

**Thinking Differently Consuming Differently: Exploring Marginalized Gen Z's
Psychological Trauma as a Catalyst to Alternative Consumption During the Covid-Era**

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Thank you, Cambridge, for being with me through all of this. I love you, kitty.

ABSTRACT

This study utilizes a fledging theory, alternative hedonism, as a means to examine the ways in which Gen Z consumers are finding fulfillment outside of material consumption during the COVID-era. I seek to understand the lived experiences of Gen Z consumers who experienced compounding psychological traumas due to race, gender, mental health, or economic standings, from March 2020 to now. Specifically, this study aims to deepen our understanding of alternative hedonism while also amplifying voices of traditionally marginalized consumers. The methods of in-depth interviews, closet interviews, and participant photographs of apparel items were utilized to unpack the ways in which psychological trauma manifested into alternative consumption practices. The six themes the researcher identified in this study include: re-evaluation of consumption, developing joyous hobbies, the purge, The Great Resignation, awakening of the self, and paradox of speed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In capitalist economies like the United States of America, consumer culture glorifies purchasing material goods to obtain a desired social status or lifestyle (Bauman, 2001; Dunnett et al., 2016). This predominant mode of consumption thus favors affluent white consumers, consequently limiting the inclusion and participation of marginalized populations with limited spending, such as young people, people with physical disabilities, some geographical regions, and diverse ethnic backgrounds (Dunnett et al., 2016; Williams & Paddock, 2003; Williams & Windbank, 2000). Expressly, specific populations are denied access to an ideal social and consumption lifestyle due to systematic barriers inherently limiting people who do not fit the dominant hegemonic narrative of Western capitalism. Along with this, there has been a continued rise in global concerns of overconsumption and overworking to satiate consumers' material demands forcing marginalized Gen Z consumers to enact self-policing and reevaluate their lifestyles. These consumers who are discriminated against through systematic barriers that are built around identifiers such as gender, race, and cognitive and physical abilities alike, find resistance in consumption. Specifically, in retaliation to consumer culture demands, marginalized individuals and young people respond by sourcing tangible goods through alternative acquisition channels (Williams & Paddock, 2003). This phenomenon of enacting alternative ways to consume outside of traditional consumption structures, alternative consumption, exasperates the psychological trauma that marginalized populations have experienced during the COVID-era. The recent psychological traumas marginalized populations experience are vast, including political discrimination and gender violence (Elze, 2019); ableism in healthcare during COVID

(Lund et al., 2020); and systemic injustices based on race (Meyer & Young, 2021). One such form of political discrimination continues to challenge the civil rights of the LGBTQ+ community in Tennessee (Bennett, 2021; Wahdwani, 2021).

The events during the COVID-era, from March 2020 to current, have triggered a tipping point where marginalized young consumers are taking time (through mandated lockdowns, job loss, or political resistance) to evaluate what constitutes the good life, which assists in understanding influences of alternative consumption practices and precisely the ways these behaviors reflect alternative hedonism, a philosophy focusing on the consumption of spiritual needs instead of simply meeting a consumer's tangible needs. Thus, this sets the stage to address a gap in knowledge concerning the impact of the COVID-era on marginalized Gen Z consumers propelled by pandemic-centric traumatic events.

Study Background and Purpose Statement

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which marginalized Gen Z consumers pivoted their consumption practices in response to various psychological traumas experienced in the COVID-era. Specifically, through unpacking the compounding psychological traumas experienced by marginalized Gen Z consumers this dissertation will broaden the understanding of alternative consumption practices informed by psychological trauma. This will also allow for additional insight within the context of consumer culture and alternative consumption practices that will assist in broaden the understanding of alternative hedonism. Therefore, my fundamental research questions guiding this work are:

RQ1. In what ways have Generation Z changed their consumption views during the COVID-era?

RQ2. In what ways does trauma inform the lived experiences of Gen Z's apparel consumption during the COVID-era?

RQ3. How may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices?

Exclusion in Consumer Culture

Capitalism's material culture, commonly called consumer culture, is facilitated by the market and has shaped a relationship between the consumer and the material goods they consume (Bauman, 2001). Consumer culture provides tools for material expression but simultaneously reinforces an economic system in which the individual's needs are only met through the constraints of tangible goods (Soper, 2008). Within consumer culture, some barriers prevent some consumers from participating in the marketplace relationships and activities; these marketplace exclusions prevent adequate representation in the marketplace for marginalized populations such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and people who identify on the queer spectrum (LGBTQ+), ultimately impacting their quality of life (Burgess et al., 2017). Specifically, consumer culture inherently perpetuates structures of power that prevent marginalized populations from accessing.

Therefore, when exploring the topic of exclusion, the primary relevant concepts include (a) the lasting adverse effects of consumption on individuals' personal well-being (Bauman, 2001), (b) discrimination and injustice (Williams & Henderson, 2012), and (c) vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Dunnett et al., 2016). These negative consequences of consumer culture influence the re-evaluation of lifestyles due to the compounding psychological traumas felt within specific communities. The understanding that marginalized communities are inherently

persecuted by an oppressive system facilitating a deluge of psychological trauma propels these communities to seek alternative means of participation (Frankel et al., 2021b). These creative and critical spaces require capital, resources, policies, and time to address marginalized communities' needs. Due to limited access to the abovementioned requirements, these communities often facilitate alternative practices.

Alternative Practices and Responses to Psychological Trauma

Alternative Consumption Practices

Alternative consumption practices occur for an amalgamation of reasons, such as limited resources (e.g., swap meets and trades), an act of rebellion (e.g., punk rock flea markets), discrimination (e.g., community mutual aid), or a time crunch (e.g., going without) that affords limited options for sourcing tangible materials. Alternative hedonism is situated within alternative consumption practices because deceleration and slowing down as political resistance to regain control over one's time is part of re-evaluating what a person might imagine as the good life. Focusing on consuming tangible goods becomes less desirable when a person has prioritized their (free) time and mental well-being over the grind of consumer culture.

Coinciding with overconsumption and access comes the concept of limited time. Time has become increasingly central to discussions of consumer culture because it is finite; individuals have been consuming time at an elevated pace competing for limited materials, working more to afford leisure, or even further driving material consumption (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). This scarcity of time creates a "time famine"; a time famine stems from the exhaustion an individual feels due to their inability to juggle various obligations (e.g., work, social responsibilities, familial duties, etc.) (Rastegary & Landy, 1993). Ultimately, this results in

feelings of anxiety from a deficiency in time to participate in leisure activities or properly delegate adequate energy to said obligations (Rastegary & Landy, 1993). Specifically, in consumer culture, one finds themselves grinding away to gain financial status, which gets put back into the marketplace through consumption. This need to consume can lead to paradoxical and problematic situations, such as working more hours to afford childcare instead of working less and rearing children.

Psychological Trauma in Marginalized Gen Z

In March 2020, the global pandemic struck the world, forcing billions of people to stop moving and practice social distancing. This global halt caused an increase in idle time in the world's population, expanding media accessibility during typical working hours (McCoy, 2020). With more individuals experiencing a prolonged interruption from their daily routine during a pandemic, tensions, and over-accessibility to time rapidly inflated to create an unprecedented and dynamic anxiety crisis (Santomauro et al., 2021). During these unprecedented times, a boiling point occurred with the media focusing on the murders of several Black Americans by police and public policies limiting the rights of various marginalized groups, specifically in the American South and East Tennessee (Wadhvani, 2021). For this dissertation, the multiple events intersecting to result in psychological trauma from March 2020 till now will be referred to as the COVID-era.

The novel coronavirus, along with the highly visible civil rights demonstrations for the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement, have commanded individuals to pause and reflect upon themselves, their local communities, and issues such as systematic racism and humanistic injustices. As found in consumer culture, modern consumption patterns that facilitate

environmental and economic damage contribute to negative social implications highlighted by reduced well-being and increased inequalities (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020) that inflict psychological trauma on low-economic and marginalized communities. Throughout the COVID-era, marginalized communities felt additional pressures and saw compounding psychological damage. For example, marginalized individuals, such as unskilled or young (Gen Z) workers, have felt further devastation from the retail and service sector (Maxwell & Solomon, 2020) alongside the increasing racial tension and gender disparities seen within the American South (Evelyn, 2020; Young, 2020). In Tennessee, precisely, the governmental policies, discourse, and actions during the COVID-era were stressful to marginalized communities perpetuating occurrences around psychological trauma and political resistance.

The compounding psychological traumatic experiences of marginalized Gen Z consumers during the COVID-era and a mandated lockdown provide the foundation for re-evaluation. The responses to this unique situation provide a site for a deeper exploration of alternative consumption practices and alternative hedonism. Alternative hedonism is a theory that enacts self-regulation to drive alternative means of sourcing material goods through alternative consumption practices, to decelerate in a politicized act of reimagining the aesthetic of what the good life looks like (Soper, 2008).

The Rise of Alternative Hedonism

This dissertation focuses on under-studied populations due to their historically restricted impact on Western consumption, which has led them to unwittingly and consciously embrace alternative consumption practices. Until recently, alternative consumption behaviors and alternative hedonism behaviors have not been accessible to all due to limited financial standing,

the scarcity of time (time famine), and the tangible needs being met by the market. The COVID-era has propelled an awakening of spiritual and intangible needs that these consumers have originally not had the luxury of time to explore. The COVID-era crisis defined Gen Z through shattered institutions and catalyzed the slow rebuild (Inglehart, 2015; Strauss & Howe, 1997). The crisis has added to the compounding psychological traumas experienced by marginalized and under-studied populations. In an act to gain control of a situation, a person can explore the tenets of alternative hedonism during the mandated slowdown.

Alternative hedonism sets forth four major tenets: seeking pleasure by consuming differently, voluntary simplicity, deceleration, and utilizing technology as a tool (Soper, 2008, 2020). These tenets interweave into the tapestry of Soper's alternative hedonism, an avant-garde form of consumerism that redirects material needs towards consumption practices that focus more on the intangible enjoyment of consumption rather than other non-traditional consumption practices.

Alternative hedonism argues that there are two types of needs that a human must meet: physical needs and spiritual needs. Physical needs are material items that meet consumers' basic demands, such as clothing to keep warm, which satiates our physical bodies; spiritual needs are the nontangible desires that lead to enjoyment, such as walking in the woods (Soper, 2020). Consumer culture can only meet the physical needs of consumers, so to fulfill spiritual needs, material goods are created (e.g., instead of working less to gain more leisure time, products meant to "save time" are marketed to consumers) and, in turn, perpetuate unquenchable yearning for consumer solutions that never truly satisfy their problems (Soper, 2020). Therefore, alternative hedonism is an unconventional form of consumerism that blends the hyper-

consumerism of Western society and enacts self-regulation influenced by the ethical and political dilemma of consumption via the “affluent global elites” (Soper, 2008). Specifically, the growing concerns that the wealthiest elites are the ones that hold power to change the climate dilemma by enacting self-regulations (e.g., Patagonia put production limits on products to reduce carbon footprint) leaves little room for discussion around the consumers’ sourcing and acts of empowerment against the systems of consumption. Understanding the experiences and motivations of marginalized Gen Z consumers will provide a counter-narrative for the discussions around White affluent consumption and add to the richer understanding of alternative consumption and alternative hedonism practices.

The motivations for engaging in sourcing materials in non-traditional fashions are still being uncovered, but the three pillars are introduced as follows; the first pillar centers around individuals who engage in these behaviors due to limited resources, next the affluent consumer’s altruistic motivations, and finally situating alternative hedonism into the explanation. Alternative hedonism stems from a re-evaluation of lifestyle not concentrated in altruism but self-interest. The theme of personal life satisfaction – whatever that might look like- can provide insight into the phenomenon occurring around prioritizing mental health.

The trend towards alternative consumption practices, specifically securing fashion and apparel items through alternative means such as thrifting, clothing swaps, or modifying/repurposing, has been exemplified by Gen Z consumers whose complex price sensitivities and desire to consume consciously manifest in unique sourcing methods, adapting, or even going without (Petro, 2022). This generational cohort’s alternative consumption can arguably be a site of engagement in practices aligned with alternative hedonism. Alternative

hedonism is, therefore, the re-evaluation and adoption of various alternative consumption. Kate Soper acknowledges the trends and proposes adopting simplistic lifestyles (Soper, 2008), actively participating in community engagement by aligning individual desires with civic and responsible practices (Ray & Anderson, 2001), and consuming differently by re-evaluating consumption practices and turn meeting spiritual needs by creating enjoyment outside of the marketplace (Soper, 2008, 2020).

This dissertation will provide insight into various experiences, responses, and interpretations around how psychological trauma and the crisis of Gen Z adopt alternative hedonism practices. The interpretation will result in additional perspectives on the complexities of the behaviors and motivations by adopting a multi-method approach. Therefore, the dissertation seeks to provide a richer understanding of the tenets of alternative hedonism and explore a deeper understanding of the ways in which marginalized Gen Z consumers enact and engage in alternative consumption practices. Below, the purpose and objectives bridge the constructs to interlace the tapestry of methodological considerations.

