How COVID-19 has Shaped Gen Z's Fashion Consumption Values?

Joohye Hwang, Li Zhao
University of Missouri

Gen Z consumers, digital natives, have been evaluated as the most resilient generational cohort during COVID-19 as they are tech-savvy and well equipped to cope with all the virtual shifts and transitions (Deloitte, 2020). Gen Z will become the most promising and influential consumer group in the "new normal" context that drives the marketplace. Therefore, it is critical to understand their consumption values, related topics, and changes during this pandemic, especially from a holistic viewpoint. This study aims to identify Gen Z's recent fashion consumption tendencies, burgeoning themes, and topics based on recently published news articles and consumer trend reports by conducting data-mining-based content analysis and adopting the consumption value theory.

The consumption value framework (Sheth *et al.*,1991) explains underlying values that influence consumer choice behavior. As the theory was established to cover consumer decision-making mechanisms, it has been widely adopted and applied to different contexts within various product categories (i.e., tangible products and intangible services) (Yan *et al.*, 2019). In the field of fashion consumer behavior, the theory has been applied to explain various consumer choices (i.e., online shopping, sustainable/ethical consumption, luxury consumption, etc.) (Yan *et al.,* 2019). The theory introduced five consumption values: functional value is associated with the product attributes and performance; social value is derived from association with specific social groups; emotional value is created by arousing feelings associated with product consumption; epistemic value is associated with curiosity and novelty; conditional value is derived from the specific circumstances and situations (Sheth *et al.*, 1991). This study utilizes this framework as a guideline to inductively interpret and explain the critical themes of Gen Z fashion consumers.

Text mining was used in this study because it ensures a baseline of consistency across results and offers an objective measure of accuracy for a large-scale dataset. (Li & Zhao, 2021). The data were collected from the Factiva database using keywords (Gen Z, fashion, and consumer) within the timeframe from March 1st, 2020 to February 28th, 2021, considering the time of the Covid-19 outbreak. Data sources include news articles, consumer reports, and major fashion trend agency reports to reflect three major perspectives in the results (i.e., general current trends, consumer-oriented information, and fashion-focused perspectives). This study adopted the Automatic Content Analysis (ACA) method using Leximancer software (edition 4.5), which has been confirmed as a suitable approach to identify the main concepts from large textual data (Cheng & Edwards, 2019). By skimming through each article, among originally collected 385 articles and reports, 178 were selected as usable data (a total of 793 pages). The noise of data was removed by filtering out irrelevant words, and redundant terminologies were merged into one key concept. The final concept map was obtained after conducting validating processes. The key terminologies within each bubbled theme were checked to see if the term was used in the theme-relevant context using the query function in Leximancer. The final concept map is

presented in figure 1.

The results showed several significant themes in Gen Z fashion consumer's values: sustainability and brand; digital and content; retail, pandemic and fashion; and jeans (denim) and style. The theme "sustainability" is the dominant theme, including their environmental concerns, from the individual level of sustainable awareness to a global market level concerns and social concerns. One of the reports indicated that "They are committed to creating a better and brighter future on the other side of this pandemic crisis (Deloitte, 2020, p.24)." Gen Z is a value-oriented cohort, and their consumption behavior reflects their values (i.e., inclusive, diverse, ethical, and sustainable) (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Thus, sustainability is the major theme that represents their social value under the consumption value framework. It is also closely related to the theme "brand" as presented in the concept map. It demonstrated that Gen Z's sustainable value influences their brand choice.

Figure 1.

The second major themes are "digital" and "content" with various concepts (i.e., video, influencers, share, and marketing). As Gen Zs are digital natives, this theme represents their generational orientation. They express their values and influence fashion consumers through social media. They value experience, authenticity, and micro-influencer marketing, which have replaced the traditional advertising strategy (Rees-Roberts, 2020). They are inclined to seek reliability and diversity in making decisions, which is why digital-based influencing marketing and authentic content effectively work with Gen Z. These themes represent their experiential value and are also closely related to social value under the framework.

