

University Students' Perception of Masks as A New Trend After Covid-19 Pandemic: from Function to Fashion

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost all layers of human life. With masks being the central focus as the government implemented mandatory rules for wearing masks during the pandemic. In this study, researchers interviewed selected university students about their perception regarding masks in the post-pandemic era. The result of this study is that in the social aspect, the mask policy has affected the behavior and mindset of participants through trends and lifestyle. In addition, masks have also affected the economy through the increasing amount of demands and its popularity even after the pandemic.

Keywords: fashion, masks, post-pandemic, socio-economy

ABSTRAK

Pandemi COVID-19 telah berdampak pada hampir seluruh lapisan kehidupan manusia. Masker menjadi fokus utama seiring pemerintah menerapkan aturan wajib memakai masker selama pandemi. Dalam studi ini, peneliti mewawancarai mahasiswa terpilih mengenai persepsi mereka terkait masker di era pasca pandemi. Hasil penelitian menyebutkan bahwa pada aspek sosial, kebijakan masker telah mempengaruhi perilaku dan pola pikir peserta melalui tren dan gaya hidup. Selain itu, masker juga berdampak pada perekonomian melalui meningkatnya jumlah permintaan dan popularitasnya bahkan setelah pandemi.

Kata kunci: mode, masker, pasca pandemi, sosial-ekonomi

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost all layers of human life. One of the impacts is in the health sector. To counteract or prevent the rapid spread of the virus, the government, on the advice of medical personel, implemented mandatory rules for people wearing masks in their daily lives. After approximately 2 years of being obliged to wear masks, masks have become a necessity that cannot be separated from every individual. It is produced massively and even becomes the main commodity of the creative economy industry business. Quoted from (Kemenkop and UKM, 2020) in Indonesian journal with title "Adaptation and Planning for The Production of Personal Protective Equipment during the COVID-19 Pandemic using Learning Curve

Models", the massive production of masks is also caused by the government's encouragement of UKM's engaged in convection to increase the production of these masks (Ulfah, 2021: 414). Many entrepreneurs modify masks as attractive as possible so that people are interested in buying them. The massive production of masks makes masks can be categorized as popular culture products. It is related to the definition of critical theory that states that popular culture often refers to mass culture because it is mass-produced for commercial profit by centralized cultural industries (Takacs, 2014: 4).

Popular culture masks more than just meaning and utility. It is about pleasure and sensation, feelings and attachments (Takacs,

2014: 167). The term "affect" is used to describe these various "feelings" and their consequences on human behaviors. In terms of studying effect, cultural studies scholars gave a two-approach which can be used. The first approach is to study popular culture itself, while the second approach is to examine audiences and their activities in popular forms (Takacs, 2014: 175).

In this study, the researcher tends to study the 'effect' of masks in popular culture by examining the audience/consumers of masks or using reader-response theory. The reader-response theory is a theory that emerged as a critique of the previous theory, namely the new criticism theory. The new criticism theory brings the idea that in researching a literary work it is only necessary to focus on the text itself. That is, there is no contribution from something outside the text such as the author's biography, the author's life history, or the response from the audience. This was opposed by some critics who later created several new theories. One such theory is the audience response theory. The history of the emergence of this theory is narrated by Beach (1993):

The New Critical approach was eventually challenged. During the 1960s and 1970s, with the increasing interest in structuralist and transformational linguistics, the "new rhetoric" of Kenneth Burke's dramatism, speech-act theory, and popular cultural analysis of media, there was an increased interest in the role of the reader/viewer.

Reader response theory, which involves the reader in the process of forming meaning, has several advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that with this theory, it can engage the audience in the analysis of texts and develop their skills as "readers"-not only of the language of the literary text and the verbal and nonverbal signifiers of the film text, but of the ideas, points of view, realities and levels of meaning expressed through them (Beach, 1993). In addition to involving the audience which will have an impact on their skill development, this theory also allows the collection of data variables from several responses which can later be taken into consideration in forming meaning or drawing conclusions about a literary work. However, this theory also has shortcomings, such as, it gives too much responsibility to the readers, possible neglect of writers' roles, possible neglect of the text's role, and too much emphasis on examining the reader's response and overlooks the text itself.

