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**From Necessity to Luxury: Menswear and the Evolution of Face Coverings during
COVID-19**

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Abstract

The paper examines the transformation of face coverings from essential personal protective equipment (PPE) to luxury fashion accessories during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on menswear. The research centres on the Westminster Menswear Archive's (WMA) exhibition, *Undercover: From Necessity to Luxury – The Evolution of Face Coverings During COVID-19*, which documents over 100 face coverings collected between March 2020 and March 2021. This study highlights the rapid adaptation of fashion brands in response to the pandemic and their efforts to reposition face masks as desirable fashion items. The exhibition, which launched on May 11, 2021, showcased face coverings from prominent brands such as Burberry, Balenciaga, and Louis Vuitton, illustrating their shift from functional PPE to high-status accessories. Additionally, it featured 365 images of discarded masks, minted as non-fungible tokens (NFTs), to challenge traditional conventional notions of value and authenticity in fashion archives.

The paper details the curatorial process involved in developing the exhibition, including the challenges of rapid response collecting and the influence of digital contexts on exhibition design. It discusses how the exhibition's thematic sections—Before COVID-19, Undercover, Protection, Digital, Charity, and Discarded—addressed various aspects of face coverings' evolution, from pre-pandemic fashion trends to their role in digital and charitable contexts. The study also critiques how the pandemic has reinforced traditional fashion hierarchies of gender and exclusivity. By capturing the rapid evolution of face coverings and their presentation in digital spaces, the exhibition critically engages with themes of value, memory, and digital archiving. This innovative approach not only preserves a significant moment in fashion history but also contributes to the broader understanding of how crises influence fashion practices and archival methodologies.

Keywords: Face masks, protective menswear, fashion accessories, menswear fashion, digital archiving, pandemic response

Introduction

In March 2020, face masks began to be adopted by the public as personal protective equipment (PPE) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By May 2020, a wide range of countries made the wearing of face masks in public mandatory (Inglis et al. 2020: 254).

Initially, many fashion companies redirected their production capacities to mitigate shortages in PPE, such as medical scrubs and face masks for healthcare professionals. However, in the UK, following the requirement for face masks to be worn on public transport in June 2020, these items began to be repositioned by fashion brands as highly desirable accessories. The curators of the Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA) documented this evolution through rapid response collecting, amassing over 100 examples of face coverings primarily produced and sold between March 2020 and March 2021. A selection of these masks were featured in the online exhibition *Undercover: From Necessity to Luxury – The Evolution of Face Coverings During COVID-19* (Groves and Sprecher 2021: n.pag.). The exhibition launched on 11 May 2021, marking one year since the UK government first recommended the use of face coverings in enclosed public spaces. It showcased 52 face coverings, illustrating their transformation from essential PPE to highly sought-after fashion accessories designed by brands such as Burberry, Balenciaga, Vivienne Westwood, and Louis Vuitton. Additionally, the exhibition included imagery of 365 discarded face masks, which were formatted as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) within the metaverse. This digital archive of discarded masks was created to challenge the prevalent bias in fashion archives, which often emphasize exceptional or high-status items. In doing so, the exhibition critically explored the concepts of value and authenticity in both physical and digital objects, and their broader implications for fashion and archival practices.

This visually-oriented article examines the curatorial process behind an exhibition that aimed to memorialize a pivotal moment in fashion history, when a previously uncommon item of clothing—face coverings—became a mandatory garment. To capture this transformation, we employed rapid response collecting, guided by material culture methodologies and our knowledge of the fashion industry, to document and analyse face coverings as both functional and symbolic artefacts within the fashion system. This approach exposed the underlying functions and priorities of fashion, revealing how the industry quickly adapted to unprecedented pressures—balancing urgent protective needs with economic imperatives and the demand for items that communicate individual style. By examining this evolution, we illustrate how face coverings came to embody wider systemic forces within fashion, from issues of accessibility and commodification to shifting constructions of value. Moreover, the exhibition underscored how the fashion system’s response to the crisis often replicated and reinforced existing hierarchies of gender and exclusivity. Through this critical perspective, we show how crises can lay bare the deeper mechanisms of fashion and its powerful role both reflecting and shaping cultural and material practices.

The Westminster Menswear Archive

The WMA is a unique and innovative teaching collection of over 3,000 examples of men’s fashion, workwear, uniform, casualwear and sportswear dating from the 1780s to the present day. Established in 2016 at the University of Westminster in London, UK, the collection aims to develop the study of menswear design from a technical and functional point of view, to advance the general knowledge of menswear as a design discipline, and to serve as a resource tool to inform contemporary menswear design. Used by students, fashion industry professionals and researchers, garments from the collection are also loaned to exhibitions and included in publications.