Purpose and Objectives

Groups on the fringe of mainstream society often challenge modern consumption practices. While consumers may have an acute sensitivity to the ethical and political dilemma of material consumption, alternative hedonism breaks from capitalism's traditional patriotic consumer mentality. It redirects the act of consuming to an individual's personal desires (Soper, 2008). Specifically, alternative hedonism acts as an alternative to consumers meeting all their needs through the expenditure of time to acquire material goods such as apparel. Redirecting consumers' energy from being driven by tangible consumption, alternative hedonism shifts

towards a more pleasurable, in-tangible outcome of consumption (e.g., learning how to knit in a community circle instead of buying a sweater from a chain retailer). Alternative hedonism is still a fledgling theory ripe for continued exploration. By addressing the criticism of focusing on only affluent white consumers, adding the voices and experiences of counter-narratives (like those of BIPOC or LGBTQ+) can help enrich our understanding and build upon the framework.

This dissertation explores how marginalized Gen Z consumers potentially pivoted their consumption practices in response to various psychological traumas experienced in the COVID-era while broadening the understanding and use of alternative hedonism. In addition to enriching understanding and addressing critical pushback, dismantling hegemonic narratives in academic research is a principal driving force in all facets of my work. My dissertation will challenge how epistemic oppression exists within consumer research and actively be intertwined in the ways this dissertation conducts, reports, and disseminates the interpretation to the community. Specifically, by amplifying the voices of marginalized consumers, my goal is to promote dialogue, challenge inequity, and assist in dismantling the influence of white supremacy in consumer science research.

Methodological Considerations

The philosophical underpinnings of alternative hedonism influenced the design of this dissertation, from research questions around tangible consumption, exploring experiences of underrepresented consumer groups, compensating local participants with gift cards from both a locally owned second-hand fashion store and a Black-owned plant boutique, including ‘in vivo’ coding in the methods, and using artwork to disseminate the research to the community at large.

Philosophical considerations that influence the methodological considerations for this dissertation are situated within my epistemology of constructivism (how the phenomenon is experienced), and my ontology is relativism (reality is subjective depending on the person) (Lincoln, Lyman & Guba, 2011). I also adopt an emic, or insider, perspective as an active participant in alternative hedonism practices. Unweaving the entangled material and social world through multi-methods allows for thinking creatively about research (Law, 2004; Woodward, 2016).

Research Questions

Gen Z consumers with intersecting identities (such as multiple gender identities, identifying on the queer spectrum, mixed ethnicities, mental illness, or physical disabilities) have traditionally been absent in research around almost any topic, let alone alternative consumption and COVID-era psychological traumas. Therefore, this study was conceptualized and designed to challenge dominant research structures while exploring alternative consumers' experiences. This research will unpack how compounding psychological traumas and a government-mandated pause led to the reevaluation of lifestyles and consumption.

Scope and Significance

The context of the dissertations aims to address the need for scrutiny directed toward literature on the affluent consumer societies of Western cultures due to the unprecedented and unchecked growth of consumer culture. The dissertation brings diversity of knowledge around alternative hedonism and alternative consumption behavior by investigating the impact of the compounding psychological traumatic experiences of Gen Z marginalized consumers during the COVID-era on apparel consumption. Alternative hedonism continues to gain momentum in

academic research but often within niche consumption groups such as limited-mobility travelers (Fennell, 2021), bicycle enthusiasts (Ryle & Soper, 2013), and the tattooed community (Frankel et al., 2021b). This dissertation will explore how a psychological traumatic global catalyst continues to shape alternative consumption behaviors of traditionally marginalized consumers. The context of a worldwide pandemic, along with localized pressures from governing bodies, has forced some consumers to seek pleasures in new ways (Ducharme, 2020) through engaging in alternative consumption practices, which result in alternative hedonism. In addition to exploring psychological trauma as a trigger for behaviors in line with alternative hedonism, this dissertation will assist in expanding the theoretical understanding of alternative hedonism and contribute to building the theory itself.

Contribution of the Study

The significance of this study practically applies to expanding our understanding of alternative consumption and how marginalized Gen Z consumers work outside of the traditional confines of the Western capitalist system. It can provide small businesses and communities insight into engaging with consumers outside conventional means of selling products. Moreover, this dissertation will assist in adding to the understanding of alternative hedonism and help to continue to develop the theory through various contexts, populations, and methodologies.

Definition of Key Terms

The following section will be utilized to articulate clear conceptualizations of the dissertation constructs.

- Alternative Hedonism: a theory that encapsulates the sense that consumers are unhappy with the by-products of consumption and should revise the idea of the good life by consuming differently to meet their needs (Soper, 2008).
- Alternative Consumption Practices: "... are modes of goods acquisition that do not involve obtaining new goods from formal retail outlets (including mail order companies and the Internet) (Williams & Paddock, 2003, p.312)."
- BIPOC: The acronym for Black, Indigenous, People of Color has gained traction in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement.
- Consumer Culture: A form of material culture facilitated by the free market, which creates a relationship between consumers and the goods or services they use and/or consume (Bauman, 2001).
- COVID-Era: The current period in which the COVID-19 pandemic occurs globally (March 2020), along with compounding psychological traumas surrounding the racial inequalities in America, including the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement and conservative political agenda perpetuated in East Tennessee.
- Gen Z Cohort: A person born from 1997 onwards is part of Generation Z or Gen Z (Pew Research, 2019).
- LGBTQ+: The acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Plus (inclusive of all who identify on the queer spectrum).
- Marginalized Consumers: A consumer population traditionally treated as insignificant or peripheral (examples include BIPOC, LGBTQ+, etc.)

- Marketplace Exclusion: the involvement of barriers to marginalized consumers from participating in marketplace relationships and activities. It prevents adequately represented in the marketplace and has implications for quality of life (Burgess et al., 2017).
- Time Famine: the feeling of having too much to do and insufficient time to do it (Perlow, 1999).
- Psychological Trauma: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5) defines a trauma experience as one that involves a threat (real or perceived) to one’s life (American Psychiatric Association, 2001).

DISSERTATION ORGANIZATION

This dissertation is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the study background and problem statement, purpose and objectives, methodological considerations, and scope and significance of the dissertation. Chapter 2 examines the impact of psychological trauma occurring from the combined forces of capitalism and COVID-era pressures as a catalyst for the rise of subconscious and conscious practices of alternative consumption as a conceptual framework, identifies the literary gaps, and proposes specific research questions that will be explored in this dissertation. Chapter 3 presents the overview of the qualitative study, including the research design, ethnographic methods, sampling procedures, and data interpretation, and identifying the themes that lead to the conceptualization of alternative hedonism. Chapter 4 then presents the interpreted meanings in the data situated within the tenets of alternative hedonism and presents visuals to accompany it. Next, Chapter 5 summarizes the study, and finally, Chapter

6 discusses theoretical and practical implications informed by alternative hedonism, along with limitations and future research avenues.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketplace Exclusion in Consumer Culture

In his seminal article, *Consuming Life*, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) explores the shift into consumer culture under conditions of modernity by crafting a philosophical argument about consumers' needs, desires, and wishes in Western society. The chronicle starts by stating that being a human requires more than just the biological existence of all other living creatures: humans have a societal standard that dictates decency and decorum and lays a path toward the good life. These standards continue to rise over time, and previous standards of consumables (e.g., food, shelter, clothes) no longer meet the needs of modern humans. Biological and social needs drive pleasure; this hedonism of consumption can create self-propelling purpose in a capitalist society. Specifically, enjoying the pleasures of consumption has a trade-off that allows for the production and consumption of goods. These needs of consumers have shifted to desire; these desires are for tangible products that an individual yearns for ownership over. Therefore, consumers' needs are no longer fixed when their wishes can be consumed (Bauman, 2001). These unrelenting desires fuel the fire of consumption, whereas the consumer can continue to expend energy towards acquiring physical objects.

Modern capitalism reclassifies human desires by maximizing consumption and encouraging it to ignore limits and run rampant and free. The consumer becomes insatiable in the market and continues to devour tangible goods – consumer culture choruses consumers into believing that all their physical and spiritual needs are being met. The wish is a volatility of modernity that perpetuates insecurities and turns that reliable condition of fear for the future and

uncertainty of the present into a pattern-maintaining order. This is the model, the enticing trap, that consumers of a capitalist economy have fallen victim to. The condition of a consumer society has created the façade of the good life to sell to consumers to meet their wishes - not the actual needs of the individual- which heightens insecurities and reignites consumption to fill the void that is left by the unmet spiritual needs (Bauman, 2001) induced by the psychological trauma of capitalism. Marginalized identities (i.e., BIPOC or LGBTQ+) and representation within consumer culture are growing research fields, especially with the increased demand for inclusion and representation. These specific consequences of consumer culture act as barriers to achieving the good life that Western society produces and sells.

With the rise of consumerism, there has been a cultural transition from the values of community and citizenship towards those of materialism and global competition (Saren et al., 2019). A byproduct of consumer culture is arguably marginalized populations' access and exclusion of social and market participation. In a capitalist society, to be excluded generally means to be rejected or kept away from the realms of consumption and the marketplace (Bauman, 2001), with lasting effects that extend beyond consumerism but also impact individuals' personal lifestyles. This phenomenon is referred to as marketplace exclusion; the definition of marketplace exclusion "...involves barriers to participation in the marketplace relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society. It affects the ability of individuals and groups to be adequately represented in the marketplace and has implications for quality of life and social cohesion" (Burgess et al., 2017, p. 491).

Accordingly, this exploratory concept refers to the mechanisms by which specific individuals and communities (i.e., BIPOC and LGBTQ+) are barred from the opportunities and

resources that the market provides through social cohesion and societal relations. However, the more considerable discussion proposed by Saren et al. (2019) targets the exclusion occurring within consumer culture that discounts poverty, sexism, and racism forcing isolation and alienation from society and the marketplace. Marketplace exclusion flows across consumer research and critical and macro-marketing literature to explore the structural and intersecting bases of exclusion perpetuated by the consumer culture. These references also identify the lasting implications for individual and societal well-being that affect various populations. Discussions have examined marketplace discrimination and injustice (Williams & Henderson, 2012) and consumer vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Dunnett et al., 2016), forcing marketplace exclusion theory to be left on read. To date, the concept of marketplace exclusion has received little attention in marketing and consumer research (see Burgess et al., 2017), perhaps perpetuating this cycle and providing justification for additional insight into the phenomenon and how consumers cope through alternative methods. These specific parameters of understanding help to set the stage for a deeper exploration of the experiences of marginalized consumers.

Alternative Consumption

Consumer exclusion in the marketplace is often met with critical resistance and creative solutions. One such solution involves ways of acquiring tangible goods outside of sourcing a new product from a corporation. Specifically, the sphere of alternative consumption practices involving informal acquisition and/or second-hand retail channels is an area of research rich for continued development. The non-traditional and alternate ways in which a person sources apparel is a multi-faceted concept that alternative hedonism neatly nestles within. Various people engage in alternative consumption for a multitude of motivations, one of them being the desire to

consume differently, a tenet of alternative hedonism. Therefore, to start, the most widely adopted definition of alternative consumption practices is as follows:

“... are modes of goods acquisition that do not involve obtaining new goods from formal retail outlets (including mail order companies and the Internet). Included under the umbrella of “alternative consumption practices” are thus all informal and/or second-hand modes of goods acquisition. On the one hand, therefore, there are informal (and usually second-hand) modes of goods acquisition, such as acquiring goods from kin, friends, and neighbors as well as personal adverts (e.g., in shop windows or local newspapers). On the other hand, there are second-hand modes of goods acquisition such as car boot sales (a market composed of individuals selling unwanted household items out of the trunk/boot of their car), second-hand shops (selling used goods) and market stalls selling second-hand goods as well as instances where goods come with accommodation”. (Williams & Paddock, 2003, p.312)

Currently, there is limited research that explores and identifies the motivations to participate in alternative consumption models, though literature has proposed five significant tenacities: involvement in the community (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Ekpo et al., 2018); social interaction (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Birch & Liesch, 1997); altruism (Birch & Liesch, 1997; Buczynski, 2013; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; C. C. Williams & Windebank, 2000); social sustainability and/or environmental consciousness (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Kim & Jin, 2020; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Schneider & Miller, 2011); and finally, monetary gain (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Guo et al., 2020). Within these findings, there are arguably three major, clearly delineated, economically focused pillars

that exist: alternative consumption driven by (1) necessity, (2) altruistic motivations, and (3) alternative hedonism.