There are some forms of reader response theory such as transactional reader response, social reader response, and psychological reader response. In this research, it will apply transactional reader response theory. The theory believed reading involves a transaction between the reader and a real text. The text acts as a blueprint or corrector of the reader's interpretation. Theorists of this theory also stated if different readers may have different acceptable interpretations but they should refer back to the text as have said before. The transaction between reader and text can be seen from two approaches. First, efferent mode and second aesthetic mode. In the efferent mode, we concentrate just on the information contained in the text, as if it were a repository of knowledge and concept, we might take with us. Contrarily, when we read in the aesthetic mode, we develop a personal connection with the text that directs our attention to the linguistic nuances of emotion and compels us to form opinions. Rosenblatt, one of the theorists, claimed readers' approach to the text must be aesthetic rather than efferent. Thus, the interview sections in this research use transactional reader response theory with the aim to dig selected university's student's responses which are related to their experience about masks.

Some researchers have studied the mask. One of them is Patricia Rodrigues. She studied the mask in her research title "Protection Mask with Religious Motifs: COVID-19 Produces New Religious Materiality". The research reveals how pandemic COVID-19 led to the development of new religious material forms, such as the use of technology for virtual ceremonies and the creation of protection masks with religious symbols. However, Patricia and some other researchers have not yet discussed the perception of university students of masks as popular culture in their life, therefore it is hoped that this study can be a reference for studies on popular culture.

METHOD

Question research of this study is "How Masks Affect Human's Lives, especially University Students" using a cultural consumers approach. In cultural consumers study, there are two methods for researching consumers. The two methods are interviews and focus groups. In carrying out this study, researchers used interviews where in one forum there was an interviewer and a participant who was invited to discuss. Participants were selected using the purposive

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sampling method where participants must meet at least one of several criteria set. These criteria include participants must be familiar with masks, participants have experienced symptoms of COVID-19, and participants are still in university (this is related to the mandatory policy of wearing masks in schools/universities).

In the implementation of the interview, the researcher sparked the discussion by asking several questions related to how masks affect participants' lives. These questions include

participants' habit of wearing masks before and after the pandemic, criteria for masks they chose before and after the pandemic, their opinion regarding the phenomenon of changing appearance before and after wearing a mask on TikTok, and discussion of the rapidly growing mask industry today. In addition to state, this study does not generalize the results of the study as the perception of all people that masks are a new trend after the pandemic because only a few people are used as respondents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

Interview Result

No	Questions	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C
1.	Are you familiar with using a mask before the pandemic?	It's a bit familiar to travel, besides that my father also works in a hospital so I'm used to wearing a mask.	Before the pandemic, I didn't use it. Mostly, I wear it when traveling far.	Not really, mostly I use it to avoid heat and dust before the pandemic. The motive to use it after the pandemic was because of the rules and sometimes if I didn't wear a mask, I was isolated (not allowed to enter certain places.)
2.	How do you feel when you wear a mask?	More confident, feel safer from viruses, paparazzi, and other people's crimes, and feel more beautiful.	It was stuffy at first, but I'm getting used to it now.	More confident.
3.	What are the criteria for the masks you used before and after the pandemic?	Before the pandemic chose masks that prevent dust and were not concerned with fashion because there were not many types of masks as they are now. After the pandemic, wear a mask that doesn't hurt the skin, isn't stuffy, is white (because it's neutral in color), and complies with health regulations.	Before the pandemic, they used plain cloth masks or just used them. After the pandemic, I prefer the white duckbill mask because it keeps up with the times and matches all clothes colors. Besides that, I also wear 3-ply masks. Indeed, other mask colors match the clothes, but I don't like them.	Before the pandemic did not pay attention to the health aspect, more to the cute ones and fabrics. After the pandemic, pay more attention to health standards but more and more here, no, following fashion. I like to wear colored masks (fabric), for medical masks I use cheap white/blue colors and adjust the color of my clothes LMAO.

4.	What do you think about the phenomenon of changing appearance before and after wearing masks on TikTok?	I think it's cooler after wearing a mask because his face is covered and his identity is not clear.	I think it relates to my experience. Before wearing a mask, if I appear in public, I am insecure, I have acne, moles, and other shortcomings. Once there is a mask to be more confident.	80% relates to life because if you wear a mask you only see your eyes, so you look more beautiful and closed.
5.	Now that there is a mask shop phenomenon, what do you think about this?	Good, with the mask shop the job opportunities are getting bigger.	This business is following the current situation but I think it will shrink because there are rules for removing masks.	For the industry, great. Because many mask shops make masks from leftover fabrics. In my opinion, mask shops can last a long time as long as they can follow trends, because many wear masks because of their appearance.

