



Social Life of Masks

Experience from Bangladesh

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Introduction

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic made masks an indispensable part of people's lives around the globe. Over time, compliance with mask-wearing has been influenced by a variety of socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, religion, location, education, work position, and monthly income (Abid et al., 2020). Along with mask use, inappropriate use of masks is another matter of concern since a great number of people keep masks on their chin or mouth, allowing the nose to be exposed for breathing (Rahman, 2020). The disposal of masks has become a great matter of concern as a potential source of COVID-19 for Bangladesh since masks are being discarded here and there inappropriately in the country (Rahman, 2020). The masks perform going beyond their original and medical roles in society and encompass various aspects of people's everyday lives, which demands understanding the performance of masks from a holistic standpoint. The study takes a biographical approach to masks inspired by the concept of "the social life of things" (Appadurai, 1986), which argues that objects have social lives like humans. A similar framework was used to understand the social life of medicine (Whyte et al., 2002). The current study views masks as a material thing with a life cycle that incorporates every facet of a human's life, including birth, social life, and death. The birth comprises its production mechanism, whereas the social life refers to the performance and interaction of the mask with society, and the death of a mask denotes its disposal or ineligibility for wear.

From a public health policy standpoint, the framework of masks' social life is critical in numerous ways to understanding people's behaviour concerning public health issues. It provides a nuanced understanding of the use of masks in the community from a multi-dimensional socio-cultural perspective, which looks at people's attitudes towards public health measures, current practices, and the barriers to following them.

Objective

The study aims to conduct explorative research to obtain a deeper understanding of the performance of masks as a material in society. It focuses on (a) how masks acquire meanings in different contexts throughout their lifetime and (b) how masks affect people's behaviour in society.

Methodology

Two communities, namely Shibganj Upazila from Chapainawabganj District and Bhalka Upazila from Mymensingh District, were selected for data collection. The anthropological study uses a set of qualitative techniques, including observation, in-depth interviews (35), key informant interviews (24), focus group discussions (15), and testimonies on masks (20) to collect data. Along with two BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) research associates, two peer researchers, one from each research community, were recruited to make the research more inclusive and participatory. A wide range of participants was selected from diverse groups considering the maximum variation of the population, including community leaders, students, day labourers, service holders, government officials, non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel, homemakers, business persons, and so forth. Inductive and thematic approaches were employed to analyze the data.

Birth of Masks

There are several ways in both communities through which masks are produced (birth), such as home-, shop-, and factory-based production. The first one occurs at the household level. When there was an acute crisis and the price of masks was higher, the women with personal sewing machines started to prepare masks with their own initiative for themselves and their family members. The shop-based production happens in the local tailoring shop. Considering the growing demand for masks, many shop owners began to manufacture masks for both commercial and personal use with various designs and colours. On the other hand, factory-based mask pro-

duction, which is only present in Bhaluka since it hosts a huge number of garment industries, takes place in the factories. The authorities of these factories made it compulsory to wear masks throughout the working hours; hence, workers were enforced to produce masks themselves with the unused clothes for their own use.

Channels of Masks to Reach People

There are three major ways through which masks reach people to be used—purchasing, free distribution, and gifts. Among these, purchasing is the most common way of getting a mask by people in both communities, including rural and peri-urban areas. Masks with great variety in terms of colour, design, fabric, and price are found for sale in every nook and corner of the community. Masks have become a common part of social work in both communities and people from different strata of the society—government and non-government agencies, business organizations, political parties, local voluntary committees, and locally influential individuals—distributed masks out of their social responsibilities that works as a great source of getting masks for the community people. Masks distribution mainly occurs in different crowded places. Currently, masks are being used as gifts in the community to maintain and re-establish their relationship. This works as a channel of obtaining masks for use, which occurs widely among a variety of people, such as students, co-workers, business partners, neighbours, and relatives.

Socialization of Masks

Socialization of masks refers to the interaction and performance of masks in the community. Masks begin to perform in the society and a new relationship develops between the mask and the people. People treat the masks in accordance with their various roles in the community. The masks' roles and interactions with the community can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, including cognitive, political, religious, economic, symbolic, gender, and professional. For instance, from a cognitive standpoint, the community views masks in a variety of ways, with non-COVID roles taking precedence—protecting from dust and harmful viruses, saving from cold allergy, working as a fashion accessory, venting wearers' preferences and socio-economic condition. From a business or economic viewpoint, masks were instrumental in in-

roducing new types of economic activities in both communities, such as producing and selling masks. When the pandemic reduced the overall income of the middle and lower classes, many of them were able to earn a living through this emerging business. In terms of political aspects, masks gained immense popularity among political figures in both communities due to their roles among politicians who distributed masks to stay by their fellow people in a crisis moment and to seek votes in the local election.

