets and stalls of masks. Masks are documented through photographic records, highlighting embroidery, patterns, motifs, printed texts, design ornamentation and embellishments. Secondary data is drawn from academic literature, news articles, fashion blogs, and brand reports to situate Pakistan fashion masks within global and regional fashion discourse.

Sampling Technique

The study uses purposive sampling to select masks that represent the variety of design available in Pakistan in post-Covid period. These include masks with embroidery, printed motifs, truck art motifs and colours, printed and embroidered text on masks.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis is based on a close examination of masks collected from different sources, including local markets, brand shops, and stalls. Each mask was photographed and arranged according to its features such as embroidery, motifs application, printed text, and type of fabric used. Collection of masks both from brand shops and local stalls showed its affordability to everyone. Particular attention was given how masks reflect traditional crafts, ideas and changing

fashion trends. To interpret the finding, Richard Hamilton's pop art framework was applied, especially his emphasis on popularity, youth appeal, and low cost. The masks were found as traditional artefacts and cultural material that change an object into a piece of art and design with its fashion features.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of fashion-oriented masks in Pakistan is guided by Richard Hamilton's framework of Pop Art, particularly his emphasis on accessibility, relevance to everyday life, and appeal to younger audience. Hamilton argued that popularity of objects is not restricted to a specific group of people but it is for mass society, reflecting the taste, consumer behaviour and trend of everyone (Shanes, 2000). Fashion masks in Pakistan often feature surface embellishment, colourful patterned fabric that reflect local tradition and aesthetic preferences with incorporation of floral motifs, hand and machine embroidery, printed fabrics and use of pearls as embellishments in masks

Popularity of Fashion Masks

Pakistani fashion manufacturers started selling face masks as trendy fashion pieces instead of only protective gear during the Covid-19 pandemic. Brands made masks with embroidered, traditional patterns, fabric prints, and surface embellishments, all of which were inspired by local textile and craft traditions. These masks were made in colors and fabrics that matched everyday and celebratory clothes, making them look good and culturally relevant. Because of this, face masks were popular as attractive, cheap, and youth-oriented accessories. This shows how they became a part of popular culture and modern fashion trends in Pakistan (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

A display of fashion masks at Generation, a Pakistani fashion brand, exhibited at *Masjid Wazir Khān, Lahore*, reflecting the transformation of protective masks into fashion accessories



Note: Photography by Author

Figure 2

Some trendy fashion masks from Pakistani Brands Chinyre, Generation and Almirah



Note : Photo by author

The popularity of fashion masks is evident in their widespread availability across local stalls, street vendors and branded shops. During the height of Covid-19, masks became everyday items and their designs quickly adapted to local cultural taste. The presence of masks with vivid design, patterns and colours show that these items were produced for mass consumption, accessible to every buyer. The appearance of face masks even in local markets and stalls shows its mass production and popularity with a variety of design in face masks. The masks displaying the fashion orientation with application of colourful fabrics, geometric designs, floral patterns, motifs, surface-based embellishment (see Figures 3-7).

Figure 3

A Local Stall of face masks at Walton Road, Lahore, Pakistan, showing Multiple design together



Note: Photograph by author

Figure 4

A local stall of fashion at Jain Mandir Road, Lahore, Pakistan



Note: Photograph by author

However, the popularity of fashion mask is not only limited to large stalls at local markets but small shops also start selling masks. This kind of selling fashion masks again aligns face masks to Hamilton's criteria of popularity and even low cost.

Figure 5

A local shop at Wahdat Road showing masks with various design and colourful fabric,



Note. Photo by author

Figure 7

A Local shop in Ichhra Bazār Lahore, Pakistan, showing fashion mask as accessory with other routine accessories



Note: Photograph by author

However, the widespread circulation of post-Covid fashion masks across markets, brands, and social spaces in Pakistan highlights their status also as material culture objects embedded in everyday life. Their repeated visibility and shared use transformed masks from temporary protective items into popular cultural artefacts shaped by collective social practices.