The first pillar of engaging in alternative consumption practices centers around individuals who engage in these behaviors not for altruistic reasons, such as thinking of future generations, but out of necessity due to limited socio-economic standings. Research in this facet is generally where the discussion of marginalized consumers is situated. Due to their economic constraints, consumers in ethnically diverse neighborhoods are forced into alternative consumption practices for goods acquisition (Williams & Paddock, 2003; Williams & Windebank, 2000). For the economically deprived consumer to participate in alternative acquisition of goods is due to a lack of choice and adds to the feelings of exclusion from mainstream consumer practices (Williams & Paddock, 2003). This exclusion occurs because, for most Western consumers, new goods acquired through traditional retail outlets are at the peak of desirable acquisition modes. However, alternative consumption modes play a pivotal role in the coping strategies of deprived populations experiencing marketplace exclusion (Williams & Windbank, 2000). Repeated disruptions in desired consumption modes result in marginalized consumers engaging in alternative consumption practices to escape feelings of powerlessness (Ekpo et al., 2018). Consumers seek alternative communities to facilitate different consumption behaviors to counteract some of the negative aspects of exclusion. Researchers argue that limited financial flexibility can act as a catalyst for engaging in altruistic behaviors, as seen in the inclusive nature of the sharing economy. Still, it is not the only motivator of this conscious behavior (Buczynski, 2013).

The second pillar centers around the affluent consumer's altruistic motivations for alternative consumption practices. In this vein, the majority of research centers around affluent white consumers who have the leisure time and financial ability to participate in alternative consumption practices of consumption out of choice for fun, sociality, distinction, and being seen to buy things in an altruistic manner (Birch & Liesch, 1997; Buczynski, 2013; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Williams & Paddock, 2003; Williams & Windbank, 2000). These consumers have adopted an agency-driven choice demonstrating an emphasis on engagement in alternative consumption practices due to an acute sense of moral obligation to be environmentally cognizant and practice a sustainable lifestyle (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Fraanje & Spaargaren, 2019; Kim & Jin, 2020; Littler, 2011; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Schneider & Miller, 2011).

Alternative hedonism is the final pillar that situates neatly into alternative consumption practices. This construct stems from a re-evaluation of lifestyle not focused on altruism but self-interest. To achieve an alternative hedonistic lifestyle, acquiring material goods to fulfill all human needs requires reimagining an individual's needs (Soper, 2008, 2020). These needs are categorized into material (tangible) and spiritual (intangible). By shifting from meeting solely material needs, a consumer can relieve stress, overwork, burnout, and overall disenchantment with consumer culture by meeting their spiritual needs (Alexander, 2011; Ray & Anderson, 2001). The focus on personal life satisfaction instead of altruism is one of the most extensive contributions to alternative consumption practices that this construct adds. Still, one cannot overlook arguments for inclusion within alternative hedonism research. Research on alternative hedonism has received considerable criticism for considerations exclusively targeting (white, cisgender, able-bodied) affluent, socially responsible consumers (Littler, 2011; Schneider &

Miller, 2011; Soper, 2008, 2020) providing a white-washed approach to the current body of knowledge.

Some researchers have tried to reconcile these apparently mutually exclusive socio-economic explanations for participation in alternative consumption practices through qualitative methodologies and have contended that cultural sensitivities to be accounted for when studying alternative consumption practices (Williams & Paddock, 2003). The continued concern about the asymmetries in the knowledge dynamic seen in perspectives like alternative consumption practices highlights the need to pursue more inclusive and reflective research agendas (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). For example, exploring how a person's queer identity influences their values and beliefs around consumption is paramount to cultivating a space in research for exploring counter-narratives and inclusive experiences. Therefore, the dissertation fills a notable knowledge gap around the experiences of marginalized Gen Z consumers in the non-traditional acquisition of material goods and apparel.

The affluent consumer, often the culprit of overconsumption, has been the epitome of researchers' focus when it comes to altruistic, environmental, and socially conscious motivations. This predisposition has continued to receive pushback from critical scholars who advocate for a more inclusive research approach. Muradian (2019) echoes Anantharaman's (2018) critique of the current research paradigm that venerates white, affluent consumers while dismissing the experiences of disadvantaged or marginalized consumers. Specifically, Muradian (2019) challenges the oppression that alternative consumption research often perpetuates by focusing on affluent white consumption populations. Systems of oppression reinforce disparities between consumer groups; below, research is presented to explore the ways in which

consumption and time perpetuate discrepancies between experiences and the toll taken upon a marginalized Gen Z consumer's mental health.

Overconsumption and Time Famine

Overconsumption in affluent Western societies is one of the most significant contributors to the ensuing issues of environmental degradation, consumer discontent, global poverty, and issues of human rights (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021; Glozer & Morsing, 2020; Schneider & Miller, 2011; Soper, 2008, 2020). The global situation has become dire and is approaching a critical breaking point that scientists have continued to warn the population about since the 1970s. Modern society is producing environmental pollution and other types of pollution, such as noise, light, and plastic pollution (Nathanson, 2021). The addition of pollution to the environment occurs faster than it can be dispersed, diluted, decomposed, recycled, or repurposed into a usable state (Nathanson, 2021). To illustrate this concerning trend, recent data on excessive consumption in North America is below.

Some staggering statistics exhibit the overproduction and overconsumption of the average American consumer. As of November 2020, 80% of the world's natural resources are used by approximately 20% of the world's population. The shocking statistic is even worse for the consumers in the United States, who represent less than 5% of the world's population, consume 17% of the world's energy, and account for 15% of the world's gross domestic product (Net Impact Organization, 2020). Popular press and academia alike have been calling attention to how overproduction and overconsumption continue to propagate global warming by increasing the already-high levels of pollution and toxic gases. These arguments highlight the impact of

how climate change due to overconsumption transcends international borders, levels of privilege, wealth, and race (Net Impact Organization, 2020).

Not just in the United States but all over the world, it has become increasingly prevalent that material consumption demands a reduction to not further exceed Earth's planetary boundaries (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021; Nathanson, 2021; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020; Soper, 2020). Consumers are becoming more aware of their negative impact due to their endless material desires being met by consumer culture. Consequently, they are acting in ways that redirect their consumption patterns. This shift is gaining significance because consumers are being introduced to new methods of consumption that focus on reflection and self-policing (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020). Simultaneously when consumers start exploring alternative ways to consume, they begin to examine their usage of time; time for leisure, time spent on the repetition of mundane work, and time that they will never get back. Moreover, research on sustainability, voluntary simplicity, anti-consumption, and other consumption reduction methods has risen exponentially to produce an overwhelming academic argument exploring the reduction of material consumption.

Therefore, in a parallel vein to overconsumption comes the complimentary discussion of limited time. Time has also become increasingly important because it is finite. People are consuming it at rapid paces, competing for materials, working more to afford leisure activities, or driving the consumption of certain products that are associated with time-saving (e.g., scheduling apps, day planners, time management note pads, and color-coded organizing bins) (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). Overconsumption and time scarcity, also referred to as time famine, have been

linked to mental distress and disenchantment with consumerism (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2016). Therefore, time is not an abstract concept but a limited and consumable commodity that individuals wish for more.

Time is a scarce commodity that zooms past us in a blink of an eye. Phrases like, “There aren’t enough hours in a day,” “I don’t have the time,” or “I’m in a time crunch” litter the workplace as Americans, on average, work 1,750 hours a year earning the title of the most overworked developed nation in the world (Miller, 1997). Time is a scarce commodity that zooms past us in a blink of an eye. In the context of this dissertations, time is restricted to terms that resonate with famine and squeeze (Anttila et al., 2009; Florida, 2019; Hochschild, 2014). The lack of time is associated with several peripheral concepts that link the limitations of time and the increase of work-related demands: “feeling stressed” (Milkie et al., 2021), “time stress” (Bonke & Gerstoft, 2007), “time famine” (Perlow, 1995, 1999; Robinson & Godbey, 2010); and “time poverty” (Garhammer, 2002). In a related vein of overwork and time comes the ideas of the intensification of time, also commonly referred to by the concepts of; “time crunch” (Leiper, 1998); “time pressure” (Kraaykamp et al., 2009); “time-squeeze” (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Southerton, 2003); and lastly, “feeling rushed” (Craig & Brown, 2017; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006) and “hurriedness” (Southerton, 2003). The various dimensions explored in the extant research demonstrate the multiple concepts of restricted leisure and overwork. Often the expectations that dominate the lives of most of us spill out of the confines of the office and into personal and social spheres. Yet, these feelings of time shortages and blurring lines of work and life are situated in the systems of employment and labor. While time famines (along with the various other concepts that demonstrate a perception of limited time for an activity) have been a research

focus for years, the influence of consumer culture and overconsumption provide a facet of additional insight into work pressures, financial acquisition, and limited leisure. Consumer culture impacts the feelings of burden that are already disproportionately influencing marginalized individuals.

There are several sources of time famine that can stem from the objective insufficiency of an individual's time to cope with various demands along with rising expectations; another source of time pressure results from how people react to different conditions that they face, while another cradle of perceived time pressure can surface from a feeling that individuals lack sufficient time to enjoy leisure activities (Rastegary & Landy, 1993). Affluent Western societies are riddled with rapid transformations that involve consumption. Even intangible wishes for leisure and free time have been commoditized and converted into fetishes in a consumption system that captures individual desires and converts them into consumable goods (Aderaldo et al., 2020). Fetishized consumption leads to hyper-consumption that is focused on immediate pleasures and promotes decontextualized ideas of progress. The emphasis is put on consumers to increase production through work to gain the means to consume.

For most Westerners working long hours to accumulate wealth - or maintain high levels of debt - is a necessity of reality. Consumer culture permeates an individual's myriad financial obligations (e.g., credit card debt) and temporal obligations (e.g., taking one's children to activities), leading to overworking and discontent. The lack of money is one of the primary sources of worry for Americans (Hershfield et al., 2016), along with a growing concern about suffering from a time famine stemming from too much to do and not enough time to do it (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2016). Individuals must make tradeoffs when making

decisions around resources of time or money with few opportunities to engage in both simultaneously. This tradeoff is commonplace and often viewed as a luxury that the privileged do not have to navigate. The autonomy and control over the expenditures that influence time are not afforded to the oppressed worker experiencing time famines.

Happiness is a spiritual need not fulfilled by overworking and consumption but by redefining what the good life can look like. Research suggests that having more autonomy over one's time leads to increased life satisfaction and overall happiness when controlling for the influence of material affluence (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). This assertion also aligns with Hershfield et al.'s finding that, while both time and money are valuable resources that can provide happiness, when an individual chooses to have more discretionary time, their life is significantly happier (2016). The specific generational cohort this dissertation is focusing on, Gen Z, has sounded the alarm around mental health and well-being concerns not only for themselves but for BIPOC and other marginalized communities (McKinsey, 2022; Wadhvani, 2021).

Psychological Trauma Impact on Marginalized Gen Z Consumers

Currently, psychological trauma scholars are unpacking the theoretical and humanistic understandings of the intricate nature of the mind, body, soul, and environment, along with the complexities of their relationships with one another. Psychological trauma results from a harrowing experience, but not all challenging experiences are traumatic; therefore, starting with a clear definition of trauma is essential. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines a trauma experience as one that involves a threat (real or perceived) to one's life (American Psychiatric Association, 2001). This definition also may encompass a situation in

which a person has lived through something negative outside the usual realm of human experience (American Psychiatric Association, 2001). Specifically, due to a traumatic event, a person may experience feelings of helplessness and fear or feel they have no control over their circumstances. Expanding on the DSM-5 definition, psychological trauma is focused on the effect of the reactions of trauma on a person's psychological well-being and overall health (Smith, 2004).

Wilson and Moran (1998) have inferred that one of the ways that psychological traumas, such as PTSD, can be treated is by addressing personal and spiritual beliefs as part of one's personality. Psychological trauma permeates the human spirit, and the individual is thrust into a state of confusion, turmoil, and disbelief. These feelings of disenchantment can cause the victim of psychological trauma to embody a sense of existential meaninglessness (Wilson & Moran, 1998).

Ultimately, the researchers call for clinicians to develop a holistic model for assessing and treating psychological trauma; through this holistic model, clinicians will be able to address the needs of the survivor's soul and empower the disenchanting spirit (Wilson & Moran, 1998). The example below shows how psychological traumatic experiences act as a point of spiritual evolution, leading toward empowerment through meaning-making.

Specifically, to expand upon the role of psychological trauma as inseparable from the human spirit, Brady et al. (1999) surveyed 446 female psychotherapists exposed to psychologically traumatic experiences and graphic recounts of sexual abuse of their clients. The salient interpretation of the data suggests that repeated exposure to psychological traumatic materials requires the practitioners to address their personal spirituality to gain a greater

understanding of its meaning within their lives (Brady et al., 1999). Traumatic events can aggravate existing psychological trauma and mental illness when left unattended. While accessing mental health resources, finding time for therapy, and receiving help from practitioners can empower a person to overcome adversity, not everyone has the economic abilities to do so.