From a religious standpoint, it is evident that religious leaders, institutions, traditions, and religiously significant days have been used to distribute and promote mask use since these have better acceptance to many locals. With respect to gender, both men and women wear masks outside the home, but there are some distinctions in mask use and access to getting masks and masking information. Women have less access to masks and mask-related information because all mask-related programs are held outside the home, where female engagement or attendance is limited. Women who cover their faces with niqabs are likely to be hesitant to use masks over them because they regard the niqab to be an alternative to masks.

Death of Masks

The death of masks is the final phase of a mask's life that denotes its disposal or ineligibility of use. There is no set time for masks to die; it is determined by a variety of factors, both on the wearer's and the mask's side. The duration of the life of a mask varies depending on its quality and material—surgical and cloth-made. Masks are discarded for a variety of reasons, including when people visit risky/gathering places, when masks become dirty and smell bad, and when they are found ripped. In terms of disposal area, there is no designated place for mask graving, which resulted in laying used masks everywhere in both communities.

Insights about Localized Features of Masks

The study finds the framework of “social life of things” useful in many ways to deeply understand different local dynamics and contexts related to mask use in Bangladesh. People's attitude towards masks: People are not merely concerned with the compliance or non-compliance with masks but also concerned with many other attributes

of masks, such as fabric, colour, design, fashion, and the quality of the mask, since masks are associated with people's social lives in various ways.

Motives for masks distribution: Though masks are mainly provided from a social welfare perspective, there are some political and business interests associated with them. Many politicians distributed masks to seek votes and increase political popularity, while many businessmen did it to promote their businesses.

Local initiatives that increase mask use: The community saw some compelling and motivating actions that contributed to promoting mask use in public spaces. Providing free masks; delivering messages on mask-wearing in various ways, both verbally and using HBCC materials; and engaging local elites in mask promoting activities are some of the many motivating factors. On the other hand, denying to provide services without masks, imposing fine for not wearing masks, being fearful of losing one's job, and harassment of the police are the compelling actions.

Multiple usages of masks: The community recognizes some of the additional contributions of masks that are not directly related to COVID-19 protection. Protecting people from dust and cold allergies, functioning as a fashion accessory, expressing the wearer's choices and socio-economic status, and allowing easy access to everywhere are some of the major roles of masks in the community. Masks also have some negative aspects; masks make it harder, for example, to understand the spoken words clearly.

People's knowledge about masks: A level of expertise has been observed among the residents regarding masks, particularly the use, quality, production, and disposal of masks. There are, however, some inconsistencies in these attitudes and knowledge. The framework of "social life of things" was helpful in understanding the human behaviour during a crisis moment and peoples' attitudes towards a specific intervention, i.e., masks. It discloses the various initiatives taken by both supply and demand sides, along with their intentions and the challenges they faced. It also reveals how people perceive and react to these interventions in different contexts. Moreover, it determines the context in which people are more compliant and vice versa.

Recommended Actions

The study finds some activities or components that worked well in promoting mask compliance in both communities, which can be continued further:

Providing quality masks: People have shown the most interest in masks with certain special features, such as organizational logos, and reusable, high-quality fabric, because these are used to assess quality.

Mask distribution with messages: Free mask distribution with key messages, including how to use, wash and reuse masks, was an important way to promote masks that allows large numbers of the population to get masks at no cost and use them appropriately.

The policy of “no mask, no service”: “No mask, no service” was the motto for many service-providing agencies, both government and non-government, such as schools, colleges, hospitals, NGOs, and so on, that actively promoted the use of masks across the community.

Washable masks: Washable or reusable masks were more convenient and cost-effective for the community members because they allow them to use a single mask for a longer period without having to worry about collecting new masks.

Educating women regarding masks: It is urgent to educate women that the niqab cannot meet the purpose of wearing a mask.

Based on the study findings, the researchers of the study also recommend some additional measures for increasing effective mask use and disposal:

- Community health clinic that has a great impact on local health services could be used more strategically to initiate any program for the community in order to get the best utilization of this local resource since it has been used on a very limited scale.

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- Female-centric programs should be initiated to engage females in masks promotion activities; most masks promotional activities are performed in male-dominated areas, such as bazaars, tea stalls, and bus stops, limiting women's access to those programs.
 - Information on mask disposal should be made available in the community to protect people from a variety of hazards, including COVID-19. Due to a lack of knowledge, people discard masks at random, increasing the risk of virus spread and causing environmental hazards.
 - Special attention should be paid to providing information about the quality of masks in the community since many locals wear single-layer and small size masks, which have not been produced following the science of mask production.

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