

Clothing brands sense opportunity in mandatory face mask use

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Coronavirus is here to stay and face mask, whose use was mostly confined to medical institutions, have become a non-negotiable part of people's everyday dress code -- a reality that has tempted clothing brands in Bangladesh to have a crack at giving an aesthetic spin to the humble piece

in early April, anticipating people's wish to turn mask wear into a fashion statement.

Now, it sells an array of face masks in different categories -- essential, fashion, embroidery, technical and denim--for men, women and children -- at its 15 stores.

"Since many people use masks, we have given importance to fashion

is made with cotton fabric and its innovative shape means it can be used as a mask and also as a scarf.

The brand has brought out embroidered woven fashion mask hena exclusively to cater to women. Made of cotton fabric for a firm and comfortable fit, the mask has a soft inner layer (non-dyed) next to the skin to avoid irritation and it is washable.

"Our masks are for non-medical use. Most of them can be washable and reusable."

So far, Yellow, which will soon manufacture four-layer N95 mask and a three-layer surgical mask, has sold 2.5 lakh units of face masks, according to Chowdhury.

It has been a week that another retail clothing behemoth Aarong started selling masks from a third-party supplier.

"The response is tremendous. More than 50 per cent of the masks were sold in seven days," said Mohammad Ashraful Alam, chief executive officer of Aarong.

To cater to the demand, Aarong will launch a face mask production line in a factory of Ayesha Abed Foundation, which serves as one of the top supply hubs of the brand, from next week.

"Our mask will be fashionable so that they match our clothing items," he said, adding that masks will be made following the guidelines of the World Health Organisation and the Directorate General of Health Services. The brand is bringing out six types of face masks and for men, women and children.

Sara, a lifestyle brand of apparel exporter Snowtex, began selling masks from the middle of April.

"We are overwhelmed with the customer's response and once we



bring out the product it gets sold out very quickly," said SM Khaled, managing director of Snowtex and Sara.

So far, it has sold about 2 lakh units.

The brand, which has five stores in the capital, invested heavily on research so that the quality of face masks improves.

"Now our masks provide 72 per cent protection level against airborne viruses. It will soon cross 90 per cent."

Ensuring both breathability and protection at the same time is the main challenge in manufacturing face masks, according to Khaled.

Sara makes embroidered and printed masks for fashionable persons. The brand's masks for non-medical use are priced at Tk 40-50 and the ornate ones at about Tk 200.

Sultana Nasreen Shumi, the owner of upscale boutique Azaaraz in Gulshan, has started giving a complementary mask to customers with every dress ordered.

"I do not sell masks at shops. But I am giving out a mask with each of my products out of responsibility," she said.

Azaaraz makes face masks matching its outfits.

"If an outfit is red, I make a red

mask. And if the dress is embroidered, I embroider the mask too."

She said a lot of the people have come out of their homes following the easing of restrictions but they are not wearing masks because they do not have beautiful ones.

This prompted her to figure out how to create fashionable masks such that people wear it.

Although Azaaraz does not sell masks directly, she selectively accepts some orders from clients.

"Even I got some orders for masks for brides and grooms," Shumi said, emphasising safety in addition to gorgeousness and fashion.



ZINA TASREEN

Face masks on display at Yellow's sprawling store at Jamuna Future Park.

of protective gear against airborne disease.

Lifestyle giant Yellow was the first clothing brand in Bangladesh to take face masks to the realm of fashion

as well as safety," said Hadi SA Chowdhury, head of retail operations of Yellow, which is owned by Beximco Group, one of the corporate titans. Its printed double layer mask

Edible oil prices on the rise in port city

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, from Chattogram

The prices of edible oil both at the wholesale and retail markets in the port city have been on the rise for the last three weeks, putting an extra burden on consumers already distraught by the spiralling prices of other food items including vegetables.

Traders pinned the price hike on an upward trend in the global markets.

Prices of soybean oil at Khatunganj wholesale hub in the port city gradually rose by Tk 150 per maund (37.3 kilograms) in the last three weeks to Tk 3,150 now.