The Compounding Psychological Traumas of COVID-era

In a scathing popular press article before the COVID-era, Wu (2019) discusses the connection between the political economy of Western capitalism and mental illness in America. The report states that mass hopelessness is occurring due to competition and not cooperation perpetuated in the exponential and rapid growth of the cost of living, market deregulation, public sphere privatization, and policies reflecting institutionalized racism (Wu, 2019). Psychological concerns around the endless competition cycle and securing financial gains permeate all facets of the American experience. Focusing on financial gain through competition and labor causes individuals to see one another as objects, exhibit more anti-social behaviors, and have lower levels of empathy. The hopelessness and exhaustion one feels within this competitive space are compounded by the speed of modernity. Without time for leisure and engagement with one's community in a system of cooperation, consumer culture and capitalism have created a system of speed that facilitates psychological trauma and mental illness.

The first time that many Americans were able to pause and reflect upon their existence within a system that does not prioritize their base human needs (such as providing safety and guidance in a global pandemic) allowing for self-exploration. For many of us, the lockdown provided **pause**. This **pause** might have occurred due to hardships like being furrowed or having to provide primary care to one's family, or it could have been a **pause** to re-evaluate one's usage

of time and resources and explore their mental health. Regardless, the mandated lockdown and loss of jobs from COVID-19 have forced thousands of East Tennesseans to step back from the confines of capitalism, slow down, and spend time in their psychological trauma. These experiences during the COVID-era have triggered concerns about the saliency of time. They are arguably a catalyst for individuals – in the confines of consumer culture – to prioritize their spiritual needs over their physical needs. Gen Z consumers have been inherently attuned to critiques around consumer culture and have responded creatively, which has yet to be explored. Once again, when discussing these experiences, it must be noted that these systems of consumption are inherently prejudiced towards some and the experiences of BIPOC consumers.

Specifically, today's consumption patterns facilitate ecological and economic damage and contribute to negative social implications evident in reduced well-being and increasing inequalities (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020) that afflict the psychological trauma of a time famine on low-economic families. Explicitly, the inequalities stem from a culture of overworking and glorifying the consumption of tangible goods. These compounding psychological traumas are closing in on marginalized consumers producing a unique – and volatile – situation that is prime for reflection around tangible consumption and reconfiguration of time. Despite the previously underexplored effect of psychological trauma influenced by consumer culture on marginalized individuals, there are more opportunities to unpack the ways in which mental health, time, and social relationships have been affected during the COVID-era and the ways in which some individuals are combatting them through finding enjoyment in consuming differently.

With the rise of additional psychological trauma to marginalized consumers induced by COVID-19 - fear, lack of income, job insecurity - increasing, it brought the

relevance/implications/ideas of psychological trauma closer to the forefront of people's minds, a new concept for many was introduced making saliency of time more accessible than ever. In combination, this pushes individuals to seek new forms of fulfillment, especially where instant gratification became more difficult to achieve, consequently forcing a subconscious introduction to alternative hedonism (e.g., reduced income affecting purchasing behavior, stores closed, reduced access to online goods due to supply chain disruptions) and forced people to find comfort in relationships - nature, friends, family - that drove outside fulfillment. TIME reported that this reevaluation is a reaction to the sudden, strange increase of time that was a result of the pandemic; Dr. Elinore McCance-Katz, the head of the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, says "[the mandated pause] gives people a lot of time to review their lives and think about what life could look like moving forward... For many people, that's not a bad thing, for them to really spend time taking an inventory of what their life is like currently and what they want it to be like" (Ducharme, 2020).

Alternatively, the compounding psychological traumas of the global pandemic and the spotlight on racial inequalities snowballed by the political climate within East Tennessee define this newfound premise of COVID-era societal psychological distress. While the undesirable consequences of consumer culture, such as marketplace exclusion, have been evident before 2020, the inequalities illustrated due to racial prejudice and the capitalist machine resulted in exacerbated psychological traumatic events that minorities have experienced during the COVID-era. Moreover, given communities of color in Tennessee have experienced higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and untimely death due to social factors (such as the fact that they are more likely to be front-line/essential workers), which directly correlate with more significant

exposure risks (Young, 2020). Young marginalized consumers in Tennessee experienced a uniquely volatile situation that produced additional factors, time scarcity, and overall dissolution around consumer culture. To summarize, the mandated lockdown provided people time to slow down and take inventory of what matters most. Next, we shift to exploring the ways in which the compounding psychological traumas of the COVID-era influenced the Gen Z cohort.

The generational cohort theory suggests that individuals born during similar periods, or cohorts, are influenced by social factors, political climate, and historical contexts. Therefore, these groups become distinguishable from other generational cohorts (Inglehart, 2015). Generational cohorts can be characterized by one of the four turning points that impact attitudes and expectations surrounding overall life outlooks; these cyclical patterns occur in phases (1) the first and highest junction is described as a period where institutions are strong, and individualism is weak; then (2) comes the awakening where self-awareness develops out of the monotony of social discipline influenced by the first phase, (3) then there is a disentanglement, which is the opposite of the high phase, where the institutions are weakened, and individualism is strong, the (4) final turning is the crisis that occurs when institutions are shattered due to a large scale or national threat and the slow rebuild begins (Strauss & Howe, 1997). The fourth phase of the cycle occurs every 80-90 years and is defined by a period of unrest; in modern American history, these turning points have influenced the cohorts that experienced have included the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Second World War (Strauss & Howe, 1997). By briefly identifying some historical events that influence generational cohorts, we can better understand why the COVID-era has acted as a crisis that directly impacts specific behaviors and perceptions of the Gen Z cohort.

Specifically, we are experiencing the COVID-era during another fourth turning marked as a crisis that influences the attitudes and perceptions of a generational cohort known as Gen Z (Becker, 2022). Gen Z is the first truly digital native cohort born between 1996–2012, approximately 23% of the US population (Duffin, 2020). This generational cohort will likely use the COVID-era as a defining context for their attitudes, beliefs, and enduring outlooks. Therefore, we must work to unpack and understand how Gen Z perceives the impacts of the COVID-era, as it will be paramount to defining the foundation for their worldviews. When working on this dissertation, the timeline of what constitutes the COVID-era has continually been changing. Specifically, since the COVID-era is still actively occurring. Still, the government restrictions and the wide availability of the COVID vaccines have led to removing almost all active COVID-19-specific policies. Due to the dynamic nature of this phenomenon, I am proposing that it be segmented into two periods. Because of the gradual loosening of government intervention, the two major timeframes we will explore will be what I refer to as the beginning of COVID (Dec. 2019 - April 2021) sparked by media exposure and mandated lockdowns across America and then the post-lockdown/reopening of East Tennessee businesses (May 2021-current).

At the beginning of the COVID-era, people were experiencing restrictions around social gatherings. Regardless of what state people live in, they have continued to be advised to stay home, limit travel, and practice social distancing. This isolation for the greater good has been divisive at best, with some taking it extremely seriously and others believing the whole even as a conspiracy. Regardless of the extremes, the mental toll of mandated isolation and 24-hour access to media and news outlets has been discussed in academia and mass media since 2020.

COVID has refocused attention on consumers' rudimentary norms and habits (e.g., shared indoor spaces, infrastructure of supply chains, the risk of publicness, the importing of goods, the essential need of competent leadership, and the dynamics found in global sourcing and localized experience) (Bennett, 2021). Individuals, non-profits, and small businesses have made efforts to foster a sense of community (e.g., free online cooking classes or outdoor concerts) among the hordes of consumers living in unexpected isolation (Goldsmith & Lee, 2021). The disruption that individuals experience daily perpetuates a negative effect on the collective psyche and has contributed to an alarming rise in depression and anxiety (Bennett, 2021). Once again, mounting evidence articulates that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) workers face more extensive economic and health insecurity in the COVID-era while the psychological concerns are amplified for marginalized Gen Z consumers.

Marginalized Gen Z's Consumption and Mental Health

While the unprecedented change and uncertainty have impacted everyone in various ways, this dissertation focuses on exploring the impact of the COVID-era on members of Gen Z. The oldest members of Gen Z were preparing for significant milestones such as high school and college graduation and entering the workforce when first phases of turmoil emerged early 2020 (Becker, 2022). Additionally, Gen Z will be dealing with the fallout of the COVID-era far into the future. Therefore, it is essential to explore how the pandemic affects their consumption practices, outlooks, and identity. While the psychological traumatic experiences of marginalized Gen Z consumers will vary and have a breadth and depth of implications for the future, marketers and content creators worldwide continue to be fascinated with the spending and consumption of this particular cohort.

Gen Z's consumption practices are a hot topic constantly trending on Google along with "How to be an influencer" and "Is Wolverine coming to the MCU". I will first look into the growing secondhand retail market to better understand Gen Z consumption. The secondhand apparel market has seen a surge of nearly 30% growth since 2019 (Petro, 2022). Price-sensitive, sustainable-focused, and conscious Gen Z consumers fuel the booming secondhand consumption market. This trend emphasizes the complex relationship seen within Gen Z consumer around price sensitivity (using the RealReal to purchase pre-owned luxury items or shopping at Target for lower priced items) and their desire to keep things out of landfills (sourcing actual mom jeans from Depop) (Petro, 2022). Overall, this trend illuminates Gen Z's price sensitivities and sustainable motivations to consume apparel outside previously established channels such as malls or department stores. While the complexities around the consumption of clothing might seem juxtaposed (wanting it fast, cheap, and sustainable), there is evidence that the cohort's outlook is influenced by their overwhelming concerns for issues around their mental health.

These complexities within Gen Z can be partially attributed to their transitional age. As mentioned before, Gen Z was transitioning from high school to early adulthood in 2020, and the impact of the various psychological traumas they experienced will have lasting effects. One of the most jarring effects is the long-term mental health concerns that Gen Z and researchers echoed. Nearly two years after the pandemic's start, Gen Z reported the highest number of anxiety, depression, and mental distress symptoms than any other generational cohort (McKinsey, 2022). The pandemic single-handedly acted as a catalyst for what has been referred to as the "youth mental health crisis" (McKinsey, 2022). Specifically, Gen Z has the least positive life outlook, which includes lower emotional and social well-being levels than seen in

older generations. The Consumer Health Insight Report shares that 25% of Gen Z respondents disclosed feeling more emotionally distressed - almost double the levels reported by millennials and more than triple the levels of baby boomers - and the COVID-19 pandemic has only amplified this challenge (McKinsey, 2022). The youth mental health crisis culminates in the devastation surrounding the up kick of national suicide on college campuses.

The dystopia that Gen Z has experienced during the COVID-era has manifested in a notable increase in suicides on campuses nationwide. Though updated national statistics for student suicides are not available, confirmed data from several colleges (such as Stanford University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Dartmouth College) and universities suggest that the rate of death by suicide might have skyrocketed since the start of 2020 (Sarkisian & Mass, 2022). More specifically, some national data shows that 1 in 4 adults between 18-24 years old have contemplated suicide in June 2020 (Sarkisian & Mass, 2022). The risk of suicide is compounded by historical prejudice and inequalities that marginalized communities face on and off campuses. These concerns were again brought to the forefront of the American public through the empowerment amplified in the Black Lives Matter Movement. This social movement, while starting prior to 2020, spearheaded a cultural shift for many Americans, young and old.

The United States has a history of oppression dating back to the first English settlers on land inhabited by indigenous peoples. This persecution was continued through the forceful and violent removal of Blacks and other People of Color from their communities to be used and abused as slave labor. After the abolishment of slavery came the systematic adoption of Jim Crow laws and other forms of institutionalized racism that are still experienced today. With that

condensed history of white supremacy, it is hard to pinpoint exactly when the Black Lives Matter Movement started growing in this country – was it in the 1950s and 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement – or has it developed more recently with our increased access to media and news?

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Global Network was founded in 2013 following the shocking acquittal of George Zimmerman, who murdered 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager who was simply walking home (McCoy, 2020). The network was created in response to building localized power and interventions when BIPOC communities were victims of state-perpetrated violence. While there have been countless high- and low-profile murders against the Black community, the murder of George Floyd (sparking a revival in the viral #BLM) has been identified as a “tipping point” for the current reinvigoration of the movement (Abadi, 2020; McCoy, 2020). The multiple and compounding psychological traumas that the BIPOC community has faced during the COVID-era have impacted their experiences uniquely disadvantageously. Systematic oppression, targeted violence, and constant media coverage have influenced the mental health and outlook of the BIPOC communities.

The Global Happiness Council released a policy brief in 2021 with an articulate analogy of a pressure cooker boiling over as the impacts of various stressors (e.g., the deadly virus variants, financial concerns for their family, limited social and economic resources, and the influence of time) on individuals’ mental health,

The increasingly common kitchen appliance - the pressure cooker - works by triggering a series of environmental shifts that profoundly impact its contents. By preventing the release of steam, mounting pressure raises the boiling point and, thus, accelerates the time required for the cooking process. The smaller the pieces of food inside the pot, the less

buffer each individual piece has to resist the heat and pressure, and the more quickly the effects take hold. The introduction of COVID-19 in late 2019 and its impacts on mental health and policymaking might be likened to the effects of a pressure cooker. The direct stressors of a deadly virus (switching on), the impacts of the lockdown (no escape for the steam), financial concerns and effects on families (mounting pressure), the unequal experience of groups without buffers of economic or social resources (vulnerability), and the speed at which political actors needed to make crucial decisions (acceleration of time) have all impacted the experience of COVID-19 on people and societies (Global Happiness Council, 2021).

