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# The New Normal: An Exploratory Study of Consumer Perceptions of Sustainable Consumption Amid a Global Pandemic

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The New Normal:  
An Exploratory Study of Consumer Perceptions of Sustainable Consumption Amid a Global  
Pandemic

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Climate change is one of the greatest existential threats of our time (Mecklin, 2017, para. 1). The \$2.5 trillion USD (and increasing) global apparel industry has been found to contribute 10% of the world's carbon emissions, produces 20% of global industrial water pollution annually, and damages the world's oceans through micro plastic pollution and maritime shipping (McFall-Johnsen, 2019; Thomas, 2019). The endless fashion cycle demands newer and less expensive trends and styles coming out every season, thus garments are considered disposable (Farley-Gordon & Hill, 2015). The projected global consumption of apparel and footwear goods is projected to rise 65% to 102 million tons by the year 2030 (Newburger, 2020). Raised consumer awareness of the environmental impact of cheap and disposable fashion has given rise in sustainable initiatives across the apparel industry. Clothing rental services, such as Rent the Runway, give customers continual access to new styles while prolonging the life cycle garments by renting to multiple consumers over time, which reduces the environmental footprint. The Gen Z, Millennial, and Gen X generations are driving these sustainability initiatives through their influence, since they are most likely to be impacted by future climate change. These generations are known for demanding evidence of sustainability initiatives from apparel brands (Winston, 2016). However, the global COVID-19 pandemic has the potential of derailing progress associated with apparel sustainability through clothing rentals. Companies have increased activities regarding sanitizing of apparel and accessory items in the midst of consumer concerns (Roshitsh, 2020) and sales of used and vintage clothing have dropped 64% (Lee, 2020). In addition, younger consumers who demand sustainability have been disproportionately impacted by the financial effects of the pandemic and will "bear the brunt of its economic consequences" (Kaverman, 2020).

**Method.** An online survey captured younger consumers feelings about clothing rentals during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The survey included a definition and examples of clothing rental services and items assessing demographics, willingness to use a clothing rental service during and after the current global pandemic, reasons for using/ avoiding use of clothing rental, pandemic shopping habits, and green consumer values (Haws et al, 2010). With IRB approval, the survey was administered between March 2020 and January 2021 to undergraduates of two mid-sized universities. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, paired and unpaired

sample *t*-tests, and regression. Data were checked for the assumptions of these analyses, such as normality and homoscedasticity.

**Results.** Data were collected from 177 participants. The sample was 81% female and included 132 participants (75%) identifying as Gen Z, 35 (20%) as Millennials, and 10 (6%) as Gen X. Thirty-six percent of participants classified their ethnicity as white, 31% as other, 28% as Asian, 4% as Black or African American, and 1% as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Participants reported yearly income before taxes of less than \$10,000 (21%), \$10,000 to \$49,000 (31%), \$50,000 to \$99,000 (29%), and \$100,000+ (19%). Fifty-three percent indicated their apparel shopping had decreased during the pandemic, 22% had increased their apparel shopping, and 24% reported their apparel shopping had stayed the same as pre-pandemic levels. Data were checked for assumptions and multi-item measures had acceptable reliability with Cronbach's alpha estimates above 0.89. Most participants (89%) had not previously used a clothing rental service, 9% had used these services a little bit, and 2% a moderate amount. A significant difference was found in willingness to use clothing rentals ( $t(175) = -7.288, p < .000$ ) during ( $M = 3.05, SD = 1.77$ ) and after ( $M = 3.86, SD = 1.75$ ) the pandemic. Participants rated the importance of hygiene ( $M = 6.72, SD = 0.79$ ), affordability ( $M = 6.27, SD = 0.98$ ), sustainability ( $M = 6.11, SD = 1.10$ ), and style ( $M = 4.77, SD = 1.68$ ) to using clothing rental services. Participants indicated they would *not* use clothing rental services due to hygiene concerns (34%), unfamiliarity with clothing rentals (23%), price (10%), style availability (12%), N/A [I would use a clothing rental service] (14%), and other (9%). Those selecting "other" reported concerns such as sizing and fit and a desire to spend money only on clothing they could keep. Willingness to use clothing rental services was regressed on a participants' Green Consumer Values for both willingness to use during the pandemic and after the pandemic. Both regression models were insignificant ( $p > .05$ ).

**Discussion.** The results indicate a slight increase in consumers' willingness to engage in clothing rental pre- to post-pandemic, which conflicts with their concerns about hygiene. It is possible that clothing rental companies' publicizing of their dry cleaning capabilities (such as Rent-the-Runway) has been effective in counteracting consumers' apprehension regarding disease transmission. Despite highly rating sustainability as important to clothing rental use, green consumption values were not found to be related to willingness to use a clothing rental service. It is possible that concerns over hygiene may supersede sustainable living in consumer's minds, as evidenced by participants higher rating of hygiene in the current study and supported by Park and Armstrong's (2019) finding that risk perception was negatively related to clothing rental adoption. Limitations of the current study include a sample that skewed towards female (81%), Gen Z (75%), and comprised mostly (69%) of White or Asian participants. Surprisingly, almost 1/2 of participants indicated that they either maintained (24%) or increased (22%) their apparel purchasing during the pandemic. Future research is required with a larger sample that includes additional millennial and Gen Z consumers and a broader representation of ethnicity and gender.

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