Exhibition Development and Design

In April 2020 the University of Westminster launched a special funding call aimed at supporting projects that addressed COVID-19-related issues, leveraging the university's research strengths and expertise. Prompted by this call and by the widespread publicity about the fashion industry's responses to the pandemic (Friedman 2020: n. pag.), in May 2020 the WMA initiated a rapid response collecting process to acquire samples of PPE and face coverings manufactured by the menswear industry. Subsequently, in July 2020, the WMA was awarded just over £4,500 to facilitate the acquisition of face coverings and to cover the costs associated with designing and hosting an online exhibition in 2021. The planned exhibition aimed to critically examine object-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It sought to evaluate both the design solutions addressing specific PPE challenges and the evolution, formalisation, and adoption of a new product category within menswear.

The concurrent processes of collecting and curating posed significant challenges, particularly due to the uncertainty regarding the ongoing development of face coverings in terms of design, production, and marketing over the year-long period. Rapid response collecting, defined as the 'active collection of items and experiences in the immediate aftermath (or in the case of COVID-19 collecting, *during*) "moments of turmoil, transition and tragedy"' has become a common practice for museums and archives (Davies cited in Bannell et al. 2024: 2, original emphasis). By autumn 2020, however, face coverings had evolved from a temporary response to COVID-19 into a definite trend, prominently featuring in the collections of a number of designers in the Spring/Summer 2021 shows (Johnson 2020: n. pag.).

Influenced by the cultural 'forgetting' of the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic (Hume 2000: 898; Beiner 2021: 1), the curators aimed to collect not only physical face coverings produced during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to gather comprehensive information on

their marketing, sales, and positioning within the fashion industry. Due to the prevalence of online shopping, particularly during lockdowns and the closure of physical retail stores, most of this activity took place online. By capturing webpages, product images, and marketing materials, the curators were able to document the rapid transition of face coverings from medical devices to fashion accessories. Moreover, as face coverings began to be positioned as seasonal fashion products, a significant portion of the digital content created in 2020 was no longer accessible online by April 2021.

The digital context was central to the exhibition's design, shaping how face coverings were presented and interpreted. Digitally enhanced images replicated the idealized look of e-commerce, while images of discarded masks remained unaltered to emphasize their worn, utilitarian nature. This contrast highlighted the masks' transformation from essential protective items to discarded detritus, embodying both material and symbolic roles. A basic blue medical mask, for instance, suggests uniformity, compliance, practicality, and anonymity because of their ubiquity. Whereas a luxury mask from brands like Louis Vuitton or Balenciaga signals deliberate choice, exclusivity, and style, reflecting the wearer's engagement with fashion even in crisis. This juxtaposition underscored the mask's dual function as both a protective item and a cultural symbol, shaped by context, desirability, and design. Most objects in the exhibition were less than a year old, unworn, and in many cases, still available for purchase online. Rather than mitigating this immediacy, as curators we embraced it. We intentionally adopted a visual layout reminiscent of the fashion pages of digital media platforms, such as *Vogue.com*, *Forbes* and the *Telegraph*, which had featured webpages showcasing the top face coverings available for purchase, frequently distinguishing them by gender (Besser 2020: n. pag.; DeAcetis 2020: n. pag.; Anon. 2020: n. pag.). This curatorial decision aimed to mirror contemporary online retail and media positioning of face coverings as gendered fashion items during this period as they were usually categorized into

menswear or womenswear. By replicating the polished aesthetics of e-commerce for the luxury masks, the exhibition highlighted how these items were positioned within the fashion system as desirable commodities and the rapid development of the digital retail environment during this period. In contrast, the unaltered images of discarded masks underscored their transition from essential protection to contaminated objects and waste, engaging with themes of consumerism, value, and disposability. This curatorial choice aligned with the exhibition's broader theoretical framework, which critically examined how fashion responds to crisis by adapting, commodifying, and ultimately discarding even essential items. The juxtaposition offered an interpretive lens for viewers to reflect on the transient value attributed to these garments, reinforcing the exhibition's critique of fashion's mechanisms of consumption and symbolic meaning.

Other curatorial decisions were guided by research into memory and time and the graphic language of pharmaceutical packaging. The lockdowns in the UK significantly contributed to temporal distortion, affecting people's perceptions of time (Ogden 2021: 13; Martinelli et al. 2021: 18). This informed the use of a chronological display sequence in the exhibition, interweaving key UK government announcements on face coverings and lockdowns with the masks released during these periods. The graphic design and color palette of the exhibition referenced Type IIR face mask packaging, while the font, Classico URW, was chosen to replicate the typography used on the cover of a Damien Hirst book featuring his medicine cabinets (Gallagher 2012: cover).

