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[GLAMORISING THE WORLD OF PANDEMIC: UNETHICAL PRACTICES OF VLOGGERS AND FASHION INDUSTRY DURING COVID-19]

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ABSTRACT

In December 2019, a new life-threatening virus variant was identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan. It was the largest pandemic in modern history and severely affected the world by shifting the thinking paradigm. The study's aim is threefold: first, to highlight ethical issues in fashion industries related to face-covering masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, point out the role of Vloggers who uploaded the unproductive offending content, which caused a waste of resources in terms of time and material. Third, to overcome this wastage of resources, some solutions are suggested to make the work of influential groups (Vloggers and fashion icons) more productive towards society. Poor government regulations and undocumented statistics of weaker economies make these economies more vulnerable during pandemics. There is a need to regularise economies to cope with such challenges in the future, as during the pandemic, there were issues with the demand and supply mechanisms for face masks. The research refers to data collected from online reports, magazines, and news sites by focusing on real-time examples of the fashion industry.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Facemask, Unethical behaviour, COVID-19, Fashion Industry, Vloggers*

Introduction

In the second half of December 2019, a new type of virus, 2019-nCoV, was identified. Pneumonia with unknown symptoms was diagnosed in a cluster of patients admitted to one of the hospitals in Wuhan, China. Later in February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) named this novel virus "COVID-19", which stands for coronavirus disease 2019 (Meng et al., 2020). After the initial outbreak in China, this infectious disease quickly crossed international borders. WHO officially declared it a pandemic in the second week of March 2020, and by the end of April 2020, the infection was confirmed in more than 200 countries (Watanabe, 2020).

In modern history, COVID-19 is considered the largest pandemic (Basnarkov, 2020) which turned the lifestyle paradigm and affected almost every aspect of life drastically, and that cannot be ignored (Mohan, 2020). When WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, a sudden shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) was observed globally. In the time of universal health emergency, many groups played a positive part (Segarra, 2020). However, some unethical practices were also observed (Rosenbaum, 2020). People faced equipment shortages and a lack of safety kits and PPE to save themselves from the viral infection. The demand for face masks increased after advice issued by WHO in 2019 about necessary preventive measures to be adopted by public health professionals, healthcare managers and infection prevention and control staff (IPC). A shortage of face masks was observed in many countries (Shemer, 2020). The WHO declared face masks an essential protective measure to restrict the spread of the virus, particularly when someone has flu, cough, or other respiratory infections. They also stated that these masks were effective only when used with other preventive measures like frequent hand washing with alcohol-based liquids and soaps, etc (World Health Organization, 2020a). Although there had been no trials of cloth masks in public (Greenhalgh et al., 2020), the face mask was not to be used for more than the

recommended period and had to be disposed of with great care.

Different kinds of masks were available in the market as shown in [Figure 1](#); however, cloth masks were not recommended in emergencies. The surgical grade N95 was considered the most effective mask. Medical or surgical masks are flat or pleated and affixed to the head with straps. However, priorities were developed by countries to provide these masks first to healthcare workers, i.e. front-line soldiers or those who are at high risk of catching the virus (Devlin, 2020).

For this study, we collected data from online reports, magazines, webpages, and news sites focusing on real-time examples from the fashion industry by pointing out that some vloggers, online vendors and fashion industry icons glamorised the pandemic by converting necessities into luxuries. They also wrongly managed the resources to which they have access. Resource accessibility, money and time management during the lockdown period were big challenges for industries and other institutions. In this period of resource stringencies, time was real money. As the lockdown had already challenged the labour-intensive economies, production units (large/small scale) were required to use their resources carefully to cope the situation emerged from COVID-19 i.e. unavailability of face-covering masks, shortage of these masks in different countries (Wu et al., 2020); (Greenhalgh et al., 2020); (Thompson, 2020); (López, 2020); (Zhou, 2020); (Hussain, 2020) and high demand but no money to purchase masks etc. (Ahmed, 2020). Many garment factories were shutting down or limiting their operations due to shortages and unavailability of raw materials, transportation, and cargo facilities (locally and internationally).