Youth Appeal in Fashion Mask

The appeal of fashion masks among young people in Pakistan can be observed through their design features, which commonly include embroidered motifs, printed fabrics, vibrant colour palettes, witty slogans, and customized text. Young people used these masks as part of their regular and special occasion costumes, using them to show off their style and personality. Embroidered flower patterns, pretty colors, personalized printed captions, and masks that matched clothing were all big things that made things more appealing to young people. Media reports showed that women were wearing masks with their clothes more and more, especially during holidays. This made local tailors make masks out of matching fabrics to fulfill the demand (The News, 2020). The popularity of embroidered theme masks among young customers further illustrates the function of ornamentation as a cultural and aesthetic enhancer, solidifying masks as stylish, expressive accessories rather than merely protective goods (Oladipo, 2020) (see Figures 8–15).

Figure 8

Showing youngsters wearing fashion masks representing style of local market



Note: Photo by author

Figure 9
Showing the trend towards matching masks in youth



Note: photo by author

Figure 10
A display of matching mask with outfit in a shop at *Fortress Square Mall, Lahore, Pakistan*



Note: Photo by author

Figure 11

Showing youth inclination towards bold motifs and appealing colours in choice of fashion mask



Note: Photo by author

Figure 12

Showing youth inclination towards bold motifs and appealing colours in choice of fashion mask



Note: Photo by author

The showcasing of self-identity on surface of mask with printed text and design is another prominent trend noticed in youth. Youngsters preferred to customize printed slogans which were witty or humorous (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Showing witty text in form of printed text on face masks



Note: Photo by author

Figure 14

Showing mask as an expression of identity popular in youth during post covid time



Note: Photo by author

Fashion masks served as identity-signifying material goods for youthful consumers, enabling individuals to convey style, mood, and cultural connection through design, color, and adornment. This interaction shows how material culture gets significance from how young people use it, show it off, and use it in their daily lives.

Low Cost and Affordability of Fashion Masks

Affordability is another factor that explains why fashion masks spread so quickly in Pakistan. Many of the mask's variety was available at street stalls for minimal prices making them accessible to wide range of consumers. Mask with price tag at a local stall which cost only 80 Pakistani Rupees only were displayed This point supports Hamilton's criteria of low cost and affordability about objects which make them accessible for people. Even though branded fashion outlets also sold designer masks, the stall versions were far more common and popular because they combined decorative appeal with low cost. This accessibility made it possible for individuals

to own multiple masks. The affordability of these masks directly connects to Hamilton’s point that popular items should be in people’s purchasing range

Figure 15

The price tag on mask packing showing low Cost of fashion masks.



Note: Photo by author

The low-cost of fashion masks made them easy to get for people of all income levels, which reinforced their function as everyday items instead of just fashion items. Street vendors, tailors, and branded stores all sell them, which shows how easy it is to get them and how they are important to society and culture.

Discussion

The study has explored the transformation of face masks in Pakistan from essential protective gear into fashion artefact. Drawing on Richard Hamilton's Pop Art criteria, the masks were analysed in terms of their popularity, youth appeal and affordability. The findings indicate that masks featuring embroidery, customized printed text, patterned fabric, embroidered motifs, and colourful surface embellishment moved beyond their original medical function to fashion trend and creative appeal. Their widespread use demonstrates their popularity, their frequent adoption by youngsters highlights their youth appeal. The low cost at stalls and even at brand shops further supports their integration into everyday fashion practices. From a material culture perspective, these masks embody how ordinary objects acquire cultural value through design, use and symbolism. In Pakistan, face masks become a means of self-expression, reflecting personal taste, social belongings. Their role as cultural and fashion artefacts suggest that fashion is not limited to luxury brands or urban elites but is embedded in daily life, local craft, and local level commerce. This perspective aligns with scholarly literature that argues material culture objects shape and reflect social identities and values (Woodward, 2007).

Conclusion

This study illustrates that post-Covid fashion masks in Pakistan reflect Richard Hamilton's Pop Art ideas while serving as material culture artifacts integrated into daily life. Masks transitioned from mere protective items to expressive fashion accessories that embody identity and contemporary trends, owing to their popularity, youth-centric design, and affordability. The results show how everyday things become culturally and aesthetically important through design, circulation, and social use in post-Covid fashion.

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