Three themes (i.e., retail, pandemic, and fashion) are closely related to each other, and they represent Gen Z's resilience and their crisis coping management during the pandemic. Due to public health concerns and store lockdowns, many fashion retailers have transferred their point of sale from brick-and-mortar stores to their online stores to mitigate profit loss and to revive their business (Amaro, 2020; Hwang *et al.*, 2020), and on/offline hybrid shopping format (e.g., order at home/ pick up curbside, virtual shopping, etc.) has become a more probable option for consumers (Kapner, 2021). During this transition, Gen Z, the digital natives, has led the change and grew as the most influential generation.

The last interesting theme is "Jeans (denim)," in regards to the "Style." Gen Z consumers pursue a loose and comfortable fit when choosing clothes reflecting their inclusive, gender-neutral value compared to their millennial consumer counterparts. Millennials are a massive fan of the skinny jean, but Generation Z refused to inherit them because the skinny is incongruent with their core values; they desire to be true to themselves (Warren, 2021; Francis & Hopeful, 2018). This theme represents their social value and functional value under the consumption value framework.

This study provides a unique framework that can be utilized to explain Gen Z's fashion consumption values by combining previous consumption value theory with the extracted Gen Z's unique themes from a macro perspective. Moreover, by conducting ACA, the results of the study reflect the most recent tendencies and trends of Gen Z consumers during the pandemic. This new approach and the findings establish a scholarly foundation for predicting trends by focusing on Gen Z in the now. Further Gen Z studies can develop measurements based on this proposed theme-oriented framework.

References

Amaro, S. (2020, July 27). How the coronavirus is changing the way we shop — and what we're buying. *CNBC*. Retrieved from https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/27/the-future-of-retail-amid-covid-19.html

Barger, V., Peltier, J. W., & Schultz, D. E. (2016). Social media and consumer engagement: a review and research agenda. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, *10*(4), 268–287. https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-06-2016-0065

Bulut, Z. A., Kökalan Çımrin, F., & Doğan, O. (2017). Gender, generation and sustainable consumption: Exploring the behaviour of consumers from Izmir, Turkey. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 41*(6), 597-604.

Cheng, M., & Edwards, D. (2019). A comparative automated content analysis approach on the review of the sharing economy discourse in tourism and hospitality. *Current Issues in Tourism, 22*(1), 35-49.

Deloitte. (2020). The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020: resilient generations hold the key to creating a "better normal." *Deloitte*, 36. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/deloitte-2020-millennial-survey.pdf

Francis, T., & Hoefel, F. (2018). 'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies. *Mckinsey & Company*, 1–10. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies

Hwang, E. H., Nageswaran, L., & Cho, S. H. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on Omnichannel Retail: Drivers of Online Sales during Pandemic. *Available at SSRN 3657827*.

Kapner, S. (2021, March 12). Covid-19 Rewrote the Rules of Shopping. What Is Next? *The Wall Street Journal.* Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-rewrote-the-rules-of-shopping-what-is-next-11615561232

Li, M., & Zhao, L. (2021). Exploring Global Fashion Sustainability Practices through

Dictionary-Based Text Mining. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X21998268

Rees-Roberts, N. (2020). After fashion film: social video and brand content in the influencer economy. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *19*(3), 405–421. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920964907

Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of Business Research*, *22*(2), 159–170. https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(91)90050-8

Warren, L. (2021, February 8). If gen z cancels skinny jeans, will others follow? *Sourcing Journal.* Retrieved from https://sourcingjournal.com/denim/denim-trends/gen-z-millennials-cancel-skinny-jeans-tiktok-instagram-edited-260334/

Yan, R., Miller, N., Jankovska, D., & Hensley, C. (2019). Millennial Consumers' Perceived Consumption Values and Purchase Intentions : Examining Effects of Made in USA and Traceability Labelling of Apparel. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, *14*(4), 155–168.