The wholesale prices of palm oil have been steady for the last few days, seesawing between Tk 2,620 and Tk 2,630 per maund. But wholesalers hinted that the prices may shoot up as international markets have been on an upward trajectory of late.

"The prices of edible oil rose in the local market in line with the global market trends," said Shahedul Islam, a wholesale trader.

Meanwhile, refiners have raised the retail prices of different brands of edible oil by Tk 3 to Tk 4 during the same period, retailers said.

The retailers were found selling each five-litre container of Rupchanda-branded soybean oil at Tk 510 to Tk



515 against Tk 495 three weeks ago.

The same five-litre container of Teer brand was selling at Tk 495, up from Tk 475, while the price of Pushti brand rose to Tk 485 from Tk 470.

"We cannot but charge higher since the refiners have raised the prices in the middle of this month," said Rumi Ghosh, a retailer at Karnaphuli CDA Market.

She claimed the distributors of the

branded edible oil suggested that the prices might rise further over the next few days.

"We have raised the prices on 20 August on the ground of a price spiral in the global market," said Biswajit Saha, a director of City Group, one of the main importers and refiners.

He, however, refuted the possibility of a further price rise anytime soon.

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Gamblers messing around with Imam Button stocks

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

In a quizzical development, the stock price of Imam Button almost doubled in a few weeks though the Chattogram-based button producer has been incurring losses for a decade and stopped production indefinitely in April.

In reply to an enquiry of the Dhaka Stock Exchange, the company on Thursday said it had been unable to log enough revenues and profits since 2011.

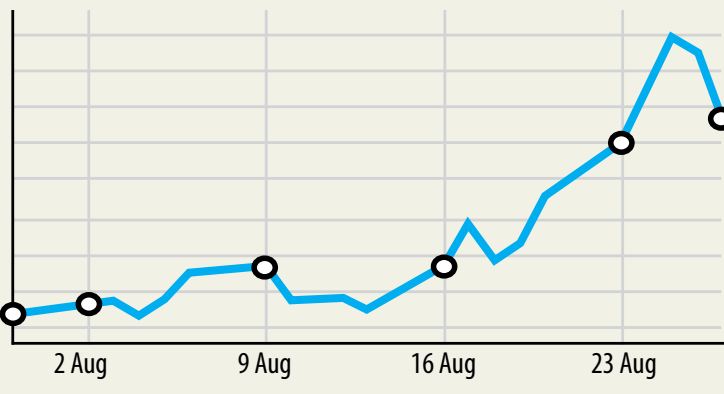
As the stock prices of the company rose a whopping 82 per cent within a few weeks, DSE had sent it a notice asking whether there were any reasons behind the price hike.

The company said it had been unable to utilise its production capacity to the fullest due to insufficient sales order, according to a posting on the DSE website on Thursday. On top of that, sales orders have totally crashed thanks to the global coronavirus pandemic.

After the web posting, stocks of Imam Button plunged 10 per cent to close at Tk 33.30 on the Dhaka bourse on Thursday.

When the price of a company, which remained in the junk category for over a decade, jumps more than

IMAM BUTTON'S SHARE PRICE KEPT SOARING FOR NO REASON



80 per cent within a few weeks, it is assumed that gambling might be in play, said an official of a merchant bank, asking not to be named.

"Someone was playing from behind, which was barred by the announcement of production halt," he said, adding that the company has always been used by gamblers.

The earnings per share of the company, which was established in 1996, ran into a total of Tk 0.5 in the negative in the first three quarters of the 2019-20 financial year.

The EPS was Tk 0.29 in the negative during the same period in the previous year.

The company's net asset value is plunging every year: in 2015 it was Tk 9.3, which came down to Tk 5.8 in 2018.

Sponsors and directors hold 29.3 per cent shares of the company, institutional investors 9 per cent and general investors the rest, according to DSE.

Imam Button could not be reached for comment.



Bicycle shops on Amar Chand Road in Sadar Ghat area of Chattogram city say sales have gone up since the emergence of the novel coronavirus in the country with people increasingly avoiding public transport to maintain social distancing. Most of the bicycles being sold are priced in the range of Tk 3,000 to Tk 35,000. The photo was taken earlier this month.

PHOTO:
RAJIB RAIHAN