The report also found an interesting phenomenon occurring around experiences of mental health in late April 2020. Specifically, factors like limited economic resources and limited community or family support contribute to the mental health issues of marginalized Gen Z consumers because the unequal experiences during the crisis of the COVID-era did not afford the leisure and privilege to prioritize mental health. Individuals with ample resources, strong family connections, and abundant financial resources saw an improvement in depression and other mental health issues because of their newfound time to engage in leisure activities and focus less on work, while this was not the case for individuals who had fewer buffers (e.g., victims of family violence, those who lost their jobs) and are more marginalized within the capitalist system (Global Happiness Council, 2021).

Mental health and the COVID-era are woven in tandem, but the experiences of the privileged and the marginalized have been vastly different. Specifically, when looking at adverse outcomes of mental health stressors and physical harm, the lived experiences of people with

fewer resources are bleak. It was found that after analyzing data from the COVID-19 Social Study, there was an increase in self-harm and suicidal tendencies in women, especially women of minority ethnic groups, along with people who were experiencing poverty, unemployment, disability, chronic health conditions, and mental disorders (Iob et al., 2020; McCoy, 2020). These findings reiterate that those with time and resources are advantaged over marginalized people. When most people experienced a pause due to the lockdown, they turned to social media and continued news media outlets to keep up with developments around the pandemic and social unrest. Gen Z heavily used social media as a constant news source and sharing resource.

The COVID-era has intensified people's social media usage for different reasons. In 2020 alone, there were 521 million new users as a result of consumers' behavior changes due to mandated lockdowns and more leisure time (Alshare et al., 2023). This is mainly due to people adapting to social distancing and limited connection opportunities while also wanting to connect with people and businesses. Social media became an even more vital information highway for consumers to learn and engage with information on a social platform during the start of the pandemic (Liu et al., 2021). With data confirming increased social media usage, the ways in which generational cohorts navigate the gathering of information and the possible unforeseen side effects of media fatigue and "info-demic". Specifically, with Gen Z, heavy social media usage has impacted psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2021). Gen Z has demonstrated an increased dependency on social media which can be a source of frustration, depression, and anxiety; these psychological traumas have been reported in children and young adults who have been exposed to images of death or injury online, in turn experiencing the traumatizing effects associated with psychological trauma even prior to direct exposure to the collective trauma

(Rozanov & Rutz, 2021). There is evidence that networking platforms may be a source of massive – positive and negative -emotional contagion, impacting young people's mental facilitates (Liu et al., 2021; Rozanov & Rutz, 2021).

Some have found that social media usage benefits Gen Z, especially during the pandemic lockdown (Sheth, 2020), others argue there is an underexplored dark side of social media use/abuse, citing the detrimental effects of usage during the pandemic (Dhir et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Rozanov & Rutz, 2021). As mentioned above, social media is a space for community connectedness and support for small businesses; the mental fatigue of access to information and the mindlessness of doom-scrolling has created two competing facets of the social media experiences. Something that remains to be uncovered is a more in-depth understanding of the impacts of the double-edged sword on marginalized Gen Z's psychological well-being (see Alsher et al., 2021).

#BLM is an example of the ways in which social media influenced mental health for marginalized Gen Z. The mandated lockdowns early in the COVID-era provided individuals time to view the optics and prevalence of the #BLM and, in some cases, heightened the need for action. Whether it be a mandated shelter-in-place, self-isolation, quarantine, or job loss, many Americans witnessed via television or a myriad of websites and social media the murders of Ahmad Aubrey and George Floyd. They listened to the recorded 911 call made by Breonna Taylor's partner after she was shot in her home eight times by law enforcement and left to die. The American public was bombarded by the continual exposure to the murders by news coverage of growing support for the #BLM and simultaneously repeated psychological traumatic exposures to violence and death in the Black community (McCoy, 2020). The volatile social

situations occurring in American society, bombarding the mental faculties of Gen Z through social media consumption, were then amplified by the financial devastation of workers furloughed or laid off in fields like retail, hospitality, and tourism.

Retail, hospitality, travel, and tourism sectors experience heavy losses due to the direct customer experience being interrupted by social distancing and the inability of that specific work to be conducive to remote work. These fields, often careers and employers of BIPOC and young people alike, saw many layoffs due to positions within service (Maxwell & Solomon, 2020). Particularly jobs with a low likelihood of offering health insurance benefits, such as several of the essential jobs sector of grocers, public transit, health and childcare, and warehouse laborers, meant an increased exposure to COVID-19 (Gould & Wilson, 2020; McCoy, 2020). The pigeonholing of BIPOC workers into the service and essential work sector demonstrates the “long-endured occupational segregation, economic exploitation, and employment discrimination” (Maxwell & Solomon, 2020, p.1). While systems of oppression impacted this national labor situation, these structures can be more apparent in more politically conservative parts of the country.

In states like Tennessee, individuals have been unexpectedly exposed to the ideological commitments of strangers in retail spaces due to circumstances of political stances on topics such as mask mandates. At the same time, choice and autonomy over one’s own body is a site of political polarization; the concept of the collective has become insolent with rampant viral videos demonstrating the defiance of mask mandates (Bennett, 2021). Tennessee’s Governor, Bill Lee, has refused to implement sweeping statewide policies that would keep residents safe and continued to allow businesses to remain open and enact self-regulation if they want to slow the

spread (Bennett, 2021). The rapid spread of disease, paired with the slow response of government intervention, left disparities for marginalized community members who were at more significant risk during the start of the COVID-era.

Lee's refusal to take decisive actions led to more cases, death, and ultimately slower economic recoveries than other states, which quickly acknowledged the crisis and took action (Coscieme et al., 2020). The COVID threat seems to have divided political parties into thinking they had a choice: money (economic health) or life (population health). What has been found in public health research on this topic is that women leaders have quickly protected population health. In contrast, many male leaders focused on keeping the economies healthy and open (Coscieme et al., 2020).

The public health crisis in East Tennessee expands beyond slow COVID responses by elected officials, but also targeted laws and the systematic enforcement of gender expression. Tennessee has been a conservative state long before 2020- but in the past several years more and more limitations and restrictions have been imposed upon people who identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Specifically, as of June 2023 there are 26 bills targeting LGBTQ+ rights in Tennessee. These 26 bills work to undermined and weaken protection of queer people. The most notorious ones prohibit transgendered people from medical care and public facilities, limit access to books and censor performances (such as drag), bar transgendered athletes from school activities, and local marriage protections (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). The effects of the political climate in East Tennessee perpetuates psychological trauma for the people who are victimized by these policies. These discriminatory bills and laws may influence a person's ability to enact their gender expression; gender expression is the basis for the perception of both sexual orientation

and also gender identity. Specifically, Gender expression refers to the exhibition of a person's sense of being masculine and/or feminine using names, pronouns, clothing, hair styling, language, and body movements associated with gender groups; therefore, gender is psychologically, culturally, socially, and sexually central within LGBTQ+ lives more generally (Anderson, 2020). The discrimination and punishment of a person due to their gender expression is common occurrence in East Tennessee with discriminatory laws and bills continually being enacted by local and federal government. Presenting some of the compounding psychological traumas of marginalized Gen Z consumers in Tennessee will assist in connecting four COVID-era responses to alternative consumption practices.

Four COVID-era Psychological Trauma Responses on Alternative Practices

Prompted as responses to the multiple layers of psychological trauma experienced during the COVID-era, Americans and, explicitly, East Tennesseans have shifted their mindsets towards embracing alternative consumption practices. The psychological and detrimental effects of the crisis have created four significant responses; (1) the transition from a fast-paced to a slower-paced lifestyle (Balderson et al., 2021), (2) the protective impact of small business leadership, which assisted in supporting the community through leadership resilience (Anacleto et al., 2021; Hadjielias et al., 2022), (3) the communities rising up to help small and minority-owned businesses (Price, 2021), and finally (4) the impact of social media on education and mental health (Alshare et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2021).

The Transition from a Fast-Paced to a Slower-Placed Lifestyle.

Gorz (1999) coined the idea of a multi-activity society which radically explored the restraints forced on workers by the labor market. The critique exposes work as an activity

imposed upon individuals according to norms defined by society, at the demand of society, reiterating that workers are capable of producing what society, as mentioned above, requires; the solution is for workers to take back their time and gain control over their lives not dictated by society's expectations (Gorz, 1999). He suggests that individuals should engage in self-oriented, community-driven activities focused on voluntary, cultural, and environmentally driven activities (Gorz, 1999). These activities should be at the center of one's life and not subordinate to the capital and profitability of companies- working should not be the dominant means by which people engage in their social time (Balderson et al., 2021). Shifting from focusing on constant work to the enjoyment of leisure can be an act of political resistance from the confines of capitalism and the labor market.

In a recent article, researchers illustrate how the negative aspects of employment (push factors) and the desire to spend time in more varied and enjoyable ways (pull factors) interact to produce motivations to promulgate working time reductions (Balderson et al., 2021). A notable finding is that psychological traumatic experiences, such as the COVID global pandemic, catalyze increased awareness of the importance of time (Balderson et al., 2021). When forced to pause, either voluntarily or mandated, participants demonstrated a desire to develop skills and subjectivities unrelated to their workplace roles (Balderson et al., 2021). The byproduct of the lockdown provided self-isolation and spending time with oneself, which allowed marginalized individuals unconditional positive regard through self-reflection, understanding, and acceptance. These self-constructs can be strengthened to shift loneliness into self-reflection in isolation, hopelessness into self-assurance leading to optimism, anxiety into self-soothing, trepidation into self-compassion, and finally, hatred into empathy (Mukhtar, 2023). The redirection and

empowerment to shift focus from overworking and mental distress to self-fulfillment and empowerment can arguably be a consequence of the pause. The political resistance shown in prioritizing time away from production and consumption and cultivating energy towards self-constructs outside of the workplace can elevate mental health (Mukhtar, 2023).

These critical arguments against a work-driven society offer the possibility of rethinking and challenging consumer culture's conventional assumption of productivity. Individuals who are not work-driven and have autonomy over time encourage themselves to place more value on happiness and improve their mental state (Balderson et al., 2021; Hershfield et al., 2016). Improving our mental state through slowing down in the presence of psychological trauma can provide insights into the influence of the COVID era as an incubator that could reorient perceptions of the passage of time and the meaning of life. Moreover, these trends have induced a reprioritization of physical to spiritual needs (Breunig, 2020; Roman et al., 2020) and implemented their continued practice even after the reopening in local communities. Spiritual needs can be fulfilled by the strength of connection with the community; in East Tennessee, small businesses stepped up to protect their employees and customers alike when the state government was slow to prioritize the community's health (Young, 2020).

The Protective Impact of Small Business Leadership

Small business owners, operators, and managers find themselves engaging in deeply crucial responsibilities around servicing a community and generating income in times of crisis (Hadjielias et al., 2022). During COVID, small businesses had to self-regulate to protect their communities and employees from the spread of the virus at the start of the COVID-era. The pandemic drove several to proactively fill policy gaps left open by local governments that

compromise the public health and safety of their workers (Hadjielias et al., 2022). Lee's desire to focus on the economic health of East Tennessee led to most small businesses having to enforce their regulations - inducing self-affecting practices- to protect their communities (Bennett, 2021). Wild Love Bake House in Knoxville, Tennessee, exemplifies self-regulation through a Facebook post from March 16, 2020,

Hello Friends and Neighbors! Meg and Shaun here. We have come to the decision to temporarily close our doors due to the Covid-19 health crisis. As employers, our responsibility is to our staff and the community. We cannot, in good conscience, move forward being open. We will have reduced hours Tuesday & Wednesday 8a-12pm (take out only) and closed for an undetermined amount of time. We will be baking as much as we can, have bags of granola, and bags of coffee to help you settle in for a while. We love you guys and plan to be back as soon as possible! Thank you for your continued support, be well and much love, Shaun, Meg + Wild Love family!

And then again on March 20, 2020, they reiterated the importance of their employees and community and created an online tip jar to generate additional funds for the lost wages of their staff,

Words could never adequately describe how much our teams mean to us. They are number one, our heart, the backbone to what we do, they help keep everything in motion on a daily basis. We are humbled and inspired everyday by their care, compassion and talent. They are friends, parents, community members and a second family. For their safety and the welfare of the business we had to temporarily shut our doors due to the Covid-19 health crisis. There are several of you that have inquired on how you could

help. If you are able or feel inclined, we set up an emergency relief fund to help these incredible people out. A virtual tip jar. All proceeds go directly to the employees. Again, thank you so much for your continued support without you, we wouldn't be here. You can always DM us if you have further questions. It takes a village. Venmo: WLfamily

The sentiment portrayed on Wild Love's Facebook echoes their commitment to their local community and their initiatives to slow the spread of COVID without a state or federal government directive. But this accountability was met with the support and intentional focus on supporting small businesses by local customers striving for community resilience. This proactive behavior is an example of an East Tennessee small business in the community stepping up to fill the gap left neglected by policies and elected officials.

