Shopping for Clothing in Retail Stores During a Pandemic:
The Role of Interdependence and Age in Use of Precautionary Measures

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Background and conceptual framework. During the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for both businesses and consumers (Verma & Gustafsson, 2020). Authorities at all levels of government published guidelines for consumers to follow when shopping in retail stores (e.g., precautionary measures such as social distancing, wearing a mask, etc.). A controversy arose regarding individual freedom to choose whether to wear a mask or not. School board meetings were disrupted by parents protesting mask mandates (e.g., Shivaram, 2021); retail employees were berated and even assaulted by customers who refused to put on a mask when asked to do so (e.g., Hauck, G., 2020). Behavior during pandemics has been attributed to individual-level motivations (Wen et al., 2005). *The purpose of this study* was to examine how individual-level personal values and age affect shopping behavior during a pandemic, specifically, the value of interdependence and younger/older age groups on use of precautionary measures when shopping in retail clothing stores.

Individual-level cultural values may vary from country-level cultural values (Hofstede, 2001; Sharma, 2010). Among cultural values are the negatively related values of interdependence and independence. Interdependent adults focus on communal goals, norms, obligations, duties and maintenance of relationships. Interdependence is related to other cultural values such as social reliability and morality, conformity (Schwartz, 1994), and compliance behavior (Schouten, 2008). Valuing interdependence can influence shopping behavior during a pandemic, for example, interdependent adults may be more willing to give priority to the common good rather than their individual rights. Consumer responses to compliance behavior such as use of precautionary measures may be affected.

Older people with pre-existing medical conditions and aging immune systems are more vulnerable to severe illness from the corona virus (Nania, 2021). It is recommended that older adults limit in-person interactions, avoid crowded indoor areas, wear a mask and practice social distancing (Nania, 2021). On the other hand, young people may discount health risks in general and assume that they are immune to the consequences of Covid-19. Covid-19 is a life-threatening disease in people of all ages; social distancing, facial coverings, and other precautionary measures are as important in young adults as in older persons (Stenson, 2020).

Precautionary measures (e.g., hand hygiene, wearing a mask) were found to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (Wang et al, 2020). It seems likely that people high (vs low) in interdependence would follow suggested safety guidelines, out of concern for their own well-being, but also the well-being for others. Likewise, older adults who have an increased

vulnerability to disease seem more likely to follow recommended guidelines than young adults who may discount health risks associated with Covid-19. Hypotheses proposed were:

- H1abcdef: Consumers with higher (lower) interdependence will score higher on use of precautionary measures when shopping in retail stores: (a) social distancing, (b) wearing a mask or other face covering, (c) wearing gloves, (d) refraining from touching the merchandise, (e) refraining from trying on clothing, and (f) washing or sanitizing hands.
- H2abcdef: Consumers who are older (younger) will score higher on use of precautionary measures when shopping in retail stores: (a) social distancing, (b) wearing a mask or other face covering, (c) wearing gloves, (d) refraining from touching the merchandise, (e) refraining from trying on clothing, and (f) washing or sanitizing hands.

Method. Participants (n=331) were recruited via Qualtrics Panel services. Participants were 122 men (36.9%) and 209 women (63.1%) ranging in age from 20-64 (M=40.05, SD=11.96); 239 Caucasians (72.2%), 22 Hispanic/Latino (6.6%), 52 African/Americans (15.7%), 12 Asian/Americans (3.6%), and 6 other (1.8%). A questionnaire contained demographic items, a scale for interdependence, and six precautionary measures used when shopping in retail stores. Interdependence was measured by a 6-item scale (Sharma, 2010) with response options of 1=strongly disagree--5=strongly agree. Responses were summed to create a score on interdependence. Six precautionary measures were selected: (a) social distancing, (b) wearing a mask or other face covering, (c) wearing gloves, (d) refraining from touching the merchandise, (e) refraining from trying on clothing, and (f) washing or sanitizing hands. Instructions were: Please indicate how often you used the following precautionary measures while shopping for clothing in brick-and-mortar stores during the last six months during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability, factor analysis, M/ANOVA.

Results. Preliminary analysis. Participants were split into two groups based on the median score (23.52) of interdependence ($\geq$ 23 high n=134; < 23 low n=197) and two age groups using the mean age ($\leq$40 n = 173; >40 n = 158). Reliability for interdependence was acceptable at .78.

MANOVA with interdependence and age as IVs and DVs of six precautionary measures was significant for age groups [(6, 322) = 4.24, p < .000] and for interdependence [(6, 322) = 3.12, p < .000]. There was no significant interaction between age group and interdependence.

ANOVA results showed that interdependence was significant for all six precautionary measures. Participants high (vs low) in interdependence practiced precautionary measures more often: social distancing (p<.03; M^{high}=4.39; M^{low}=4.13), mask wearing (p<.000; M^{high}=4.69; M^{low}=4.29), wearing gloves (.005; M^{high}=2.80; M^{low}=2.32), not touching the merchandise (.004; M^{high}=3.56; M^{low}=3.15), not trying on clothing (.04; M^{high}=4.10; M^{low}=3.80), and washing/sanitizing hands (.002; M^{high}=4.37; M^{low}=3.96). H1abcdef were supported.

ANOVA results showed that age group was significant for three precautionary measures: social distancing (p<.006; $M^{>40}$=4.41; $M^{\leq40}$=4.10), mask wearing (p<.04; $M^{>40}$=4.63; $M^{\leq40}$=4.34), and not trying on clothing (p<.04; $M^{>40}$=4.22; $M^{\leq40}$=3.66). Those greater than 40

years old more often used these three precautionary measures than the less than or equal to 40 age group. Younger and older age groups did not differ in three precautionary measures: wearing gloves, not touching the merchandise and washing/sanitizing hands. H2abe were supported.

   Discussion/implications**.** The personal value of interdependence affected consumer behavior; those with heightened interdependence used more precautionary measures. It is encouraging that the mean score of both groups was at or above 4 ("most of the time") for social distancing, mask wearing, and washing/sanitizing hands. Likewise, the mean score of both age groups indicated they used social distancing and wore a mask most of the time. Retail workers who are asked to monitor customers for masks should receive training in how to respond to recalcitrant and often belligerent customers who do not want to comply. Retail workers should be able to expect a safe working environment free from exposure to transmissible diseases and physical or verbal assault.

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