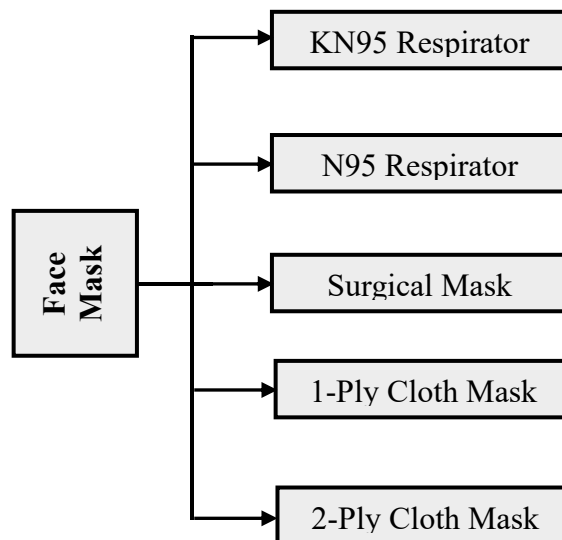


Figure 1: Types of Face Masks

Background

The fashion industry is often criticised for its immoral acts (Stinson, 2016); (Shaw, Deirdre & Tomolillo, 2004). During COVID-19, people also observed a few unethical examples, as shown in [Figure 2](#). On one hand, people were facing a shortage of these masks to get basic preventive facilities, and, on the other hand, companies were making branded masks with colourful designs to encourage youngsters to buy these materials at high costs. This was surely a waste of resources, i.e., a simple undyed mask could be used, and

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thus large production could have been possible in a limited time by following standard designs. The guidelines provided by the CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) mentioned that face-covering masks made up of common material at low cost serve the purpose (Adams, 2020).

Vlogging And Digitized World

Vlog is a term used for "Video logged." The year 2000 brought a significant change in blog history. Adam Kontras, a showbiz star, was the first to run the longest Video blog in history. In the same year, Adrian Miles coined the term "Vog" for his video in which he used changing texts on the still image (Vlog, n.d.). The term was then modified to Vlog in 2002 when Luuk Bouwman, a musician and filmmaker, created a site where he shared videos of his post-college travel. Jawed Karim, co-founder of YouTube, was the first to upload the vlog clip "Me at the Zoo" on his YouTube channel "Jawed". (Video Blog, n.d.). The popularity of vlogging reached the level that in 2010 an annual convention was held in California. There, a formal platform was provided to internet creators, viewers, and representatives. Since then, it has become the largest in-person gathering of the digital world community.

Role of Vloggers during Pandemic

Many vloggers and fashion icons have done positive work during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a few brands offered a donation strategy called "Buy one, Give one", and the *University of Fashion* offered free masks to nursing homes, etc. (Sardone, 2020). UK-based stylists Anna Rosa Vitiello and Bettina Looney raised money for NGOs like *Doctors Without Borders* and *Help Them Help US* (ELLE, 2020). A few of them took advantage of the situation. They uploaded unethical content and sold costly products to make money, which they could not have earned without the outbreak (Thompson, 2020). This reaffirms that capitalistic opportunities usually emerge because of trauma and ethical dilemmas that make their story of origin painful (Friedman, 2020).

Violation of YouTube and Google (Own) Policies

YouTube has been criticised by lawmakers and viewers after misinformation spread through videos which went viral on this platform about COVID-19. YouTube's "Advertiser-friendly content Guidelines" discussed sensitive events and controversial issues and stated that such events/ issues are unsuitable for ads. Thus, YouTube had the policy of not monetising any outbreak on this forum. After March 11, 2020, the CEO of YouTube declared that they were lifting the ad ban on any video related to COVID-19 (Perez, 2020). However, YouTube's parent company, Google, said that videos should follow the community and other sets of guidelines (i.e., hateful content, violence, inappropriate language, etc.) to meet the requirements of this forum. CNBC, a business news channel, reported the cases wherein Google's policies were violated. This includes the ads about those products that claim to protect people against COVID-19 (Elias, Jennifer & Graham, 2020).

