

Coping during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Perspective of Fashion Shopping

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Introduction With the outbreak of COVID-19, consumers have been experiencing dramatic lifestyle changes. Accordingly, significant changes have been observed on consumer behaviors, including shifting consumer needs to essential products, cutting spending, and transiting to more online shopping (Yang et al., 2020; Gerlich, 2021; Youn *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, unusual consumer behaviors, such as hoarding, panic buying, and impulsive buying were also observed during the pandemic (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Xiao *et al.*, 2020). In consequence, the retail landscape has experienced unexpected disruptions. To survive in such a swiftly changing market environment, it is of vital importance for retailers to understand consumer coping behaviors when facing a public health crisis. To fill the literature gap, this study aimed to explore consumer coping strategies during the global pandemic. Since fashion products are publicly consumed, also and the fashion industry has been influenced significantly by the pandemic (Oberlo, 2022), this study focused on fashion shopping to reflect consumer coping behaviors.

Literature Review Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals exert to manage stressful events (Folkman *et al.*, 1986). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that coping behaviors are influenced by how individuals appraise the stressful situation and their evaluation of personal ability to manage stress. Built upon the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), multiple coping inventories were proposed to capture consumer coping strategies, such as Ways of Coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), Multidimensional Coping Inventory (Endler & Parker, 1990), and Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) Inventory (Carver *et al.*, 1989). Among them, the COPE Inventory and its brief version (i.e., Brief-COPE Inventory; Carver, 1997) were widely used to assess coping (e.g., Khan, 2013). While the specific dimensions vary among the different coping inventories, there is a census recognizing the dichotomy of problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping refers to direct actions to resolve the stressful event or alter the source of the problem, while emotion-focused coping refers to managing the negative emotions associated with the stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Babin *et al.* (1994) postulated two types of values consumers obtain through shopping, namely utilitarian and hedonic values. Utilitarian shopping value reflects whether the particular consumption need stimulating the shopping trip was accomplished through the acquisition of products (Babin *et al.*, 1994). On the contrary, hedonic shopping value reflects the value received from the multisensory, fantasy and

emotive aspects of the shopping experience, which indicates the potential entertainment and emotional worth of shopping (To *et al.*, 2007; Babin *et al.*, 1994). Consistent with the coping theory, shopping could serve as a way of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping by providing utilitarian and hedonic value respectively. Therefore, the current study aimed to understand consumers' coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of fashion shopping.

Method A qualitative exploratory study was conducted by analyzing existing social media data (Twitter data) in May 2020 to reveal consumers' fashion shopping behaviors during the early pandemic. Screening keywords were used in the process of data scraping. A total of 31723 fashion consumption related tweets were collected as raw data. Then, tweets posted by organizational accounts were excluded to ensure the collected data reflect consumer insights only, resulting in 24934 Twitter data identified as qualified. Finally, ten percent of them were randomly selected to represent the whole data set for further qualitative content analysis. A codebook was developed based on the COPE inventory (Carver *et al.*, 1989) to lead the coding process. Multiple theory-guided dimensions were reviewed within the context, then inappropriate dimensions were excluded. Next, the authors each conducted a content analysis of a subsample of 100 to develop data-driven codes. Mutually agreed data-driven themes were fit into theory-driven dimensions as subdimensions, which further consolidated the theory-driven dimensions. Finally, the codebook was developed, guided by which, the whole data set of 2493 tweets was content analyzed. Table 1 illustrates the simplified coding structure.

Table 1. Coding Structure

Problem-focused Coping Strategies	Active Coping	Changing shopping channels	Emotion-focused Coping Strategies	Positive Reinterpretation	Money-saving
		Hygiene-concerned behaviors			Exploring new brands
		Stockpiling			DIY
	Restraint Coping	Controlling expenditures		Acceptance	Adaptation
		Saving money			Positive/neutral attitude
		Holding off fashion shopping			Shopping as usual
	Seeking Instrumental Social Support	Seeking suggestions		Mental Disengagement	Distraction
		Gifts			Mood alleviation
					Seeking Emotional Social Support
					Gifts

Results Seven fashion consumption related coping strategies were identified from the collected data. Within problem-focused coping, three significant coping strategies were adopted: active coping, restraint coping, and seeking instrumental social support. Specifically, consumers changed their shopping approach, became more hygiene-concerned when shopping, and stockpiled essential products as active coping behaviors. For restraint coping, consumers tended to control their expenditures and save money intentionally. Also, some shopping was held on for a period in order to save resources and prepare for the future uncertainty induced by the pandemic situation. Additionally, the Twitter data indicated that asking others for suggestions as well as giving/receiving gifts as instrumental social support is another commonly used strategy to cope with the COVID

situation. Regarding emotion-focused coping, four themes of coping were identified: positive reinterpretation, acceptance, mental disengagement, and seeking social support for emotional reasons. Consumers tried to think about the pandemic situation positively to deal with the stress emotion. Specifically, the pandemic situation was reinterpreted as an opportunity for money saving, trying new brands, and experiencing DIY. Some consumers took the acceptance strategy to adapt to the stressful situation, accepting it as a “new normal”. Also, fashion shopping was always used as a way to mentally disengage from problems induced by the pandemic. Particularly, fashion shopping was employed to alleviate the negative mood, distract from the stressful situation, and provide compensatory feelings. For emotional social support, gifting for cheering someone up is significant among consumers.

Conclusion Theoretically, this study contextualized the COPE Inventory in the field of consumer behavior toward fashion shopping during the pandemic. The conceptual framework established in this study provides a systematic understanding of consumer coping strategies from the perspective of fashion shopping, which lays a foundation for future quantitative studies. Practically, the consumer behavior pattern discovered in the current study gives managerial implications to fashion retailers, which contribute to the marketing strategy development in crisis. From the humanity perspective, this study may shed some light on how our society, including media, public policymakers, social workers, and other consumer wellbeing practitioners and advocates, could get better prepared for future pandemics or crises.

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