The exhibition ran from 11 May to 5 June 2021, a total of 26 days, and featured 52 face coverings in the main section, each nominally representing a week of the previous year. It was structured into six thematic sections: Before COVID-19, Undercover, Protection, Digital, Charity, and Discarded. Hosted on the Westminster Menswear Archive website (Westminster Menswear Archive Website 2021: n.pag.), the exhibition was also designed to

be featured on Instagram, with two face coverings published daily over the 26-day period to drive traffic to the main exhibition site. However, Instagram's strict content policies regarding Covid-19 and face coverings presented significant challenges:

We're working to remove content that has the potential to contribute to real-world harm, including through our policies prohibiting coordination of harm, sale of medical masks and related goods, hate speech, bullying and harassment and misinformation that contributes to the risk of imminent violence or physical harm. (Anon. 2021: n. pag.)

The policy restricted our ability to post exhibition content, either requiring significant edits or resulting in shadow banning. Furthermore, posts related to the exhibition could not be promoted, limiting their reach to audiences due to the content restrictions.

Before COVID-19

The Before COVID-19 section of the exhibition examined fashion trends prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how face coverings emerged as a significant menswear in the decade leading up to 2020, likely influenced by the widespread long-standing practice of wearing of face masks in Japan and Korea (Hyun et al 2020: n. pag.). In 2014, designer Nasir Mazhar introduced facial masks during his Autumn/Winter show at London Collections: Men (Burley 2014: n. pag.). This trend continued in September 2016, when the Japanese streetwear brand A Bathing Ape launched a collection featuring a camouflage neoprene face mask, which was described by *Hypebeast* as 'designed to protect against the flu season of winter' (Chin 2016: n. pag.). In 2017, Virgil Abloh's Off-White presented a line of cotton face coverings in camouflage, overprinted with the brand's diagonal striped motif (Wete 2017: n. pag.). This was followed in August 2018 by British brand A-COLD-WALL* releasing a capsule collection that included repurposed industrial protective gear, such as earplugs, protective acetate glasses, and a dust-resistant face mask (Stanley 2018: n. pag.). By 2019,

the British online menswear retailer BoohooMAN had also entered the market, offering face coverings inspired by medical masks designed for SARS (Anon. 2019: n. pag).

