



# "Vanity-Oriented" Fashion Consumption During Covid-19: an Empirical Study of Chinese Consumers

Yanghui Cao

University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom  
Email: yd841648@student.reading.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the purchase intention of Chinese consumers concerning vanity when making decisions, to what extent vanity influences the final purchase behavior, and to assess its basic logic by adjusting the rational action theory model. In addition, the results of this study are helpful to marketers and local policymakers and fill gaps in the literature in the in-depth understanding of Chinese consumers and the Chinese fashion market, with possible solutions to help the luxury industry decrease the existence of counterfeit luxury products.

**Keywords:** *Consumer Behavior, Vanity, Covid-19, Chinese fashion market, Theory of Reasoned Actions*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase "vanity-oriented consumption habit" was coined in a previous study to refer to the tendency of people to buy goods and services for their pleasure, regardless of cost, taking cosmetic factors into account [27]. Vanity-oriented consumption has been introduced by some previous studies as the consumption behavior caused by "Social Face Sensitivity" or "Face consciousness" [4] [23]. It is a form of conspicuous consumption which refers to spending money on luxury items or services, such as expensive cars, but not limited to luxury items, any financially unaffordable and deemed to deviate from its original use intent could be a form of vanity-oriented consumption. For instance, previous research by [22] described it as 'fixation on physical appearance and achievement of personal goals, which leads to negative customer behaviour.

The situation has become more common in China since the country experienced its first economic crisis in 2008. In recent years, due to the increase in disposable income of Chinese consumers and changing social attitudes towards such consumption, such consumption behavior has risen sharply [32].

There are three possible reasons for vanity-driven consumption in China.

- 1) There is an unwritten culture in society that demonstrates an individual's wealth by purchasing products with non-rigid demand, and there is an apparent mismatch between an

individual's financial situation and this consumption habit.

- 2) Luxury goods or services are purchased to compare with friends or simply because of celebrity advertising.
- 3) "Anxiety-instigated" consumption (panic buying) caused by unreliable information gathered by social media and consumers' judgement about the impact of a future pandemic on materials and resources.

## 2. RESEARCH AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the latest trends in some unnatural and unsustainable consumer behaviour in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, the purchasing intentions of Chinese consumers concerning vanity when making decisions, and the extent to which vanity influences the final purchasing behaviour. In addition, further effects of this phenomenon to the production side in China will be discussed.

### 2.1. Research Objectives

Objectives of this study include the following:

- (1) To verify whether Chinese consumers made "vanity" purchases during the pandemic;

- (2) To discuss how vanity-oriented purchasing behavior develops among Chinese consumers;
- (3) To identify the reasons why Chinese consumers reject second-hand clothing;
- (4) To determine whether Chinese consumers are likely to accept second-hand clothing or other types of sustainable fashion consumption;
- (5) To examine if vanity-oriented purchases will affect the luxury production.

## 2.2. Research questions

This study focuses on addressing the following research questions

- (1) Do most Chinese consumers attend vanity-buying during the global crisis?
- (2) How is vanity buying developing among Chinese consumers?
- (3) What are the specific reasons why Chinese consumers reject second-hand clothes?
- (4) To what extent do Chinese consumers accept buying and wearing second-hand clothes?
- (5) How this kind of purchasing behavior will affect the production side in China?

## 3. THE RATIONALE FOR SELECTING THE RESEARCH TOPIC

Predictably, the growth rate of China's middle class in recent years has shown an increase in purchasing power, which the fashion industry should not ignore. The Chinese government has minimized the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy, and the growth rate of national consumption has not declined as in some other countries [19] [12]. As one of the largest consumers of the fashion market and one of the countries with the largest clothing and clothing materials factories, China has great potential in both consumption and production [26].

According to Lang et al. (2018), Chinese consumers have a strong desire for uniqueness, which drives these consumers to seek products different from others constantly. This study explores the relationship between Chinese consumers' vanity and fashion consumption during current global crisis events. Therefore, local and foreign marketers will understand how Chinese consumers will react before the COVID-19 event ends or future events.

## 4. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Few studies have introduced the concept of consumer vanity in different disciplines. For instance, Netemeyer

et al. (1995) presented four components of vanity construction: appearance concern, appearance perception, achievement concern and achievement perception. To narrow the scope, this study focuses only on vanity-oriented fashion purchases during COVID-19. The online survey will determine how Chinese consumers participate in vanity consumption habits through questionnaires designed. In addition, this study will determine why Chinese consumers refuse to buy second-hand clothing and the possibility of accepting second-hand clothing in the future.