The Rise of Localism

Global and national shortages of goods/labor and a desire to support their community have led consumers to turn to local businesses to fill the gaps and consciously sustain local businesses (Benjamin & Frankel, 2020). In the context of an increasing reliance on global sourcing, consumers with an annual household income of approximately \$40,000 annually or less demonstrate a lower attitude and purchase intent toward globally sourced products versus local (Aljukhadar et al., 2021; Tu et al., 2012).

This phenomenon can be seen in a recent case study on flowers and ornamental plants shop; flower shops had to pivot to create a new model of relationship with customers focusing on social media, localized marketing tactics, and developing online community spaces for gardening workshops (Anacleto et al., 2021). While the flower and plant shops have not seen the sales they once experienced before the pandemic, they capitalized on various tools that focused on their

local communities to attempt to stay operational. This sentiment, relying on the local community for support while also engaging with customers on social media, has been echoed in various other popular press articles (Benjamin & Frankel, 2020). With the rising demand for supporting local communities (in-person and online), there is yet another layer to the phenomenon. With the racial and social crisis unfolding in news and media, another site of political resistance was to support small and BIPOC businesses in a deliberate consumption act of politics and support.

Desire to Support Black-Owned Businesses

Smith (2004) discusses the impact between the intertwined relationships of psychological trauma and the search for personal meaning and purpose in the form of spirituality; and how the interaction of the two affects the life of a trauma survivor through a comprehensive literature review. Smith argues that psychological trauma and spirituality interact with one another as a means of recovering from a traumatic event. Explicitly, the displacement of “a sense of life’s meaning and purpose”, resulting from psychological trauma alludes to a shift in the balance of power and shatters assumptions of fairness and balance in their worldviews (Smith, 2004, p. 233). This displacement can act as a catalyst for spiritual growth and leads to a search for meaning and purpose through nurturing a desire for a more meaningful existence (Decker, 1993). The inner realization is contingent on overcoming psychological trauma can result in behavior change (Decker, 1993). Therefore, behavior changes in consumption as part of a response to spiritual growth centers around exploring what is truly needed to find purpose in life. Reevaluation of needs is a central component of alternative hedonism and simultaneously an integral part of recovering from psychological trauma. One way this reevaluation of needs through prioritizing the community can lead to a more fulfilling and meaningful existence. Examples of

this can be seen in working within a community, providing resources, jobs, and opportunities, and keeping a small circular economy.

As of May 2021, the federal aid and consumer focus on community has sparked a new era of entrepreneurship. This rise in small businesses has led to a surge in start-ups in America that are currently drawing experts' attention. Using data from the National Bureau of Economic Research which allows the precise tracking of new businesses across time and place, Americans have seen the most robust small business growth in Black communities (Fazio et al., 2021). The national data echo the previous statements that an act of political resistance to the global capitalist labor structure is to find enjoyment in leisure, strengthen support for marginalized or oppressed individuals within one's communities, and have basic physical needs met within a local economy.

Specifically, many Black-owned businesses in Tennessee saw a rise in support during the early stages of the #BLM movement that occurred at the start of the pandemic (Price, 2021). The tumultuous COVID-era psychological traumas assisted in spotlighting the inequalities throughout American society and bringing the conversations to the forefront. These discussions led many consumers to grapple with how race is intertwined with entrenched problems in their communities (Price, 2021), leading some Black business owners to experience an increase in sales as new customers hurried to support them. Rallying behind the community not only empowered people to see the direct influence of their (in some cases limited) consumption but also acted as a political act of solidarity with marginalized business owners who were often left with limited resources during the start of the COVID-era. In response to the limited support, groups nationwide started echoing the growing public demand. Southern Restaurants for Racial

Justice is a coalition of bakers, chefs, makers, and restaurant owners who have joined together to benefit Black communities in the American South, specifically Black-owned restaurants struggling during civil unrest and COVID. Their collective aim is to raise and provide financial resources to protect Black-owned businesses while also amplifying Black leadership, messaging, and progress (2021). The rise of non-profit organizations and coalitions to support Black businesses during this tumultuous time has continued to gain traction demonstrating a trend in social justice and community engagement that was unprecedented before the COVID-era. Supporting the local economy and the rise of resilient small businesses is a grassroots movement, starting from the ground up. Resources have become inherently limited for marginalized youth throughout the COVID-era; social media became a site of education and knowledge sharing about the communities one engages with and support. Yet, social media has been on a collision course of two competing streams: information sharing and the mindlessness of doom-scrolling, which inherently exhaust individuals.

The four COVID-era responses outlined above demonstrate the ways in which consumers, specifically marginalized Gen Z consumers, adapted and reacted at the start of the COVID-era. Next, I will discuss the consequences of these responses and begin to construct the interwoven connection between the grassroots responses and alternative consumption.

The Consequences of the COVID-era

As consumer culture continues to perpetuate a structure of overworking to secure material goods, the responses to psychological trauma induced by the COVID-era support a new way of thinking of individuals prioritizing their physical and spiritual needs, ultimately embracing a lifestyle more conducive to alternative hedonism. This creates a system of

psychological traumatic catalysts that can create dissatisfaction within a consumer, changing their long-term behavior. With the financial demands of capitalism, individuals have consequently pushed themselves into time famines that leave them mentally and physically traumatized (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011), in turn, limited free time to engage in leisure activities which can empower and recharge a person reactively, pushing them towards feelings of helplessness and isolation. Consumer culture addresses the individual's discontent by promoting tangible goods to fill the voids in their lives while glorifying overworking and increasing debt. The shift for many consumers who experienced psychological hardships within this system found a moment of solace when the COVID-era mandated lockdowns occurred throughout the United States and East Tennessee.

Alternative Hedonism for Marginalized Gen Z Consumers

Vices of the Western capitalist system, over-working, and overconsuming, are renounced by alternative hedonism. The endless pursuit of money allows consumption to yield unlimited acquisitiveness (Alexander, 2011; Ray & Anderson, 2001). However, non-material consumption that fulfills spiritual needs can provide longer-lasting pleasure (Alexander, 2011). By limiting the consumption of material goods, individuals no longer have to be singularly driven to procure money or debt. They can embrace meaningful lifestyle changes that ascertain manageable working hours facilitate more leisure time, and indulge in more simplistic, enriching activities (e.g., reading a book or enjoying a walk in the park). This slower-paced lifestyle focuses on strengthening interpersonal connections along with the spiritual and communal aspects of resistance servitude to affluent consumer society (Ray & Anderson, 2001).

When consumers' self-identities are synonymous with their accumulated products, the material goods significantly influence their lives (Frankel et al., 2021a). This reimagining of a deeply material lifestyle is imperative because many consumers use fashion and other branded products to construct idealized façades, which is harmful to self-esteem and the environment. Fashion industry critics suggest that physical products create “depthless, materialistic outlooks and a perpetual state of dissatisfaction over one’s current lifestyle and physical appearance” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 16). In addition to low levels of personal satisfaction, this consumerist lifestyle generates stress, ill health, and environmental pollution, arguably conflicting with human nature (Soper, 2008). Therefore, considering the influence of tangible goods on fashion and appearance for the marginalized Gen Z consumer allows for a deeper exploration of the mounting mental health concerns of the cohort.

In particular, the marginalized Gen Z consumer responds to the onslaught of psychological traumas center around the leisure time to reprioritize their individual needs along with what serves their community, empowering themselves and others to engage in political acts of resistance which facilitates a paradigm shift within traditional Western capitalist societies. These activities have been shown to be conducive to alternative consumption, which opens new ways of thinking about human well-being, transforming their meaning of fulfillment and prosperity in response to the psychologically traumatic experiences of the current COVID-era climate (Breunig, 2020).

In Western societies, basic needs are extended to the consumption of objects due to mounting pressures of increased advertising, which intensifies consumers' associations with sex, status, and self-respect (Wilk, 2002). Individual choice theorists argue “needs are produced

internal psychological and cognitive processes,” influencing choices within the marketplace (Wilk, 2002; p.6). From this viewpoint, alternative hedonism promotes “cultural as well as aesthetic and cultural modes of self-realization rather than the expansion of shopping” (Fredriksson, 2016, p.155). The current market works to meet physical needs, needs that can be capitalized upon with tangible goods; any need that is not physical is then promoted to consumers as having a tangible solution that drives the never-ceasing consumption, which perpetuates dissatisfaction and irreversible environmental and spiritual damage (Soper, 2020). For example, consumer culture cultivates products touting new age, boho-chic, vintage reproduction, and faux artisanal products for mass consumption to trigger feelings of spiritual fulfillment for concepts like wanderlust or manifestation in Gen Z consumers. This tangible solution to concepts associated with positive mental health (Dodds et al., 2021) can act as a bandaid to the ever-declining mental health of marginalized Gen Z consumers. This phenomenon facilitates an interesting duality; consume to feel better but acutely aware that overconsumption negatively impacts the environment and our mental health.

With growing worldwide attention on sustainable consumption ideals, paradoxes in consumer practices have continued to be identified as a mechanism that undercuts progress (Holt, 2012). Individuals wanting to participate in sustainable consumption must adhere meticulously to high personal standards to avoid ecologically or socially harmful products. This self-regulation allows for few middle-ground consumption alternatives; therefore, sustainable consumption becomes an unobtainable approach because the goal of resources enough for future generations is largely unachievable for consumers (Holt, 2012). Self-regulation is often

associated with luxury, a luxury to choose or go without in consumer culture. It, therefore, has been generally limited to research focusing on the consumption of affluent consumers.

Advocates of alternative hedonism have received backlash for their considerations of exclusively targeting (white, cisgender, able-bodied) affluent, socially responsible consumers (Littler, 2011; Schneider & Miller, 2011; Soper, 2008, 2020), providing a limited understanding to the phenomenon. Despite this criticism, rising ethical consumers value consumption alternatives, irrespective of socioeconomic standing or community type (Cranfield, Henson, & Blandon, 2012; Fullagar, 2012). Scholars have applied alternative hedonism to non-market pleasures of consuming (Jenkins, Molesworth, & Eccles, 2010), anti-consumption (Portwood-Stacer, 2012), and a zero-waste brand community (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2015). Alternative hedonism has also been reconnoitered in Japan to demonstrate that individuals demonstrating cultural creatives' (Ray & Anderson, 2001) tendencies are connected to alternative hedonism (Hatayama, 2019). Therefore, there is a poignant demand for diverse representation and inclusion in future research to gain additional insight from marginalized populations.

Specifically, Muradian (2019) challenges the often-overlooked system of oppression that sustainability often reinforces upon lower-income populations. Muradian (2019) echoes Anantharaman's (2018) critique of the current sustainability paradigm that dismisses the experiences of disadvantaged or under-represented populations. Both critical essays discuss the difference and importance of understanding self-regulating consumption practices versus socio-economic barriers that force an individual into voluntary simplicity. Several concerns with the exclusive focus on predominantly affluent Western consumers have been introduced and argue for a more inclusive approach to understanding individual's motivations for limiting

consumption and the self-regulating phenomenon (Anatharaman, 2018; Caruana et al., 2019; Littler, 2011; Muradian, 2019). However, Muradian (2019) warned that appealing to voluntary frugality is probably an ineffective strategy to counterbalance the current decline of progressive values and environmental concerns worldwide. Concerns with materialism and the environment do not appear compatible with the aspiration of social mobility of a large share of the lower-income population (Anatharaman, 2018; Muradian, 2019). This dissertation will explore marginalized Gen Z consumers to actively address this academic critique. Next, narrowing further into the context of the COVID-era, alternative hedonism can facilitate a more profound discussion around leisure, travel, and social-, and ecological responsibilities.

The COVID-era has caused unfathomable disruptions to various industries, but as mentioned above, the retail, tourism, and service sector has felt some of the most extreme negative effects. In a recent article by David Fennell, the impact of COVID on tourism is explored through the theoretical lens of alternative hedonism and the sustainable citizen (2020). Fennell discusses the effect that COVID has had on the tourism industry and outlines how, with alternative hedonism and technology, tourism can become more accessible to individuals who might not be able to partake in the activities physically or who do not have the economic capital to travel (Fennell, 2021). Alternative hedonism allows people to enjoy the attraction and consume the touristic experiences in a new age by utilizing technologies to reduce the negative ecological outcome of tourism (Fennell, 2021). By creating personalized, interactive, and real-time tours through technologies (such as live streaming animal habitats, YouTube aquarium tours, live Instagram safari tours, etc.), people can still partake in tourism experiences while reducing their negative ecological impact by traveling to destinations and disturbing natural

ecosystems. While the COVID-era has influenced various businesses and industries, connecting the tangible product of consumption into the folds of alternative hedonism practices will be paramount to bringing more intricacies around Gen Z consumption to the surface.

