

## Chinese Gen Zers' Emotional Dimensions for Fashion Design During the Pandemic

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### Introduction

Ever since the onset of COVID-19, the pandemic has driven dramatic shifts in the lifestyles of Chinese Gen Z (CGZ)s, including their clothing needs (Yang & Zhang, 2021). While this segment is a lucrative target market (Su & Tong, 2020) with significant consuming power in post-pandemic China (Zhou et al., 2020), it is still underresearched in terms of CGZ's fashion design demands. It is worth investigating CGZ's emotional dimension of fashion styles during the pandemic because it can provide practical information for fashion brands currently targeting CGZ. This study aims to i) examine CGZ's preferences on fashion styles, ii) conceptualize CGZ's emotional needs for fashion through the Kansei Engineering (KE) model, and iii) provide insights to academia and practitioners regarding the emotional dimensions of CGZ in fashion.

### Literature Review

*Reshaped Chinese Generation Z during the pandemic.* Scholars have revealed that members of CGZ born between 1996 and 2010 are culturally confident, open to other cultures (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999), are digital-friendly, and have substantial spending power with higher consumer autonomy (Grønhøj, 2007) than other generations. Due to the pandemic, however, the ways of thinking and consumption habits of Gen Z in China have been drastically changed and altered. They now tend to consume less, weigh more on work-life balance, and are more flexible in planning their lives (Xiaonan, 2022).

*Emotional Measurement.* The precedent study has examined that consumers make purchase decisions based on emotion (Kansei) and intuition about product attributes (Nagamachi, 1995). In order to capture the various and vague dimensions of these emotions, the studies conceived of verbal (adjectives) and figural (images) measurements. KE is a consumer-oriented technique for product design through interpreting consumers' psychological feelings and images for a product, and consequently, products can be developed to elicit the intended response (Nagamachi, 2002).

### Research Method

We conducted research for the KE in four steps: i) image selection, ii) word extraction, iii) a survey using the semantic differential method, and iv) an analysis of the CGZ's style perception and preference.

Specifically, we selected eight style hashtags from articles about popular styles among Gen Z in the Asia-Pacific region for the past three years from WGSN: #Newprep, #Cottagecore, #Sartorial, #Y2K, #Loungewear, #Youth essentials, #Gothlite, and #Gamescape. Representative image samples of each style were borrowed from CGZ influencers' Weibo with over 100k followers in order to examine clothing perceptions from exclusively CGZers'. For the word extraction, two experts sorted out 227 style descriptive keywords from 35 articles analyzing popular styles among Gen Z in the Asia-Pacific region from collecting reviews, key trends, and buyer's briefings on WGSN, reported after the outbreak of 2019. We crawled these initial keywords on the Vogue US website from 1988 to 2021 through Python, ranked the keywords by frequency of occurrence, and finally had 21 pairs of adjectives and 1 pair of preference words for the semantic differential method (Osgood, 1952).

The survey consisted of 7 demographic items, 2 consumer values and behaviors items, and 8 questionnaires about style preferences and perceptions with a 6-point bipolar adjective scale. We surveyed after the IRB approval (HSEARS20211228002) between 13 Jan 2022 and 27 Jan 2022 with 168 participants, and 162 were ultimately deemed valid, with 38 males and 124 females aged 18-25 from tier 1 to tier 3 cities in China. We employed descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and cluster analysis using SPSS 26.

### Results & Discussion

*CGZ's preference for fashion style and factors correlated.* The mean value of each Kansei image was calculated and presented based on CGZ's preferences for each style. CGZ most favored those styles that featured vibrant and youthful qualities (Youth essentials, New prep), as well as relaxed styles such as Loungewear and Cottagecore, while less preferred the formal (Sartorial) and retro (Y2K) styles compared to casual and comfy fashion, whereas they altogether disliked offbeat and surreal styles (e.g., Gothlite, Gamescape). Furthermore, a correlation analysis showed that 3 pairs of keywords, "inappropriate-appropriate" (0.674), "uncomfortable-easy" (0.627), and "hard-soft" (0.408) were most significantly correlated with the "like-dislike" factor. This result is consistent with the core of their preferred style, which is age-appropriate and comfortable.

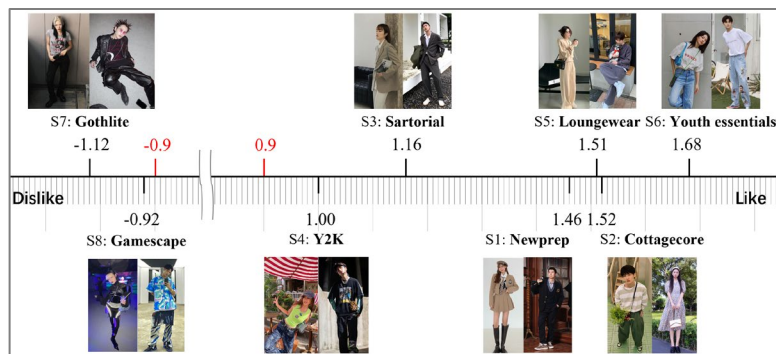


Figure 1. Style preference spectrum

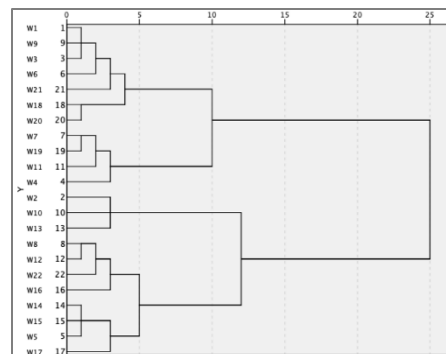


Figure 2. Dendrogram using Ward linkage

**Cluster analysis.** We categorized four groups using cluster analysis. In order to evaluate CGZ's fashion style more intuitively, we defined each common factor as i) sense of the surroundings (W1: old-new, W6: classic-contemporary, W21: mature-youthful, W18: rural-urban, W20: local-global, W3: serious-fun, W9: unfashionable-chic); ii) a sense of its relationship with others (W2: light-heavy, W10: casual-formal, W13: feminine-masculine); iii) a sense of its relationship with the body (W4: hard-soft, W7: uncomfortable-easy, W11: slim-loose, W19: inappropriate-appropriate); and iv) a sense in terms of dressing purpose or intent (W8: simple-complex, W12: pure-sexy, W16: natural-artificial, W22: inexpensive-luxurious, W5: plain-rich, W14: common-unique, W15: subtle-bold, W17: functional-aesthetic).

### Conclusion

This study focused on CGZ's emotional needs for dressing and their perceptions of apparel design under the influence of the pandemic by employing KE and cluster analysis. The results imply that CGZ prefers easy, casual, and preppy looks rather than formal and overly trendy styles. Also, CGZ's perception of styles was categorized into four groups according to the degree of proximity between themselves and clothing, others, and the environment. In a future study, there could be a further investigation regarding which category is the most influential on clothing purchase decisions. This study contributes to both academic scholarship and the clothing industry by translating various consumers' needs for clothing into a conceptual framework and broadening the existing research on consumer-driven fashion design. With this insightful result, designers can develop apparel products based on consumers' perceptual demands. However, the research needs to be further assessed and discussed via constant observation and analysis in order to meet the varying needs of a new generation in the era of ever-changing values and constantly shifting environments.

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