Google was showing ads for anti-COVID-19 products even though it was against its policy of banning such products. Moreover, Google was showing shopping bids. After getting a reaction from the public and stakeholders, Google removed those products. Many third parties used Google, Amazon and other such platforms, resulting in severe violations of their policies. Thus, it is the latest example of how the operators of massive-scale online platforms lack the tools or personnel to keep up the never-ending game of

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whack-a-mole against people who exploit them. On YouTube and other sites, bogus advertisements mislead many buyers and report their complaints on these forums (Matsakis, 2020); (Lee, 2020); (Graham, 2020). Discussing the negative impact of this pandemic on the fashion industry, *Francois Suchet*, a member of the *Ellen MacArthur Foundation Program "Make Fashion Circular"*, claimed that those brands who focused on waste management and sustainability initiatives as a core business strategy are secure in terms of sustainable transformation plan in contrast to those businesses that used it as a marketing tool (Islam, 2020).

Real-Time Examples: Views and Discussion

The developments in information technology and the increasing role of social media have made this world a global village. Sometimes, immoral, non-productive videos/ photos and unethical content are shared on social media in the flow of information. Various vloggers started uploading immoral and useless videos during the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the study points out a few real-life examples and discusses the purposeful use of medical masks.

1. In one of the YouTube videos, a teenager used facial makeup over her mask to give a no-face-covering look. This video was uploaded on March 18, 2020, by *Zainab Sardar*. This video had 17609 views whereas it was liked by ninety-eight people and disliked by 150. The viewers highly criticised the video. One of them advised her "*not to waste your make-up products and time on such things, just buy a mask of your own skin colour.*" A few of the viewers also made ironic comments. However, one of the viewers used an angry tone and asked her to check the ground realities of how seriously people are suffering because of the virus, while having no access to basic face-covering masks to protect themselves from life-threatening infectious diseases. He also pointed out that she had made a poor choice by uploading a video on this topic. This is a waste of media resources (Sardar, 2020).

2. An unusual act was done by *James Potok*, an Instagram star with a following of 38.5 thousand. On February 5, 2020, he was flying towards Jamaica from Toronto. He joked onboard that he had recently visited China, where COVID-19 originated. He was covering his face with the mask, and while standing in his seat, he lied loudly that he had just come from Wuhan province and was not feeling well. The flight had 243 passengers onboard. They all got scared after his announcement. The flight was then redirected to Toronto. He was arrested after he admitted that it was part of a prank to make his video viral. To defend his actions, he said, "*It would be something else if I said Hey guys, I have a bomb strapped to me, I have a weapon on me, people blew it out of proportion. To me, it was simply a joke*" (Baker, 2020); (Fruen, 2020).

3. An American Magazine, *Wired*, asked, "*Is it OK to Make Coronavirus Memes and Jokes?*" It claimed that the answer to this question was not as simple as humour. Unethical practices of cracking jokes were observed on the internet. Memes and jokes about the Coronavirus were spreading faster. These memes, on one hand, represent fatalism while, on the other hand, making fun of people coughing, and some are just puns: Corona the beer is having a rough go of it this year, as virus memes have caused its stock prices to plummet. Satirical singer *Al Yankovic* tweeted. "*Not gonna do My Corona*" (Ellis, 2020).

4. *Samir Khan*, an Indian TikTokker, while making a funny video, tossed his face mask

in the air by saying, “Forget masks and trust god.” Later on, he tested positive for COVID-19 (Funky Cult, 2020). Royal family member *Prince William* and controversial celebrity YouTuber *PewDiePie* also faced online criticism for their coronavirus-related ironic comments (ET Canada, 2020); (Lustig, 2020).

5. People seemed to continuously request *Poshmark* to add the masks as prohibited items and remove their listing, as these are not fashion items. One of the Facebook users said that thousands of Americans are dying due to this pandemic, and we are using preventive measures as a fashion item.