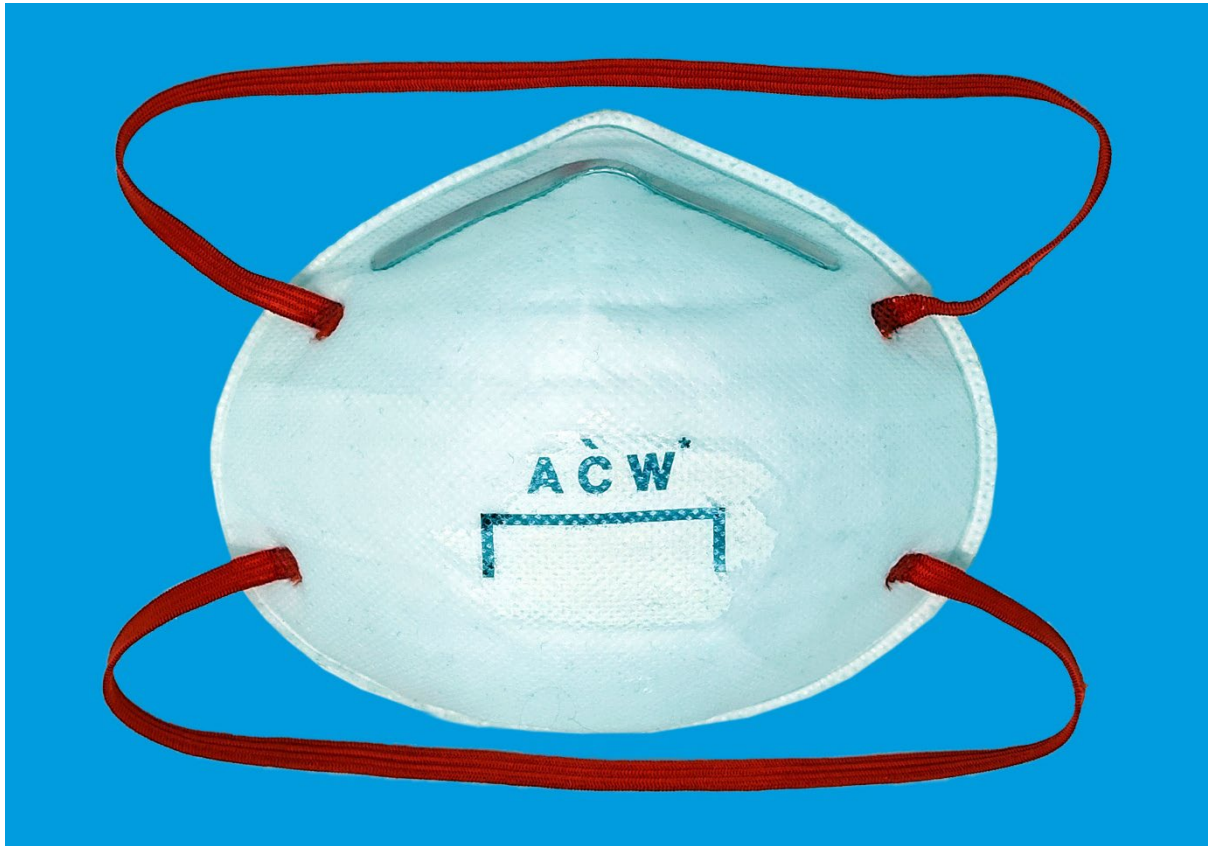


Figure 1: A-COLD-WALL*, *Dust-resistant face mask*, 2018. Polypropylene and elastic. 16.5cm x15.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. In 2018, British menswear brand, A-COLD-WALL*, released a capsule collection featuring rebranded personal protective equipment, including this face mask. Price £25.

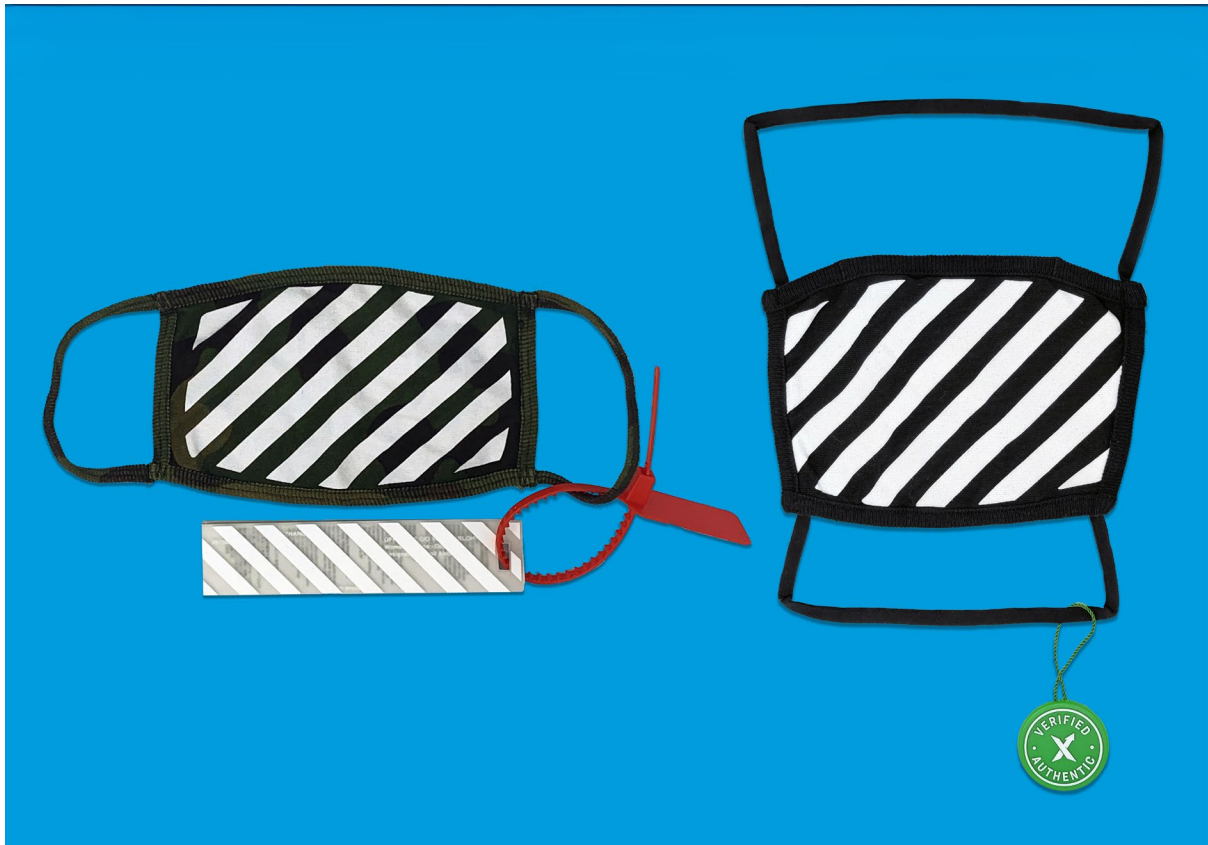


Figure 2: Left: Off-White, *Camo Brushed Diags Mask*, 2017. Cotton. 18cm x 11.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Right: Off-White, *Diag Over The Head Face Mask Black/White*, July 2020. Cotton and elastic. 16cm x 11.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Off-White introduced face masks to their collection in 2017, priced at £49. By contrast, a similar mask released for Spring/Summer 2020 retailed for £70.