Alternative hedonism has been used as a theoretical tool to examine various research fields and industries; however, it has sparsely been used in the fashion sector. Diesel's 2007 "Global Warming Ready" campaign was the focus of an article investigating irony in corporate social responsibility (CSR) marketing and fashion advertising (Glozer & Morsing, 2020). While alternative hedonism was not a lens for the investigation, it did help to illuminate some of the findings, specifically, how hypocrisy in fashion advertisements can spark new reflective processes on topics like climate change and therefore be consumed in a way that looks for the good life outside of the capitalist system (Glozer & Morsing, 2020). Here the critical reflection that occurs after exposure to ironic CSR messaging is the site of alternative hedonism practices. Still, there has been no consideration of how alternative hedonism has influenced fashion consumption.

Consumer culture is a prevailing and damaged system that does not account for an individual's physical and spiritual needs. Alternative hedonism provides a framework for meeting spiritual needs; whenever a physical need is required, an individual will enact a mindful, self-policing action of sourcing through alternative consumption. For example, instead of shopping for clothes at the mall for a serotonin boost during times of mental distress, redirecting that physical need to enact a spiritual want (happiness), an individual could read a borrowed library book at a public park and receive feelings of pleasure and enjoyment without a

transaction for ownership over material commodities. This act, enjoyment in a library book, articulates the desire to share and borrow instead of buy and collect finite resources.

Consumers might have more access than ever to products without ecologically damaging byproducts, like electric cars. Still, as a result, consumers are driving more and purchasing new vehicles, leading to the “Jevons Paradox” (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Holm & Englund, 2009; Polimeni et al., 2012). Jevons Paradox is a consumption problem because a per unit reduction in the throughput of material goods does not actually lead to any reduced environmental impact. After all, the efficiency improvements are outweighed by the increased amount of commodities that are consumed (Holm & Englund, 2009). The implications for creating more green and environmentally friendly products for consumers cannot solve the global ecological crisis on its own; there has to be a fundamental shift in the mindset of the consumers and the production of physical needs in the marketplace. Detangling the concept of needs to understand the difference between physical and spiritual needs can empower personal fulfillment without relying on the market to address unquenchable material desires. Marginalized Gen Z consumers have often capitalized on the mandated pause to re-evaluate their notion of the good life, re-prioritize their needs, and use leisure as a form of political resistance and empowerment. Self-fulfillment and self-interest previously influenced consumption for the cohort, but the ways in which psychological trauma and mental health responses during the early stages of the COVID-era can unearth additional considerations for our understanding of alternative hedonism.

Trying to fill spiritual needs with material goods creates an unquenchable yearning for solutions that never truly satisfies problems (Soper, 2020), along with perpetuating Jevon’s Paradox (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). This creates a “psychological emptiness” that continues to

fuel affluent societies' desire for material growth (Meadows et al., 2004; p.217). Once a society can acknowledge and become aware that there are non-material needs and find solutions to these newly identified desires, a higher level of personal and overall human fulfillment may be obtained. Alternative hedonism emphasizes that our self-interest, which presents as spiritual needs, is unmet in consumer culture and therefore become an enticing aspect of shifting to a simpler and more sustainable mode of consumption. Specifically, marginalized Gen Z consumers responses to the COVID-era psychological traumas have crafted a paradigm shift that expands upon the knowledge previously understood in the realm of alternative hedonism in consumer culture.

Chapter Summary

Modern capitalism and consumer culture reclassify human desires by maximizing consumption and encouraging consumers to ignore limits and run rampant, leading to overconsumption and environmental degradation. A byproduct of consumer culture, known as marketplace exclusion, is the lack of inclusion of market participation by marginalized populations. Specifically, marginalized Gen Z consumers have experienced disruptions to their consumption patterns, with psychological traumas acting as a catalyst for re-evaluating what is essential to their mental and physical health. Some have adopted alternative consumption practices for altruistic, social, and environmental motivations. Acquiring goods through non-traditional means is an agency-driven choice that centers around ample leisure time and financial standing. It leaves the discourse around marginalized consumers' motivations for alternative consumption practice engagement limited to their socio-economic standings.

The responses of the marginalized Gen Z consumer to the compounding psychological traumas manifest as alternative consumption practices which reflect alternative hedonism principles. Therefore, alternative hedonism can provide additional insight into this context by providing a new way of achieving the good life that many consumers strive to fulfill with material objects. Once consumers can differentiate their physical and spiritual needs, they will be able to break from much of the damaging and ecologically destructive tendencies of consumer culture and embrace alternative hedonism through self-policing, rethinking thinking about their needs and engaging in more locally-focused commerce.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 of this dissertation contains the following sectional overviews: (a) the role of the researcher, (b) the situation of myself as the researcher in the qualitative studies, (c) the multiple methods used in this dissertation, (d) the sample and procedures for recruitment, (e) procedures for analysis of the data corpus, and finally (f) the presentation of the interpretation.

The Role of the Researcher

I identify as a white, Jewish, queer, cisgender woman, that engages in alternative hedonistic practices. I have been participating in these types of activities for almost 10 years prior to learning about the theoretical perspective of alternative hedonism (i.e., limiting my tangible consumption to the secondhand market, focusing on a slower paced life, and engaging in activities with the least amount of environmental impact such as walking versus driving). I also have found that my experiences of the COVID-era have enhanced my engagement with the alternative hedonistic lifestyle driving my interest in the topics explored in this dissertation. Moreover, because I am a member of the alternative community, I have access to the group that gives me a competitive advantage over any outside researcher. I believe I have substantial credibility due to my active participation in alternative hedonism that assists me in building a rapport with the participants (Saldana & Omasta, 2016). My engagement with alternative practices can provide a connection between the participants and myself. Overall, my Subjective-I's position me within this research and assist in facilitating my relationship within the research and community (Peshkin, 1988).

The following table (Table 1) uncovers my Subjective I's as a way to proactively understand my distinct contributions to this project. Through this conscious and critical review of myself, I can construct my reality for understanding individuals' lived experiences that I am wanting to document. This activity will assist me in remaining transparent through the inquiry process to demonstrate credibility as a researcher and interpreter of the data. Moreover, I believe that this has been beneficial to my own research on alternative hedonism. It must also be mentioned that I have personal biases that must be addressed within this research arena. I have personal opinions and assumptions for each research question that I develop and have used my personal experiences to guide the questions to better understand different experiences and facets of the group. This is something that was continually reflected upon during the qualitative research journey which enriched the ethnographic data corpus that is interpreted in the fourth chapter (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

Table 1. My Subjective I's

Peshkin's Subjective I	My Subjective I	Positioned in this project
Ethnic Maintenance I	My Jewish I	I identify ethnically as a Jewish woman. This aspect of my identity is not religious but more vital to my cultural composition. This presents itself in my views on education and family, in addition to being aware of other's suffering and persecution for being <i>different</i> .
Community Maintenance I	My Southern I	The physical space I occupy is in the southern United States. This influences my desire to serve, please, and provide hospitality that is a strong characteristic of the southern charm.
E-Pluribus-Unm I	My Tattooed I	The group that I am strongly identified with is the tattooed subculture. Based on my appearance and lifestyle choices this group reflects who I am on the surface, especially from the eyes of an outsider.
Justice Seeking I	My Feminist I	My feelings of inequity for the world around me drive me to advocate for inclusivity and respect for all as equals. This is also echoed in the social justice emphasis my generational cohort (millennial) rallies behind.
Pedagogical-Meliorist I	My Empowered I	The desire to empower and teach others is something that occupies my entire research agenda and personal life.
Nonresearch Human I	My Empathy I	Through my desire to become closer to a subject I empathize strongly with marginalized, oppressed, misunderstood, and vulnerable people. This reduces the distance between myself and an individual, creating a bond of affection.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, methods, and methodologies are used by researchers who are interested in exploring and illuminating the ways specific or individual groups generate meaning from their lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For this dissertation, I have adopted an ethnographic approach to exploring the phenomena that have driven Gen Z consumers to modify their consumption practices during the COVID-era signaling a shift toward alternative hedonism; this insight will be used to broaden the understanding of alternative hedonism within modern consumer culture. Ethnography is a qualitative research framework chosen due to its ability to help understand the experiences of life and culture of a specific group of individuals (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Specifically, I used multiple methods including ethnographic observations (to view the positioning of the phenomena in the context of consumer culture and how the cultural of the individuals interrelate with it), ethnographic interviews (to gain subjective insight into the experiences of the culture surrounding marginalized Gen Z consumers), and closet interviews (which bring the tangible object into the discussion and refocusing consumer culture alongside tangible and intangible needs).

Situating the Researcher

Situating oneself in the context of this dissertation comes easily to many consumers because of the shared distress during the COVID-era. I, personally, have felt the weight, anguish, and isolation experienced through the psychological traumas of the COVID-era that contributed to my reprioritization of consumption into more fulfilling ways. It is hard to write on this topic without taking a moment to journal about my personal experiences on each header of this dissertation.

Prior to the COVID-era, I was participating in alternative hedonism and alternative consumption practices. These activities ranged from only buying used clothing, carrying reusable bags with me to the farmer's market or co-op, trying to source all my products second-hand or exclusively American-Made, walking to the store instead of driving, to supporting small locally owned businesses. None of that has changed but instead grown more important in my daily life since.

But in March 2020, the world was set ablaze and spent a significant period of time in fear. I had just visited my little sister in NYC when COVID was hitting national recognition. I remember checking the live map on CNN's website seeing the state of New York becoming riddled with red dots of confirmed cases. We didn't know how it spread, so we were scared, and even in the first few days there was no hand soap, disinfectants, Clorox, or bleach on any shelves in the bodegas my sister and I passed. Amidst my rising anxieties around COVID, the news of Breonna Taylor's murder hit national news. I cried for a woman I never knew in a New York bathroom.

When I returned home to East Tennessee on March 16, 2020, I did not leave my house again for almost four months. My partner and I shifted to remote working, and thankfully both were able to keep our jobs through those difficult times. I remember crying a lot. I turned to self-medication and lost all ability to focus on anything more than the news. Anguishing over George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the violence I was seeing all around me. I was too scared to even go to the #BLM protests that were occurring in my communities because COVID was still rampant, and discussions of a vaccine were barely starting.

It took months to refocus on being a graduate student. I needed to heal from this pain, from the meaninglessness of my life, from the feeling of being insignificant in the face of disease, politics, and racial violence. I spent time outside walking at parks, enjoying picnic lunches in shady groves, knitting, exploring how to cook, deleting social media applications from my phone, and reading leisurely (paranormal romance and sci-fi/fantasy novels). I turned to medical professionals and my partner for assistance when I needed additional support outside of my own control. I started refocusing on what really mattered, I had to change my perspective from feeling powerless and scared to feeling empowered and grateful. This did not happen overnight- it took months- and years later, I am still working on it. I had to redefine my relationship with work. Because I had taken so much time away from it, I had a new found perspective that showed me how detrimental my past relationship with it had been to my health. The pre-COVID me was just a cog in the machine. I tried to be a mindful consumer, but I was still caught up in the rat race of the world and felt like I lost a piece of myself due to the self-inflicted pressures of work... but for who?

I realized I had been suffering from a time famine for over a decade and my past trajectory was going to perpetuate my scarcity of leisure time. This was made even more apparent when I read and truly understood what Kate Soper (2020) was saying. I was a conscious consumer before the pandemic because I was being altruistic and thinking of the future, but the COVID-era showed me the importance of the *now*. The importance of time and is an influence on my mental health. My active engagement with alternative hedonism and experiences during the COVID-era have helped to situate me within the research and therefore inform my chosen ethnographic approach to the dissertation.

Exploring Experiences through Ethnography

Ethnographic approaches to methods of participant-observation and interviewing are paramount in studies of material culture to explore how material things frame the everyday lived experience of individuals (Miller, 1997; Woodward, 2016). Ethnography is a qualitative research framework adopted to experience the daily life and culture of a specific group of individuals (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Through the systematic gathering of interview data, fieldwork, photographs, and other secondary sources, I follow a research process that explores the lived experiences and the culture of others (Gobo & Molle, 2017).

For this dissertation, marginalized Gen Zs' consumption experiences during the COVID-era, rising emphasis of mental and physical health, and national civil unrest represent the central, shared phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which marginalized Gen Z consumers in East Tennessee have modified their consumption practices during the COVID-era to reflect an adoption towards alternative consumption practices.