## 5. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 5.1. Chinese Fashion Market

In terms of regulations and efforts to reduce vanity buying, a handful of studies claim that in some other countries, people are starting to buy clothing made from environmentally friendly materials and are encouraged to rent and swap clothing rather than buy new ones [16] [2]. Some fashion industry researchers have suggested that rematching clothes through fashion advice can increase people's interest in reusing old clothes and thus reduce clothing waste, for example, the success of vintage shops and trading platforms in several Western countries [6].

However, some studies claim that although some consumers in developed countries are more receptive to new things, many Chinese consumers do not like to wear clothes that have been worn by others, and some clothes that are treated as garbage cause waste and pressure on the environment [5][30]. Additionally, research by Wei and Jung (2017) emphasized the behavioral intention of Chinese consumers is highly related to their emotional value, such as the face issue.

Nevertheless, Vanity-oriented behavior and Chinese consumers' extreme concerns about social face generate another kind of demand which brought the industry negative influences. While the inflation rate is increasing in recent years, the increasing price of luxury items may cause more consumers who are eager for luxury items but financially-incapable to purchase counterfeit luxury products. To elaborate, that eager of eliminating differences between actual state and ideal state may finally cause the purchases of counterfeit luxury products when insufficient funds are available for consumers to purchase real luxury products, as it's the fastest way to increase their "social face" and reach the ideal state [2] [21]. In this case, counterfeit production industry in China may damage the future of luxury industry. As it was stated by many literatures [20] [27], although there are paid attention from few luxury companies to fight against counterfeit products with advanced technology (e.g., Blockchain), the problem may not be eliminated easily as the demand is still increasing during covid-19. As a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, consumer behavior tends to change accordingly with their judgments about future

pandemic trends and panic states about the convenience of online shopping [12]. The classic physical purchase method may not fulfil the safety demand for the current period, while the counterfeit luxury products tend to be more based on online shopping. In this case, there are significant challenges for the luxury industry to deal with [15].

**5.2. Consumer Vanity Scale**

Consumer vanity, according to Netemeyer et al. (1995) and later research by Workman and Lee (2010), is defined as a four-dimensional construct consisting of a focus on physical appearance, a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of physical appearance, a concern for achievement and a positive (and possibly inflated) view of achievement. Consumers' vanity purchasing habits tend to correlate highly with their public self-consciousness and public appearance. Meanwhile, those psychological factors may be the motivation to attend vanity buying. Zamani et al. (2017) claimed that the initial purpose of clothing should be warmth and shelter, which the consumers gradually forget. In addition, the theory of social comparison [11] explains that individuals compare themselves to others in order to evaluate their appearance, which can lead to reinforced and infinite comparisons over time. To put it more specifically, the study does not definitively explain whether Chinese consumers will start to compare their own sustainable fashion consumption behavior. In other words, whether Chinese people will behave differently if they begin to compare the sustainable fashion behavior of others.

**5.3. Chinese Consumers**

As far as the consumers in China, research of Fan and Xiao (1998) reported that China's younger generation is more inclined to seek products from luxury brands, as the country's rapid economic growth has increased the vanity of Chinese citizens [9]. Another study details the vanity of Chinese consumers among the younger generation, who pay more attention to achievement than other countries because of the one-family-one-child rule around 2000 [28][6].

However, the validity of these arguments arguably remains to be seen due to policy changes in the last five years that have seen the one-child rule abolished in order to prevent an aging population. However, most of the generation Y born under one-family-one-child regulation are becoming the major purchasing power in the Chinese market [13][31]. Their comparison with other generations would allow the study to produce a more comparable result.

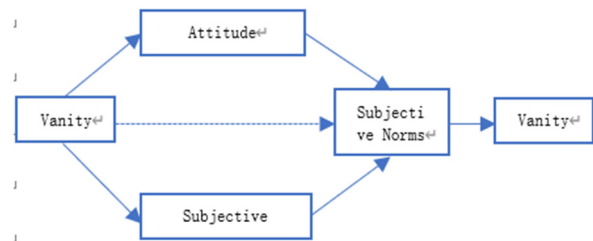
**5.4. Theory of Reasoned Actions**

In previous studies, reasonable action Theory (TORA) holds that through diagnosing consumers' attitudes and

subjective norms, individual intention to participate in a particular object or behavior (Aact) is considered to be the best predictor of that particular action, and it is regarded by much literature and experiments as one of the most qualified and effective consumer behavior prediction models [1][24] [25]. According to Choo et al. (2004), attitudes indicate individuals' cognitive belief (positive or negative) toward a certain action. Subjective norms are the personal perception of social norms, namely whether "a behavior accepted or against by most people or the important ones surrounding" [24]. Therefore, TORA seems to be the best model to measure and explain the SC behavior of Chinese consumers in this study.