B. Discussion

In answering the research question “How Masks Affect Human's Lives, Especially Students”, the present study revealed some findings. The discussion of the findings is divided into several aspects, namely social and cultural aspects.

a. Social Aspect

Based on the results of the interview, in the social aspect, the mandatory wearing of masks during the pandemic by the government has affected the life pattern and mind patterns of participants.

- **Life Pattern**

Within the scope of life patterns, a very visible influence lies in the differences in participants' habits of wearing masks before and after the pandemic.

Participant C: Not really, mostly use it to avoid heat and dust before the pandemic. The motive to use it after the pandemic was because of the rules and sometimes if I didn't wear a mask, I was isolated (not allowed to enter certain places).

Participant C's answer above was a response to the question, "Are you familiar with/using a mask before the pandemic?" If identified, participant C's response above shows that she

is not a person who always wore a mask before the pandemic. Then, when there was a pandemic, she started wearing masks because there were rules from the government. Not far from the answer of participant C, participants A and B also experienced the same thing. They weren't used to wearing masks in their daily lives before the pandemic. Therefore, it can be concluded that all participants had the same changes in the habit of wearing masks before and after the pandemic.

- **Mind Pattern**

The mind pattern of participants formed after the mask trend was that masks can be a tool to increase self-confidence. In addition, masks today are no longer always worn only to prevent the virus, but also for a person's style. This can be seen in their response to the question "How do you feel when you wear a mask?"

Participant A: More confident, feel safer from viruses, paparazzi, and other people's crimes, and feel more beautiful.

Participant B: It was stuffy at first, but I'm getting used to it now.

Participant C: More confident.

Participants A and C shared the same perception of masks as confidence-boosting.

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They feel more confident when wearing masks. Meanwhile, participant B showed signs that he was used to wearing a mask now. In addition to perceptions of masks as confidence-boosting, participants also linked the phenomenon of masks on TikTok to their personal lives, the question the researcher asked was "What do you think about the phenomenon of changing appearance before and after wearing masks on TikTok?"

Participant A: I think it's cooler after wearing a mask because his face is covered and his identity is not clear.

Participant B: I think it relates to my experience. Before wearing a mask, if I appear in public, I am insecure, I have acne, moles, and other shortcomings. Once there is a mask to be more confident.

Participant C: 80% relates to life, because if you wear a mask you only see your eyes, so you look more beautiful and closed.

The relationship between the TikTok phenomenon and real-life carried out by participants shows that this mask trend has indeed influenced the mindset and lifestyle of participants.

b. Economic Aspect

In addition to the social aspect, the mandatory wearing of masks during the pandemic by the government has also actually affected the economic aspect.

- **Fashion industrialization of masks (Disney, Design brands)**

Coronavirus pandemic has changed many aspects such as the social, economic, political, and even affects the fashion industry. During the strict pandemic lockdown where everything was shut down to keep the virus from spreading, fashion brands had to come up with a strategy to maintain their business in the midst of a pandemic, in which they succeeded by donating masks, gowns, and sanitizers for free to medical organizations, coronavirus research laboratories, and more.

Fashion brands started participating in coronavirus social campaigns, producing fashionable masks with branded themes, all following the latest trends and even innovated self-cleaning masks, in collaboration with high-tech companies. These series of actions were possible because they understand that it is

pivotal to strengthen their image in sustainable business strategy.

The rise in mask demands and mask stores brought some participants' opinions on this.

Participant A: Good, with the mask shop the job opportunities are getting bigger.

Participant B: This business is following the current situation but I think it will shrink because there are rules for removing masks.

Participant C: For the industry, great. Because many mask shops make masks from leftover fabrics. In my opinion, mask shops can last a long time as long as they can follow trends, because many wear masks because of their appearance.

Between the B & C participants, there were differences in perceptions about the robustness of mask stores in the industry. Participant B argued that the phenomenon of mask shops will not last long because there are already government regulations that allow removing masks. However, participant C felt that this industry would last a long time because now people are wearing masks not only to prevent the virus but also to beautify their appearance. There is nothing to blame for these two opinions, but looking at the development of the times and the various models of masks that continue to be issued to this day, it is very likely that this industry will last a long time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, masks affect human/students/the participants' lives in two aspects: social and economic. In the social aspect, masks changed the life pattern and the mind pattern of participants. Life pattern here meant their habits of wearing masks before the pandemic and after the pandemic has been changed greatly. Participants who were not using masks before the pandemic became familiar and even comfortable when using a mask after the pandemic. Not only the life pattern, but the mind pattern of participants also changed with masks. They now think of masks as a new culture of confidence-boosting. Last, in the aspect of economics, most of them felt that masks as a new industry are a good thing.

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