Undercover

The Undercover section of the exhibition focused on the period between 23 March 2020 and 26 March 2021, and presented 52 face coverings in chronological order, interspersed with key government announcements during this period. The exhibition starting date was the day of the first UK lockdown and the date that the first face covering was released by the menswear brand, Wawwa, in Manchester. Of the 52 masks included in this section, 43 were purchased online, six were donated, and three were purchased in person (from Liberty, Balenciaga, and Louis Vuitton). Only two of the masks, the Metropolitan Police mask and the Climate Revolution protest mask, were previously worn.



Figure 3: Instagram @menswear_archive, *Screenshot*, 2021. Digital image. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Instagram page displaying 18 different face coverings, each posted on the platform over several days.



Figure 4: WAWWA, *Face Mask*, 23 March 2020. Cotton and elastic. 20cm x 7.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. On the first day of the UK lockdown, 23 March 2020, the Manchester-based menswear brand WAWWA launched this face mask via Instagram. Price: £12.



Figure 5: BoohooMAN, *Skeleton Mask*, 19 April 2020. Jersey knit. 18cm x 11.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. BoohooMAN had previously sold face masks in 2019. However, when this mask was released in April 2020, it was quickly withdrawn, amid accusations of profiteering during the National Health Service (NHS) PPE shortage. Price £5.

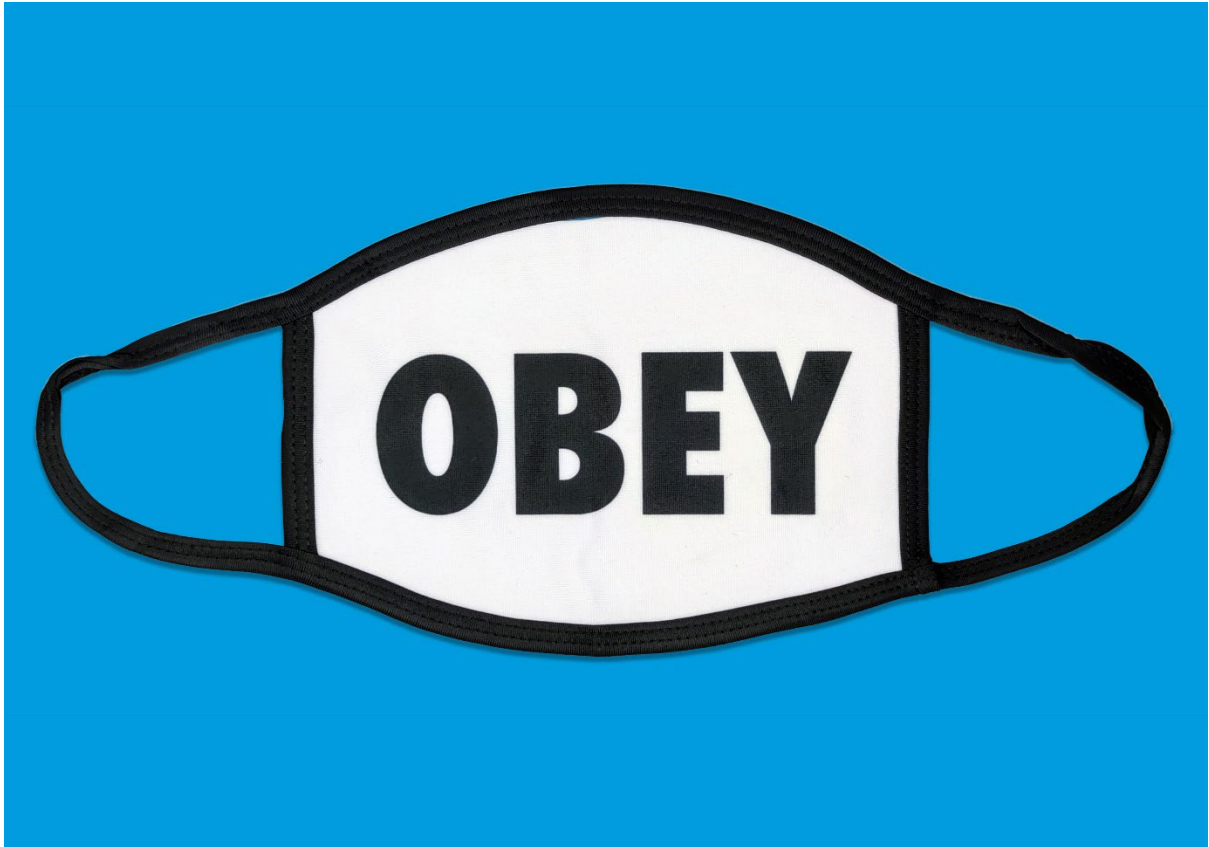


Figure 6: Retrobomb, *Obey Mask*, May 2020. Polyester and cotton. 17.5cm x 13.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. This mask is not from the streetwear brand Obey. An Etsy seller was inspired by John Carpenter's 1988 film *They Live*, where the ruling class use subliminal messages to manipulate the masses. The message struck a chord with consumers who expressed their objection to wearing a face covering. Price £10.67.