6. Different colours and different designs of masks were advertised on Facebook, YouTube, and online shopping sites. People highly criticised such things. The article “Coronavirus Couture: the Rise of \$60 Designer Facemask” published in the *Guardian*, also discussed the issue. According to the author, one of the negative aspects of the fashion industry is that it is making everything materialistic. She also mentioned *Gianluca Russo*, a New York-based freelancer for *Teen Vogue*, also raised the same issue while discussing the ethical boundaries of the fashion industry. *Gianluca* said that brands are taking

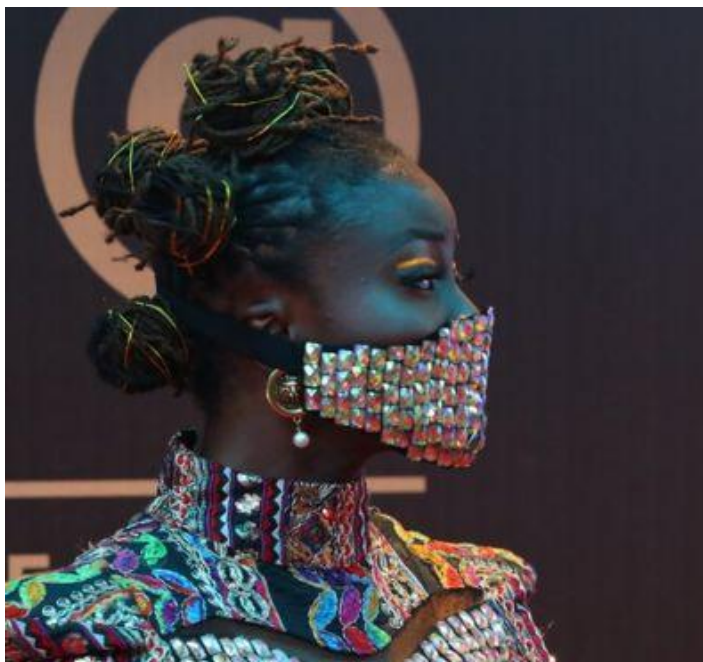


Figure 2: Nigerian celebrity wearing a blinged-up mask

advantage of this scary situation by charging higher prices and capitalizing their earnings (Sanoff, 2020). As it is done in Paris fashion week, where all celebrities and models were wearing so expensive luxurious masks, obviously not fulfilling the purpose for which masks were said to be worn (Weinberg, 2020). Similarly, Nigerian celebrities like *Olashola Kola Oburoh*, *Ada Afoluwake Ogunkeye* and *Iheme Faith Uloma* AKA also posed with glittering and flashy masks (BBC, 2020b).

7. A report published by the BBC on 20 April 2020, pointed out that one of the fashion retailers, ‘Boohoo’, targeting the age group between 16-30, was highly criticized for selling fashion face masks. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) said they were “scandalous,” and one NHS nurse said it was “disgusting.” One of the nurses who was working in Manchester Hospital recorded his concern to the BBC that it is unethical that fashion retailers like Boohoo tried to cash this situation while medical staff did not have enough PPE. After that, Boohoo apologized and removed the masks from sale. USDAW’s general secretary *Paddy Lillis* said: “Selling fashion clothing is not essential in a period of national emergency but selling items that look like essential equipment is downright scandalous” (BBC, 2020a).

8. *Venessa Friedman*, in her article published in *The New York Times* on 22 April 2020, pointed out that the public is not happy with the fashion industry making a necessary

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item (face masks) as a fashion item. She referred to the tweets after an announcement from Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, and Brooks Brothers to produce face masks. She rightly pointed out that these types of colourful masks are creating inequalities among societies (Friedman, 2020).

9. Designer Chrys Wong, who claimed to hold a sustainability-focused business philosophy, released a “collection” of luxury masks on her official website. The price range was between \$18 for simple, printed cotton styles to \$120 for luxury items decorated with French laces. Similarly, *Citizens of Humanity* (a California-based jeans brand) sold five packs of cotton masks for \$25 at the same time Kes (a New York-based ready-to-wear fashion brand) was offering masks made of silk (Berlinger, 2020). Eric Toner, who is a scientist at Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security, warned that wearing surgical and N95 masks without a doctor’s recommendations could create harm. Washing hands are more effective than merely wearing a mask (Secon, 2020).

