Understanding Consumers' Perceived Values of Mass-Customized Dress Shirts during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background and Purpose: Ever since the introduction of the concept by Davis (1987), the application of Mass Customization (MC) has kept on developing. Information technology and reconfigurable manufacturing system has enabled further development of MC in the fashion production and consumption. The trend of online shopping accelerates the popularity of online MC, 3D printing enhanced pattern making and Visual Try-On improves consumers' satisfaction of online mass customized garments (Lim et al., 2009). With the development of MC, consumers now can order more categories of mass-customized apparel products online, from sports shoes to T-shirts (Liang et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2015). During Covid-19 Pandemic, consumers shift to Working from Home (WFH) and doing remote videos via virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), which makes consumers pay more attention to their looks from the waist up. As people adapt to WFH for long enough time, they may have formed new consumption habits and changed their preferences for fashion clothing (Sheth, 2020). It is critical to find out what value means to consumers as they establish new clothing consumption routines. This will help fashion marketers to circumnavigate the crisis and locate growth opportunities through better satisfying consumers' changing needs, wants, and lifestyles. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study is to understand what consumers value the most when they purchase mass-customized clothes online during Covid-19 pandemic by analyzing consumer posted comments.

Literature Review: MC programs enable consumers to purchase best-fit garments while personalizing certain features including color, fabric, and style (Lang et al., 2020). According to Merle et al. (2010), MC provided consumers both the product value and experience value. Mass customized products, which provide consumers the sense of exclusivity and a venue for them to express identity fulfill consumers' needs for utilitarian benefits, uniqueness, and self-expression. In the meantime, co-design process, which provides consumers with the pleasant experience and achievement of creation, adds value to mass-customized products and consumption experience. According to Lamb and Kallal's (1992) FEA model, consumers seek functional value, expressive value, and aesthetic value when purchasing apparel products. Research has also found that consumers more likely enjoy MC experience when friendly return policies and timely fulfillment are offered (Liang et al., 2017). Based on a review of related research, this study conceptualized the values of mass-customized dress shirs into three dimensions: product value, co-creation experience value, and ownership transfer value.

Method: Six top retailers that offer MC dress shirt were identified by searching "customizing dress shirt websites" on Google.com. The consumer comments posted to companies' official websites and Trustpilot.com between March 2020 and March 2021 were collected. In total, 586 comments were included for data analysis. A small portion of the collected text data was analyzed to develop the coding scheme first. The developed coding categories were used by the researchers to read through and independently code the whole data set. Themes were identified and then grouped into the three dimensions of values (Table 1). NVivo 12 was used for coding and analysis.

Findings: Seven themes of customized product value, six themes of co-creation experience value, and five themes of ownership transfer value were identified respectively (Table 1). *Utilitarian/ functional* value was found to be the top product value. *Fit* and *quality* were more frequently mentioned than others. Also, *style* and *price* value were also moderately mentioned by consumers. *Creative achievement* value was found to be the top co-creation experience value. Consumers also frequently mentioned *experiential/ hedonic value* and *functional value* for MC experience. *Utilitarian value* obtained from easy payment and delivery were found to be the top ownership/possession transfer value. During pandemic, consumers are more accommodating with the service and delivery provided by retailers.

Table 1. Consumer Values of Mass-Customized Dress Shirs

Value	Customized Product Value		Co-creation Experience Value		Ownership/Possession Transfer Value	
Themes	Utilitarian/ Functional Value	Quality (560)	Experiential/ Hedonic Value	Fun (144)	Utilitarian Value	Easy payment (231)
		Fit (843)		Pleasure (382)		Easy return (72)
	Uniqueness/ Aesthetic Value	Style (136)		Friendliness (295)		Delivery (238)
		Color (78)	Creative Achievement Value	Achievement (322)		Timely fulfillment (65)
		Expressiveness (61)		Accomplished (520)	Experiential/ Hedonic Value	(241)
	Cost/Sacrifice Value	Price (195) Save time (81)	Functional Value	Ease to Use (249)		

Discussion/implications: The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted consumers' fashion clothing consumption. Due to lockdown, consumers cannot shop or try-on in stores, consequently online shopping for mass customized waist-up clothes provide an efficient

alternative to meet consumers needs for professional looks from the waist-up. Our findings showed consumers value fit and quality the most when purchase a mass-customized dress shirt during the covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, consumers enjoy the feeling of accomplishment and the pleasure of co-creation process. This finding showed that underlying an individual's clothing consumption is still a desire to feel good, not only physically but also emotionally, even during a crisis time. These findings also indicate a growth opportunity for fashion brands to navigate the crisis through offering online mass-customization options.

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