Figure 7: HOEZINE, *Black Lives Matter Mask*, June 2020. Synthetic knit. 33cm x 12.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Designed by Bethan Dadson, founder of *HOEZINE* magazine, for the London protests on 6 June 2020, following George Floyd's murder 13 days earlier. Price £10.



Figure 8: Vivienne Westwood Climate Revolution, *True Punk Face Mask*, July 2020. Cotton. 19cm x 15cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Purchased second-hand on eBay, this mask was not sold commercially, it was given to Vivienne Westwood's staff and acquaintances to highlight the designer's Climate Revolution campaign. Price £58.00.



Figure 9: Balenciaga, *Care Mask*, August 2020. Polyester and elastane. 18cm x 15cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Though the Balenciaga brand was founded in Spain in 1917 and later based in Paris, this Balenciaga Care Mask was produced in Slovenia by the Austrian company Wolford, highlighting the complexities of global fashion production. Price £95.



Figure 10: Burberry, Vintage Check Cotton Face Mask, 28 October 2020. Cotton and polyester. 32cm x 15cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Announced on 20 August 2020, but not released until 28 October 2020, this limited-edition face mask was made in Italy and sold out on its launch day. It included a storage pouch and a 118-page instruction booklet. Price £90.



Figure 11: Louis Vuitton, *Monogram Tapestry Bandana Mask Cover Set*, November 2020. Cotton and elastic. 23cm x 15cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. In April 2020, Louis Vuitton shifted production to create free face masks for healthcare workers and vulnerable communities affected by COVID-19. By November 2020 they had released a luxury face covering with a monogram bandana in a drawstring pouch. Price £350.

Protection

The Protection section of the exhibition examined how menswear brands navigated the dual objectives of presenting face coverings as luxury items while concurrently addressing concerns related to health and illness. Designers utilized various packaging and supplementary materials—such as booklets, leaflets, and ephemera—to provide instructions on the use of face coverings. Simultaneously, these materials served to acknowledge that the face coverings did not conform to the regulatory standards required for classification as PPE or as medical devices.

