

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable fashion consumption values among US Gen Z consumers: Implications for Marketers

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Background and Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic has immensely affected consumers' daily lives, their consumption priorities, values, and behaviors (Liu et al., 2021). Due to resource scarcity, uncertain financial future and other pandemic-related restrictions, consumers increasingly have realized their unnecessary consumption habits, moving toward simplifying their lives while nurturing non-materialistic sources of personal satisfaction (Valaskova et al., 2021). Fashion consumption trends have also decreased during the pandemic that can be attributed to change in attitude toward and relationship with clothing during the pandemic (Iran et al., in press). With consumers' increasingly altering their lifestyle and consumption choices during the pandemic, marketers are revamping their efforts to reach consumers who may have shifted to a simpler lifestyle (Çinar, 2021). Gen Z consumers are recognized as being pragmatic (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), with a strong inclination to adopt sustainable fashion practices (Dabija et al., 2019). Understanding changes in the value that Gen Z consumers attached to their fashion consumption practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US is critical to help fashion retailers develop adequate strategies to respond to post-pandemic consumer preferences.

Voluntary Simplicity (VS) is the guiding theory for this study. "Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle of low consumption, ecological responsibility and self-sufficiency" (Shama, 1985 p.59). Scholars argue that such simple lifestyle leads consumers toward sustainable prosperity as material consumption reduces, while ecological awareness, and inner satisfaction increases (Elgin, 2013). Literature (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Shama 1981) related to VS conceptualize the following values that are common among voluntary simplifiers – material simplicity [MS] (buying and consuming what one needs over what one wants); human scale [HS] (preference for products that are small and more efficient); self-sufficiency [SS] (being less dependent on external sources); ecological awareness [EA] (consumption that takes into account ecological responsibility) and personal growth [PG] (ascribe more importance to personal growth than economic growth). To address the limited research on Gen Z fashion consumers' changes in values related VS lifestyle related to their fashion consumption choices during the COVID-19 pandemic, the purpose of this research was to examine changes in the value that Gen Z consumers attached to fashion consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore relationship between these values and consumption satisfaction.

Methods: Items to measure different values related to VS (material simplicity, human scale, self-sufficiency, ecological awareness and personal growth) were adapted from Elgin & Mitchell

(1977) and Shama & Wisenblit (1984), with a leading statement “*The COVID19 pandemic has increased my desire to ...*”. Example statements included under each sub-construct included – “...buy and consume less clothing” [MS]; “... find the right amount of clothing consumption for my own well-being” [HS]; “... reduce my dependence on the fashion marketplace to meet all my clothing needs”[SS]; “... reduce my clothing consumption to address environmental issues”[EA]; and “... seek personal growth instead of worrying about the things I possess” [PG]. Consumption satisfaction [CS] was measured using two statements (I have everything I need in my wardrobe, and I am satisfied with my wardrobe) adapted from Mano and Oliver (1993). All statements were measured on Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Data was collected during September 2020 to April 2021 using a convenience sample of university students at three western and southern US universities. The study focused on Gen Z consumers because they are recognized as the most lucrative target market concerning fashion apparel (Arora & Manchanda, 2022). IRB approvals for the study were obtained at each university.

Results: The final sample (n=633) consisted of Gen Z participants who had a mean age of 21.89 years and mostly female (81%). Reliability for all constructs was above 0.80. Regression analysis was used to examine the relationships between independent variables [MS, HS, SS, EA, PG] and the dependent variable [CS]. Participants expressed positive values related to – material simplicity ($M=3.43$, $SD=0.94$); human scale ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.92$); self-sufficiency ($M=3.35$, $SD=0.95$); eco-awareness ($M=3.50$, $SD=1.06$); and personal growth ($M=3.14$, $SD=0.99$). Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between independent and dependent variables. The overall model was significant (refer Table 1).

Table 1. Multiple Regression

	df	R ²	F	β	t	Sig.
<i>Dependent variable</i>						
Consumption Satisfaction	5	0.07	7.361			.00***
<i>Independent variables</i>						
Material Simplicity				.104	1.616	.11
Human Scale				.099	1.396	.16
Self-sufficiency				.200	2.997	.00**
Ecological Awareness				-.112	-2.153	.00**
Personal Growth				-.081	-1.446	.15

Table Note. ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Among all the five independent variables only two independent variables (self-sufficiency and ecological awareness) had statistically significant relationship with consumption satisfaction. There was a significant positive relationship between self-sufficiency and consumption

satisfaction and a negative statistically significant relationship between ecological awareness and consumption satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion: Overall results of this study indicated that Gen Z fashion consumers exhibited some form of value change related to VS lifestyle during the pandemic. More specifically results showed that Gen Z consumers voluntarily decided to reduce fashion consumption, and to limit their dependence on the mainstream fashion marketplace to meet all their clothing needs. Interestingly, decrease in fashion consumption did not occur because of Gen Z consumers intention to help reduce negative environmental impact, but with respondents increased satisfaction with apparel products they already possess in their wardrobe. Majority of respondents expressed growing need to be self-sufficient, frugal, and value conscious, and those emerging values led them to abstain from non-essential purchases and buy only what they actually needed. Such findings provide important insights to fashion marketers who are now facing a hard task of ensuring business profitability amidst crisis driven anti-consumption. Therefore, findings of this study show that apparel marketers should consider prioritizing promotion of their fundamental values, and timeless styles, instead of speedy and micro-trends. Additionally, mainstream fashion retailers should consider providing alternative modes of retailing (e.g., resell), and collaborative consumption (e.g., rental) in order to better align to Gen Z VS lifestyle, and sustainable fashion values that are emerging due to the pandemic crisis.

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