10. Canela López published in *Business Insider* on 27 Feb 2020. She pointed out that fashion industry icons and movie stars promoted dangerous myths about face-covering masks. Though Authorities had already issued statements to reserve N95 and surgical masks for the front-line workforce, the celebrities and fashion influence groups posted their selfies in these masks, urging the public to wear these masks. Brody Jenner, Bella Hadid, Selena Gomez and many others have their selfies in fashion magazines wearing such types of masks (López, 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic and Prices of Face Masks

A tremendous increase in mask prices was observed in many countries, especially when WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. As an example, we compared the prices of masks in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, USA, Italy, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan in [table 1](#):

Table 1: Prices of Simple Face-Covering Masks: Before And After COVID-19 Declared as Pandemic

Countries	Price/mask (during the period Feb 15 to April 15, 2020)		Percentage increase	Population below the poverty line (under\$ 1.9) ^h	Regulatory prices (After April,2020)
	Before	After			
Pakistan ^a	15 Rs	100 Rs	567	29.90%	15 Rs
India ^b	10 Re	40 Re	300	21.90%	8 Re
Sri Lanka ^c	15 Rs	75 Rs	400	0.30%	15 Rs
USA ^d	1 \$	6 \$	500	11.80%	0.8 \$
Italy ^e	1 E	7 E	600	29.90%	.50 E
Bangladesh ^f	30 TK	100 TK	233	4%	15 TK
Afghanistan ^g	24 Afn	32 Afn	32	52.20%	-

Source: From news reports and magazine Articles published in

a: Pakistan Daily ‘The News’ published on Feb 27, 2020

b: Indian Newspaper “The Economic Times” published on March 19, 2020

c, f, g: Al Jazeera published on April 28, 2020

d: “The Star” published on April 02, 2020

e: "The Walt Street Journal" published on March 18, 2020

h: National estimates of the percentage of the population falling below the poverty line are based on surveys of sub-groups, with the results weighted by the number of people in each group. Definitions of poverty vary among nations. For example, rich nations employ more generous standards of poverty than poor nations.

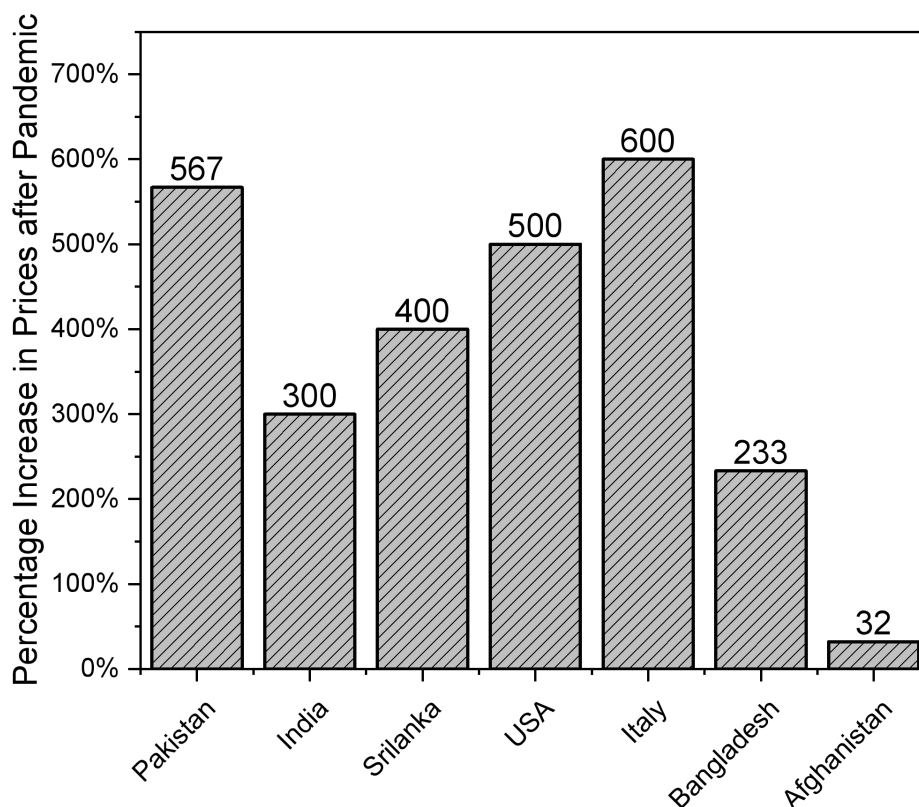


Figure 3: Percentage increase in prices after WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic

In some countries, the shortage of simple face masks created serious problems for doctors and paramedical staff. One of the examples of such a situation was observed in Pakistan in March 2020. A representative of the Pakistan Young Pharmacists Association (PYPA), Dr. Furqan Ibrahim accused the drug regulatory authority and the Prime Minister's Special Assistant on Health that on February 08, 2020, five companies were allowed illegally to export an unlimited number of PPE which resulted in a shortage of such supplies in the country. He further added that it was done after written directives were issued regarding the relaxation of rules, and it was done to provide monetary benefits to owners of these companies (Junaidi, 2020). Türkiye and Spain proposed solutions to such issues. According to *Daily Sabah*, a crackdown on overpriced masks was made by the trade ministry of Türkiye after they received complaints on the hotline that some online sellers raised mask prices to TL 450 (\$74) from TL 20 (\$3.29) in the early weeks of the outbreak (Daily Sabah, 2020). Spain made a strategy to keep an eye on the production and selling of masks. Salvador Illa, who was serving as a Minister of Health in Spain, announced price regulations for masks and sanitisers. He informed that despite the government not distributing masks, the maximum price on surgical masks was set at €0.96 (Hodgson, 2020). Once a week, regional authorities were required to report to the Health Ministry with an updated list of their existing supplies of face masks, PCR testing

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kits, eye gear, gloves, gowns, cotton swabs and hand sanitiser. (Sevillano, 2020).

Suggestions

We can conclude that most designers were selling masks with different specifications and quality of clothes and designs, thus associating fun with this serious, life-threatening virus. The essence of wearing masks was undermined by creating a brand distinction. This was a waste of money, time, and engaging production units. Vloggers and fashion models are an influential group in society so they should have helped those who lost their jobs due to the economic consequences of this pandemic by providing awareness and provided digital solutions to earn a livelihood. They should have gathered information like job vacancies posted online on different sites, new ideas to involve labour to produce items at home and discuss other life-saving motivational stories for those who do not know how to gather information on these topics and how to create opportunities. Along with digital media, governments must control media activities responsibly by taking serious actions and by providing guidelines to Vloggers, locally registered designers and national as well as private print, broadcast, and OOH (Out of Home) media. Another reason such acts should be discouraged is that they widen the gap between social income groups. Wearing a logo of fashion brands like *Channel*, *HM*, and *Akese Style Lines* etc. may create class discrimination among those who can and cannot afford such brands. Price regulation strategies worldwide can provide a solution to this issue. After setting up a one-price policy such distinction could be eliminated. In this way fashion lovers' appetites could be met, and they can wear whatever they like according to their taste in fashion.

The WHO issued guidelines titled "Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19" clearly stated that there is no current evidence to recommend for or against non-medical (cotton, fabric etc.) masks in this setting. However, WHO made efforts to understand the efficiency, effectiveness, and role of non-medical masks in collaboration with its R&D partners. WHO also strongly encouraged countries to conduct research with the purpose of providing scientific evidence to back their advice (World Health Organization, 2020b). WHO updates its guidance whenever new evidence becomes available. It is further added that for the use of non-medical masks the features like fit/fix of the mask, the breathability of the material, design of the mask, number of layers of cloth/tissue and water and airborne particles-resistant qualities should be strictly followed. The attitude of people towards the use of medical masks and the safety practices they follow are poor in countries like Pakistan (Kumar et al., 2020). Personal Hygiene and waste handling hygiene are the biggest challenges (Kumwenda, 2019). So, the research suggests that mask management guidelines provided by WHO should be strictly followed and some penalties or charges should be put on those who go against it. It is an unprecedented situation for developing countries, especially for undocumented economies. They are facing challenges obtaining resources and healthcare services needed to stay safe. As medical masks could be used only for a limited time and need frequent replacement, the poor populations cannot afford to buy basic low-cost face masks. So, the expensive mask that are made with expensive material and pearls/stones (as mentioned above in the study) should be discouraged.

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