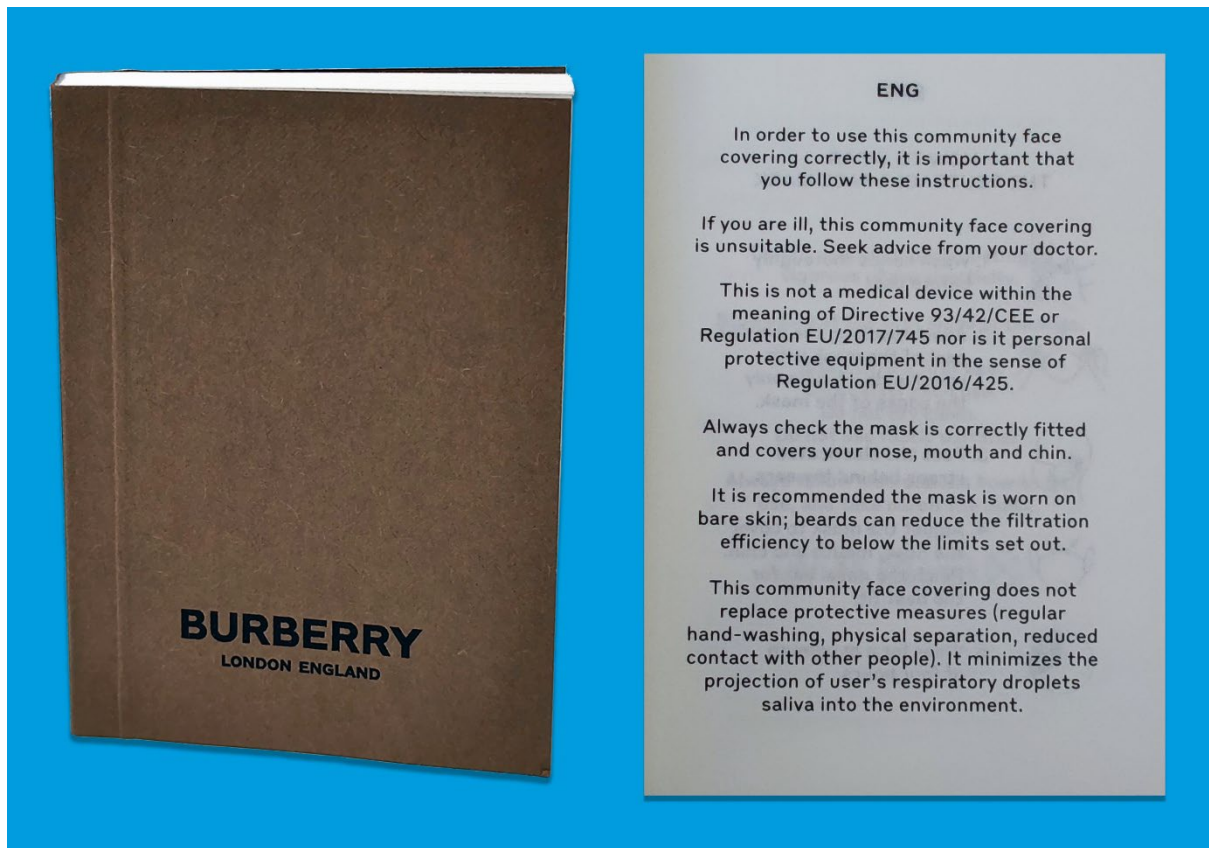


Figure 12: Burberry, *Instruction Booklet*, October 2020. Paper. 5.5cm x 7.4cm x 0.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Unlike most face coverings, which lacked information about how to use them, the Burberry mask included a 118-page booklet with detailed care and usage guidelines, provided in multiple languages. Price £90.

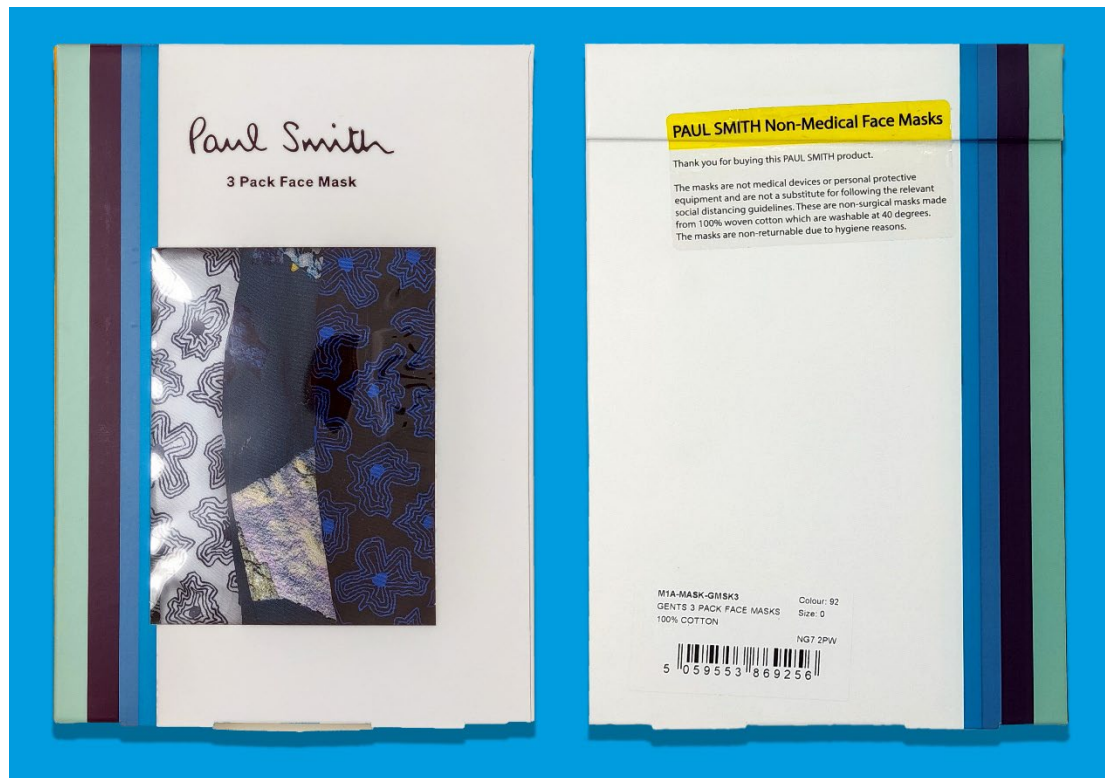


Figure 13: Paul Smith, *Multipack Packaging*, December 2020. Cardboard. 19cm x 13.3cm x 2.5cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. A sticker across the box's opening states: 'The masks are not medical devices or personal protective equipment and are not a substitute for following the relevant social distancing guidelines. These are non-surgical masks made from 100% woven cotton which are washable at 40 degrees. The masks are non-returnable due to hygiene reasons'. Price £35.00.