Although there is sufficient empirical and theoretical support for the TORA model from previous research, since its publication, much criticism and skepticism have been raised about the interdependence between norms and cognitive concepts (subjective norms and attitudes). For example, Ryan and Bonfield (1975) claimed that an individual's attitudes and subjective norms toward a particular activity or product should be constituted. The distinction of the two factors is ambiguous. Other researchers and the creators of the original theory have also demonstrated an interdependent relationship between the two structures [1][24]. This study will examine the interdependency between attitudes and subjective norms.

Most of the literature applying or criticizing the TORA model attempts to set attitude, SN, and other relevant variables as antecedents of behavioral intent, followed by mediators (behavior intention) of Aact. In this study, the variable "vanity" will be used as the moderator before attitude and SN to examine if vanity has a direct or indirect influence on (1) attitude to SC; (2) SN to SC, and (3) consumers' SC behavior.



**Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework Based on the Theory of Reasoned Actions Model**

**6. PROPOSED RESEARCH METHOD**

This study will use mixed methods, questionnaires to collect consumer data, and qualitative research will be conducted before quantitative research to determine sustainable and unsustainable fashion consumption behaviors in the minds of Chinese consumers, and how they observe the purchase of counterfeit luxury products.

## 7. TOOLS FOR COLLECTING PRIMARY RESEARCH

### 7.1. Qualitative Research Method

At least 6 remote or face-to-face 1-hour in-depth interviews will be completed to identify at least 3 sustainable and unsustainable fashion consumption behaviors that are widely accepted (familiar with) and have access to among Chinese consumers. The participants will be randomly selected from each of five Chinese fashion consumers in a shopping mall in Shanghai. The data collected through the interviews will be coded and the notes will be manually analyzed. Furthermore, the data will be used to examine consumers' subjective norms and attitude toward vanity-oriented purchasing behavior, and counterfeit luxury products.

### 7.2. Quantitative Research Method

To reduce the risk of measurement error, small sample sizes should be avoided and at least 200 samples should be used to obtain more accurate statistical results. In order to obtain raw data on Chinese consumers' consumption habits, preferences and attitudes towards buying unaffordable goods, at least 250 consumers will be invited to complete online research questionnaires. Additionally, the participants would be restricted to only Chinese citizens aged 18 and 60, regardless of gender. To clarify, the decision to confine participants' age is to control the viability of the results. Participants should be capable of making purchase choices alone and engaging in sufficient social activities to be exposed to the public. The current mandatory retirement age in China is 60 years old. Interaction between citizens may decrease to some extent, so this study will not collect data from participants beyond this age.

In order to gather more valuable and accurate research data, consumer vanity will be measured using the Consumer Vanity Scale of Netemeyer et al. (1995), which was developed through a powerful psychometric process, namely the generation of items and purification of the final scale. Here is an example of a project for each of the four dimensions [22]: (a) physical-concern 'My social appearance is important to me'; (b) physical-view 'People notice me often about my social attractiveness'; (c) achievement-concern 'I want to be recognized by others of my achievements' and (d) achievement-view 'My achievements are highly rated by others.'

## 8. PROPOSED METHOD FOR DATA ANALYSIS

### 8.1. Qualitative Research Data

The data collected through the interviews will be coded and the notes will be manually analyzed to

determine consumers' attitudes and subjective norms toward vanity-oriented purchasing behavior.

### 8.2. Quantitative Research Data

Descriptive statistics and survey-related methods will be adopted. SPSS or Excel will convert the collected data into a TORA model for interpretation, and tables and charts will be used to present clearer results. Regression analysis will also be conducted to determine whether Chinese citizens' vanity has increased or changed as a result of their rising economic status, and whether consumption of fashion products has side effects

## 9. CONCLUSION

This study will determine whether the vanity is a key factor in Chinese consumer knowledge and its relationship with purchasing behaviour.

As most Chinese citizens' education level is below undergraduate level, the knowledge of most participants may not support them to complete the all-English questionnaire. Therefore,

1. A Chinese version of the questionnaire will be prepared for participants with a lower educational background who may not be able to understand and answer questions in English.
2. The questionnaire will avoid open-ended questions and instead use rating or Likert scale questions to help simplify the survey process for participants.

Possible outcomes of this study will be to determine the degree of vanity in Chinese consumers' decision making, as well as the reasons for Chinese consumers' refusal to purchase second-hand clothing and the possibility of reducing vanity consumption or acceptance of second-hand clothing in the future due to the rise of subjective norms regarding comparison in personal sustainable fashion consumption habits. In addition, the results of this study will benefit marketers and local policymakers with in-depth understanding to Chinese fashion market. Meanwhile fill in gaps in the literature for a deeper psychological tendency of Chinese consumers about their fashion purchasing behaviour.

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