

The use of clothing as a mood enhancer and its effect on mental health in emerging adults in Canada during a global pandemic

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Introduction. The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated societies and daily living. Literature has consistently found that mental health had worsened across the globe during the pandemic (Rajkumar, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). Statistics Canada (2020) stated that emerging adults (18 to 29 years of age; Arnett, 2004) reported poorer mental health among other age cohorts and indicated a greater need for mental health care than other age groups. Relationships with clothing during the pandemic was also affected due to decreased consumption of fashion and the preference to wear comfortable clothing at home (Liu et al., 2021). Given the pandemic's effects on mental health and fashion consumption, it is unclear whether emerging adults used clothing to regulate their mood during the pandemic. This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the use of clothing as a mood enhancer, and its effects on mental health for Canadian emerging adults.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework. Clothing has been proven to have an empowering and multi-faceted contribution to people's lives, such as expressing and bolstering one's identity (McNeill & Venter, 2019; Rocamora, 2017; Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017), providing comfort and safety (Kang et al., 2013; Kwon & Shim, 1999; Rahman et al., 2021), and being a tool that can enhance mood (Kang et al., 2013; Koksai, 2014; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Moody et al., 2010). Therefore, clothing influences psychological processes, and Adam and Galinsky (2012) defines this effect as enclothed cognition. This study applied this concept to assert that clothing had influenced mood and mental health in emerging adults during the peaks of the global pandemic. With this conceptual framework, positive relationships were predicted between effects of the pandemic, using clothing as a mood enhancer, and mental health. This study addresses the following research questions.

- RQ1.** How has the pandemic impacted fashion involvement?
- RQ2.** How has the pandemic impacted the use of clothing as a mood enhancer?
- RQ3.** What are the motivations for using clothing as a mood enhancer during the pandemic?
- RQ4.** How has the use of clothing as a mood enhancer impacted psychological well-being during the pandemic?

Method. Participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics and were recruited from several social media platforms. To measure the effect of the pandemic on emerging adults, the fear of COVID-19 scale was implemented (7 items measuring level of fear of the pandemic; Ahorsu et al., 2020). The survey also included the Fashion Involvement scale (10 items measuring the relationship with and significance of

clothing; O’Cass, 2000), the clothing for Mood Enhancement scale (7 items measuring use of clothing to enhance mood; Kwon, 1992), two dimensions of the Proximity of Clothing to Self-scale (6 items measuring the extent clothing reflects the self and 8 items measuring self-beliefs that clothing evokes; Sontag & Lee, 2004), and the Mental Health Continuum (MHC) Short-Form scale (14 items measuring overall mental health; Keyes, 2002). The survey also included an item citing different clothing functions to determine participant’s motivations for wearing clothing during the peaks of the pandemic (Kwon & Parham, 1994). A total of 576 participants were recruited in this study. The majority of the sample fell into the 19-21 age bracket (53.3%). Three hundred ninety-six individuals identified as female, 134 identified as male, 13 as transgender, and 21 as non-binary. While the sample was diverse in ethnicity, most participants were White (60.9%), followed by South Asian (8.7%), and Black (5.7%).

Results. Each research question was investigated with a Pearson correlation and a linear regression. Fear of COVID-19 significantly predicted fashion involvement (RQ1: $\beta = .123, p < .001$). There was a positive and statistically significant relationship between fear of COVID-19 and fashion involvement (RQ1: $r = .123, p < .001$). Fear of COVID-19 significantly predicted clothing as a mood enhancer (RQ2: $\beta = .232, p < .001$). There was a positive and statistically significant relationship between fear of COVID-19 and clothing as a mood enhancer (RQ2: $r = .232, p < .001$). Mood enhancement had a strong positive and statistically significant relationship with self as structure, (RQ3: $r = .740, p < .001, \beta = .443, p < .001$) and self-esteem (RQ3: $r = .736, p < .001, \beta = .429, p < .001$). Participants reported several motivations behind their clothing selections during the pandemic, including enhancing self-comfort (83.2%), increasing security and self-confidence (51.6%), displaying individuality (27.6%), being fashionable (26.6%), and camouflaging parts they were dissatisfied with (19.6%). The use of clothing as a mood enhancer did not have a statistically significant correlation or effect on mental health.

Discussion and Implications. Fashion involvement was positively related to fear of the pandemic, which can mean that clothing was of greater relevance to one’s life and dressing became more meaningful during the pandemic. The use of clothing to enhance mood was also positively predicted by fear of the pandemic, suggesting that emerging adults used clothing as a tool to cope with fear by enhancing their mood. Significant relationships between clothing use as a mood enhancer, self-esteem, and self as structure was found. This suggests that emerging adults bolstered their self-esteem and reinforced a positive self-concept through their use of clothing during the pandemic, and this consequently enhanced their mood. No significant relationship was found between mental health and clothing as a mood enhancer. Several explanations are considered. As mood is temporary, enhancing mood through clothing may be difficult to sustain to influence mental health. Alternatively, mental health captures emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, whereas mood enhancement relates to emotional and psychological wellbeing. Therefore, the mental health variable may not be the appropriate measurement to capture this effect as it is too broad. This research is the first attempt to understand how the pandemic impacted the use of clothing to cope and manage mental health. It is also the first study to investigate the relationship between clothing and mental health. The study was limited with a sample population drawn exclusively

from Canada and thus, the findings would be difficult to generalize across all emerging adults. Considering the global adversities with mental health, this study suggests that clothing can be used as a coping mechanism to sustain positive moods and halt negative moods by providing comfort, bolstering self-esteem, and being in alignment with one's self-concept.

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