Digital

The Digital section of the exhibition reflected on the use of various digital technologies by online and physical retailers to authenticate fashion products. The growth of digital authentication processes, such as barcodes, QR codes, stock-keeping units (SKUs), and proprietary systems like Certilogo—featured in Off-White products—has further bolstered the rise of platforms like StockX. Founded in 2015, StockX began primarily as an auction site for designer menswear, trainers, and accessories. The platform markets itself on guaranteed authenticity by requiring items sold to be sent to them for verification before being forwarded to the winning bidder. Additionally, StockX employs a variable pricing framework akin to a stock market, allowing consumers to track historical price data and market trends.



Figure 14: Off-White, StockX, *Product Tags*, February 2021. Paper and plastic. Dimensions variable. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Price £66.12. These Off-White product tags are from a mask released in Spring/Summer 2020. Two additional tags are from StockX verifying the product as authentic.

Charity

The Charity section highlighted face coverings produced by menswear companies at the beginning of 2020, either distributed for free or created to raise funds for various charitable causes. A notable example included the Great British Designer Face Coverings, produced by Bags of Ethics on behalf of the British Fashion Council. These face coverings were sold to benefit multiple organizations, including the NHS Charities Together COVID-19 Urgent Appeal, the BFC Foundation Fashion Fund, and the Wings of Hope Children's Charity.



Figure 15: Bag of Ethics, *Great British Face Coverings*, June 2020. Cardboard and plastic. 21cm x 23cm. Westminster Menswear Archive, London. Courtesy of Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster. Produced for the British Fashion Council (BFC), these face coverings were sold to support the NHS Charities Together COVID-19 Urgent Appeal, the BFC Foundation Fashion Fund, and the Wings of Hope Children's Charity. In December 2020, the BFC announced that sales had generated a £500,000 donation to the BFC Foundation Fashion Fund. Price £15.

Discarded

The exhibition's focus on a single year was underscored through various aspects of its curation. In the concluding section, titled 'Discarded,' 365 photographs of used, worn, and discarded face coverings were displayed, each representing one day in a calendar year. These images, taken between 7 January and 22 March 2021 in Manchester, UK, captured each mask in situ, recording the ephemerality of these newly ubiquitous accessories and documenting them digitally rather than physically due to concerns over contamination and health risks. The 365 images of the discarded masks were minted as NFTs on Opensea.io. NFTs, which use blockchain technology to authenticate ownership of digital or physical artifacts, gained significant attention in early 2021 (Reyburn 2021: n. pag.). During the exhibition, 52 of the 365 NFTs, one for each week, were made available for free, with the curators aiming to probe issues of ownership and value creation within the fashion system and the curatorial process (Groves 2021: n. pag.). This experimental approach questioned the merit and worthiness of certain objects for acquisition and explored the creation of new value through digital artifacts and blockchain technology.



Figure 16: Andrew Groves, Discarded Mask #161, 10 February 2021. NFT. Manchester. © Andrew Groves.

Conclusion

The *Undercover* exhibition digitally visualized the evolution of face masks into fashionable menswear objects over a single calendar year, revealing how these items became markers of identity, status, and style. This transformation—from essential protective gear to symbols within the fashion hierarchy—was documented through a curatorial approach that highlighted the industry’s ability to quickly adapt, reinforcing traditional hierarchies of gender and exclusivity. By preserving face coverings as both functional and symbolic artefacts, the WMA ensured that a significant chapter in fashion history was collected and recorded, a contribution recognized by the inclusion of selected masks in an exhibition organized by ICOM Costume (part of ICOM: International Council of Museums) bringing together masks collected by museums globally (ICOM Costume 2021: n. pag.).

By launching the exhibition within the same digital landscape as the objects it featured, *Undercover* provided a critical lens on how value and authenticity are constructed

within fashion, especially in times of crisis. The use of NFTs as digital archives introduced an innovative dimension to fashion curation, prompting questions about how contemporary items are valued and remembered. This dual approach—combining digital preservation with conceptual critique—invited viewers to consider how crises reveal the fashion system’s power to assimilate and commodify even the most utilitarian items.

Through its contrasting presentation of luxury masks and discarded medical masks, the exhibition highlighted the material and symbolic fluidity of face coverings, showcasing how fashion assigns and revokes value based on cultural context, market forces, and consumer perceptions. By synthesising these insights, *Undercover* prompts a broader reflection on the fashion industry’s persistent structures of exclusivity, accessibility, and consumption.

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