COVID-Stress Induced Self-Regulatory Sustainable Apparel Consumption in the U.S.

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Background and Setting

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several researchers indicated how the consequences of the pandemic were particularly dire due to the ill environmental health and how human actions were partly responsible for that ill environmental health (Barreiro-Gen et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2021). The different negative consequences of the pandemic evoked COVID-stress (i.e., increased stress, depression, and other negative psychological and emotional responses to COVID-19 pandemic) (Perz et al., 2020). The increasing environmental concerns and/or awareness (Barreiro-Gen et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2021) and intentions for sustainable consumption during the pandemic (Ali et al., 2021; Barreiro-Gen et al., 2020; Garel & Petit-Romec, 2021; Mishra et al., 2021; Severo et al., 2021) testify people's willingness to protect the environment to lessen the brunt of the pandemic due to ill environmental health. However, despite the apparel industry being one of the biggest contributors to ill environmental health (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018), to the best of our knowledge, there is no research on how the COVID-stress experienced during the pandemic would influence intentions for sustainable apparel consumption intentions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of (i) COVID-stress on the commitment to the environment and intentions for sustainable apparel consumption in terms of purchase intention for sustainable apparel and intentions for divesting apparel; (ii) the commitment to the environment on the purchase intentions for sustainable apparel and intentions for divesting apparel and; (iii) how the commitment to the environment mediates the relationship between COVID-stress and the intentions for purchasing sustainable apparel or divesting apparel.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

The regulatory focus theory posits that people have two distinct foci for self-regulation—promotion-focused and prevention-focused (Higgins, 2012). The promotion-focused people are driven by aspirations, growth, and developmental needs to align their actual self with their ideal self. The prevention-focused people are driven by security needs to align their actual self with their ought self to fulfill their duties and secure their future (Higgins, 2012). As a result, several instances of growing environmental concerns were rife during the pandemic (Ali et al., 2021; Barreiro-Gen et al., 2020; Garel & Petit-Romec, 2021; Mishra et al., 2021; Severo et al., 2021). A few researchers mentioned increased sustainable consumption behavior during the pandemic (Ali et al., 2021; Degli et al., 2021; Severo et al., 2021). Previously, researchers have indicated the relationship between the self-regulatory foci and sustainable consumption/sustainably oriented mindset (Bhatnagar & Mckay-Nesbitt, 2016; Fischer et al., 2018; Miniero et al., 2014). For example, Minero et al. (2014) found that prevention-focused people engage in both short- and long-term green behavior. Long-term promotion-focus increases environmental concern (Bhatnager & McKay-Nesbitt, 2016). Therefore, it could be implied that the promotion-focused people will have higher commitment to the environment and evoke higher intentions for purchasing sustainable apparel and divesting apparel in the hope of environmental health recovery to cope with their COVID-stress. On the other hand, the prevention-focused people may exhibit higher commitment to the environment and evoke higher intentions for purchasing sustainable apparel and divesting apparel due to the insecurity that if they do not do so it will

negatively impact the environment, worsening the brunt of the pandemic. Therefore, the prevention-focused people may feel that it is their duty to be more committed to the environment and engage in sustainable apparel consumption by purchasing sustainable apparel or divesting apparel to help the environment recover or at least help the environmental health not go worse during the pandemic. Based on this discussion, we hypothesized that COVID-stress will positively influence **(H1)** commitment to the environment, **(H2)** purchase intentions for sustainable apparel and **(H3)** intentions for divesting apparel. Researchers have shown that a higher concern or commitment for the environment encourages sustainable consumption, including higher intentions for purchasing sustainable apparel and divesting apparel. Therefore, we hypothesized that the commitment to the environment will positively influence **(H4)** purchase intentions for sustainable apparel and **(H5)** intentions for divesting apparel and; the commitment to the environment will mediate the relationship between COVID-stress and **(H6a)** purchase intentions for sustainable apparel and **(H6b)** intentions for divesting apparel.

Method and Data Analysis

An online Qualtrics survey was administered on Amazon Mechanical Turk to collect the data ($n = 317$). The national sample of U.S. millennials (born between 1981-1996) were recruited to participate in the survey. Extant measurement scales were adapted to measure COVID-stress (Perz et al., 2020), commitment to the environment (Davis et al., 2009), purchase intention for sustainable apparel (Ghazali et al., 2018), and intentions for divesting apparel (Cho et al., 2015). All the variables were measured in 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Confirmatory Factor Analysis was performed in Mplus (version 8.6) which fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 515.98$, *df* = 183, *p* < .001; χ^2/df = 2.82; RMSEA = .08; CFI =.91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06). The hypotheses were tested in Structural Equation Modelling as a comprehensive model in Mplus. In Model 1, we tested H1-H5. Model 1 fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 515.98$, *df* = 183, *p* < .001; χ^2/df = 2.82; RMSEA = .08; CFI =.91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06). **H1** (β = .39, *p* < .001), **H2** (β = .38, *p* < .001), **H4** (β = .55, *p* < .001), and **H5** (β = .73, *p* < .001) were supported. **H3** (β = -.03, *p* =.001) was rejected. We ran Model 2 to test the mediation hypotheses. Model 2 fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 515.98$, *df* = 183, *p* < .001; χ^2/df = 2.82; RMSEA = .08; CFI =.91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06). **H6a** (β = .21, *p* < .001, C.I. = [.16, .27]) and **H6b** (β = .28, *p* < .001, C.I. = [.21, .36]) were supported. The variance explained in the commitment to the environment (R^2 = 15.2%, *p* < .001), purchase intentions for sustainable apparel (R^2 = 60.6%, *p* < .001) and intentions for divesting apparel (R^2 = 51.1%, *p* < .001) were significant.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2012), we proposed and found support to our conceptual model that COVID-stress positively influences commitment to the environment and purchase intentions for sustainable apparel. Although we did not find support to our hypothesis that COVID-stress positively influences intentions for divesting apparel, we did find an indirect positive influence of COVID-stress on the intentions for divesting apparel via commitment to the environment. Therefore, higher the degree of the COVID-stress, higher would be the commitment to the environment which in turn would encourage intentions for divesting apparel. Additionally, the commitment to the environment mediated the relationship between COVID-stress and purchase intentions for sustainable apparel. Therefore, higher the degree of the COVID-stress, higher would be the commitment to the environment which in turn would encourage purchase intentions for sustainable apparel. In the future, studies could explore how the two regulator foci would influence the appraisal of sustainable apparel or sustainable consumption during a pandemic or any other crisis situation. Based on our findings, we recommend the marketers and apparel brands to communicate how consumption of sustainable apparel would help protect the environment and minimize the degree of negative consequences of COVID-19 due to ill environmental health.

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