Multiple Methods Approach

Mixed methods approach to research is generally presented as a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods; this limitation reinforces binary methodological divisions instead of utilizing methods as tools for exploring the multidimensionality of social worlds (Mason, 2006). However, *multiple* methods are a way to understand the entangled material and social worlds which lay a foundation for thinking creatively about sociological methods (Law, 2004; Woodward, 2016). The interdisciplinary process of an assemblage of methods is vital to how the project is designed and the data is approached. Therefore, adopting an interdisciplinary approach encourages reflexivity throughout the endeavor and acts as an accepted way of

engaging in research when faced with alternative knowledge practices (Woodward, 2016). When thinking of an assemblage of methods, Mason (2006) argues that “the intention is not to triangulate the data to produce an integrated picture of ‘the material’, but rather to hold methods in ‘creative tension’,” (p.6). These tensions and ambiguities between methods and data can be explored through participant discussions and act as a site of dialog that allows an enrichment in how the materials are understood (Woodward, 2016).

Method 1: Ethnographic Observations

For this dissertation, I adopted an *emic* - or insider - perspective as an active participant in alternative consumption practices. The emic relationship assisted in synthesizing the human phenomena and aid in providing a deeper understanding of the interview data (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Over the course of seven months, I gathered supplemental materials through reflexive journaling, field notes, and ethical dialogue (Woodward, 2016) in the interviews to acknowledge my preconceived notions and biases along the way.

Specifically for events where I collected field notes, observations, emersion, and participation in the field I have spent a minimum of one hour per visit, following all COVID-era precautions and CDC recommendations, at the following:

- French Fried Vintage’s monthly First Friday events (June, July, and August)
- The University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Maternal & Child Health Nutrition Leadership Team is partnering with Growing Resilience in the South (G.R.I.T.S.) to offer the Food as Resistance College Tour
- French Fried Vintage 3rd Annual Spring Chicken Pop-Up
- Oglewood’s Macrame & Plant Care Workshop

- Black Doula Collective Pre-Natal and Postpartum Community Classes (4 in total)
- 7th Annual Punk Rock Flea Market
- PRIDE's Stop the Hate Rally for TransYouth
- Black Appalachian Storytellers of Tennessee Event

The ethnographic observational data was collected during the interviewing time frame (February 2022 through August 2022) and ceased when theoretical sufficiency occurred within the data (Dey, 1999). Field notes, photographs, and journaling excerpts were incorporated into the data corpus to assist in providing a holistic and multifaceted insight to the phenomena along with the transcriptions from the interviews (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016) to assist with transparency and rigor (Tracy, 2010). Fieldnotes and photographs were collected to provide a descriptive account of the scenery and individuals along with personal experiences and reactions for interpretation (Crang & Cook, 2007; Emerson et al., 2001). The purpose of the observations was to help provide additional insight into diverse populations of people and how they are engaging in alternative consumption outside of the scope of this study. It is also important for me to support the communities I am conducting research with; I did this by attending events and supporting the different businesses and community organizations. It allowed me to feel more connected with the participants and gain a stronger emic footing when participating. The addition of materials to the corpus addresses the potential hazard of possible deletion of information that might contain unknown units of data that could pull everything together (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016); though they are inevitably selective and not simply a matter of facts (Emerson et al., 2001).

Method 2: Ethnographic Interviews

Language is a specific technique of the methodology that is used to assist in ethnographic observations; this project utilized both language in interviews and observations in fieldnotes to attempt to acquire empathic knowledge of the culture (Gobo & Molle, 2017). The interviews were conducted with ethnographic interviewing techniques. Ethnographic interviewing focuses on the lived experiences of participants and in turn generates a detailed and in-depth description of their experiences (Roulston, 2010). The central cognitive mode was operating through participatory research and individual interviews; the data management and analysis techniques were limited to transcription and coding of the interviews and field notes (Gobo & Molle, 2017).

Recruitment started with screening questions (see Appendix A) that participants accessed through scanning the QRCode on the flyer. Some of screening questions included information pertaining to gender identity, preferred pronouns, population group, sexual identity, veteran status, disabilities, and impairments. There was also a textbox that allowed for additional information to be shared around alternative consumption practices and psychological trauma. Once the participant passed the screening and clearly demonstrated engagement in alternative hedonism and was demographically situated within the sample population, they were contacted via email to schedule their first interview. The participant demographic information is presented in Table 2below.

The interview was informed by an interview guide (see Appendix B) which was developed using the theoretical framework as a guide for selecting questions (Agee, 2009; Roulston, 2010). Theory serves as a conceptual tool that guided the interview questions to assist in producing a deeper level of understanding to the phenomenon of alternative hedonism and

consumption (Agee, 2009). The interview-guide for this project continued to be refined through the interview process so that the questions are formulated to generate rich and in-depth descriptions of participant's perceptions and experiences (Roulston, 2010). The research questions, which are reflected in the interview guide, were developed to reveal how the culture experience and think about alternative hedonism (Agee, 2009). I then continued with follow-up interviews with participants to further explore what was uncovered through the interview process and participant's own reflections (Charmaz, 2003; Roulston, 2010). Initial interviews lasted between 36 minutes to 1 hour 7 minutes.

Method 3: Closet Interviews

Materials are understood through their dynamic practices and contexts of use (Matthews & Hodges, 2013; Woodward, 2016). Specific interactions or explicit contexts can illuminate the different qualities of the materials that might have been suppressed or realized through verbal communications (Keane, 2005). The limitations of verbal interviews raise the importance of developing methods to think through the entangled relationship between people, places, materials, and contexts (Woodward, 2016). Materials things are at the center of consumer culture; materials can present as vibrant things (Ingold, 2007) as well as provoke material practices and shifting meanings to participants. Furthermore, it is imperative when accounting for the multi-modal nature of lived experiences to move beyond discourse reductionism and attempt to produce contextualizes embodiments with rich detail through experiences (Del Busso, 2021; Pink, 2015).

Semi-structured and closet interviews (see Appendix C and D respectively) designed to probe how apparel or a material object relate to the phenomena in question, were conducted with

each of the participants (Matthews & Hodges, 2013). The information shared explored the ways in which apparel choices of marginalized Gen Z consumers are influenced by alternative consumption. These interviews, informed by alternative hedonism, lasted between 28 to 48 minutes, and were audio-recorded; the photographs were later emailed to me by the participants to provide additional evidence of the material objects. The participants were asked to prepare items from their closet that reflected the initial interview themes we discussed together. With the physical object we discussed the practices of obtaining the apparel items along with illuminating uncovered attachments that are sparked by the object. Finally, due to the sensitive nature of the conversations, each participant was sent a list of mental health resources (see Appendix E) after the first interview was completed.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Sexual Identity	Ethnicity	Inclusion
Lily (she/her)	20s	Woman	Bisexual	White	Long-term mental health condition and medical illness
Alexis (she/her)	20s	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	None were disclosed
Clover (prefer not to answer)	20s	Non-Binary	Pansexual	White	Long-term mental health condition
London (she/her)	20s	Non-Binary	Lesbian	Black	None were disclosed
Bailey (she/her)	20s	Woman	Bisexual & Queer	White	Longer term mental health condition & additional disabilities that were not disclosed
Ella (they/them)	20s	Non-Binary & Trans	Pansexual & Queer	White	A learning disability & longer term mental health condition
Erica (she/her)	20s	Woman	Queer	Hispanic & Mixed Ethnicity	None were disclosed

Recruitment Procedures

The process starts with receiving IRB approval (UTK IRB-22-06777-XP) to receive approval on the materials (see Appendix F). The flyers were printed and hung in approximately 20 small businesses and community spaces (such as French Fried Vintage, Oglewood, Three Rivers Co-Op, and WildLove), around Knoxville, Tennessee. The recruitment flyers included a scannable QRCode that directed potential participants to the screener questions (see Appendix A). An example of screening questions includes information surrounding to gender identity, preferred pronouns, population group, sexual identity, veteran status, disabilities, and impairments. I also provided an additional space that allowed for additional information to be shared around alternative consumption practices and psychological trauma. From this screening information the participant was emailed or texted (based on their preference) and invited to schedule their first interview and review the consent form (see Appendix G).

After the first interview participants were sent an email with the information of free resources around mental health and were asked to schedule a follow-up closet interview. Compensation, a \$50 gift card to French Fried Vintage and another \$50 gift card to Oglewood Avenue Plant boutique, were mailed one at a time after the completion of an interview. It should be noted that one participant, London, only participated in the first interview and therefore only received one gift card of their choice.

In-Depth Interview Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data corpus was transcribed and cyclically open coded utilizing descriptive coding to examine the multiple realities and perceptions of the human experience (Crang & Cook, 2007; Davidson, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). This procedure reflects the ongoing critical and

creative research process that is associated with ethnographic research. Initial codes were co-created during the first interview in the constructivist inquiry paradigm (Charmaz, 2003; Lincoln, Lyman & Guba, 2011). The transcriptions then were coded using ‘in vivo’ and ‘emotion coding’ (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Descriptive coding, such as ‘in vivo’ coding, is a form of literal and emic coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). These codes are participant-generated from the individuals within the study of alternative hedonism and are utilized by me as a form of participant empowerment. Specifically, ‘in-vivo’ codes are codes that are generated from the exact words used by the participant (e.g., “...I felt violated...” the code ‘violated’ was produced). Next, emotion coding was used to explore interpersonal and intrapersonal participants' experiences and actions within social relationships (Frankel et al., 2021a; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The application of this coding technique assisted in understanding the affective qualities of human action and reaction along with the underlying tone of alternative hedonism. Therefore, I believe that both types of coding offer insight into the research questions.

All new codes that were identified in the coding process were entered into the coding schema. Specifically, 41 codes were generated, these were then condensed into 10 second-order themes and finally refined and presented in six final themes (see Table 3). Procedures, such as inviting interviewees to review the identified themes via email/text/phone calls and Zoom, were to ensure trustworthiness and establish strong credibility (Tracy, 2010). Lastly, the finalized selection of codes identified themes informed by the theoretical framework of alternative hedonism. As mentioned above, once the initial codes were generated, I grouped like codes together that appear coded in similar fashions in order to reduce any redundancy. After this step, I finalized the codes that then thematize into mood stanzas, with feedback from the participants,

representing a story-arc; an avant-garde visual and performative representations of the data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Each stanza will be representative of the themes that holistically capture the overarching mood during the interview segment; this technique is often utilized by actors and dancers who conceptualize a character's voyage through a performance by creating a heuristic understanding of the emotional journey (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The interviews were pungent with emotions and represent an essential part of the discussion around psychological trauma. Moreover, the use of the overarching mood informed by the emotions of the participants influences the creation of artwork and can encourage deeper discussions around reflection and mental health.

Table 3. Coding Process

First-order theme	Second-order themes	Codes
Re-Evaluation of Consumption	Consumption of Food	Vegan/Vegetarian Locally sourced Farmers markets/growing Shopping small/restaurant
	Food as a catalyst	Shopping small/restaurant Re-evaluation through food Maslow's Hierarchy
Developing Joyous Hobbies	Rekindling Old Hobbies	Forgotten joy Lost hobby to time "Always enjoyed..."
	Adopting New Hobbies	Social media to learn new skill Connecting with community Keeping busy through hobby Self-sufficient skill
The Purge	The Closet Purge	Donating Selling Sparking joy "Purge"
	Shedding the Consumerist Lifestyle	Decluttering/Selling Mutual aid and community focus Rebellion Anti-Capitalism sentiments "Frugal"/Frugality
	Removing/Decelerating	"Downsizing" Deactivating social media Sobering/Sobriety "Going analog"
	Trajectory Changes	Work/Life balance Burnout Being a boss Desire for more flexibility

Table 3. Coding Process Continued

First-order theme	Second-order themes	Codes
Awakening of the Self	Exploration of mental health and sexual identity	“Mental health” Anxiety/Depression Sexual identity Reflection on self Self-autonomy
Paradox of Speed	Double Edged Sword of Social Media	Social media Access to knowledge “Overwhelmed” due to knowledge Empowerment through social media Accessing community in isolation

Photo Data Analysis and Interpretation

The themes around consumption, identity, and aesthetic revisioning for any generational group is by nature complex. Conversely, within Gen Z, some of these complexities can be partially attributed to their transitional life stage (McKinsey, 2022). The political resistance shown in shifting from production and consumption towards cultivating energy towards self-constructs can elevate mental health outcomes (Mukhtar, 2023). Therefore, in the confines of this study, I chose to reconnoiter the ways in which apparel choices of marginalized Gen Z reflect the tumultuous social and culture settings of the COVID-era through fashion. To accomplish this, in addition to interview and observational data, photo data analysis through closet interviews were conducted to better understand how apparel choices are influenced by psychological trauma for marginalized Gen Z consumers. Moreover, the visual data collected from the participants provides a unique opportunity to expressly share their viewpoints, explicit and implicit biases, and their experiences by their own creative devices (Benjamin et al., 2017). This form of photo elicitation through volunteer photography bequeaths data collection authority around personal experiences to the participant allowing them to create the visual products themselves. Volunteer photography echoes previous considerations for the conceptual design of this dissertation. The photos from the closet interviews are utilized as tools to provide equitability through power sharing for both the researcher and participants; this is accomplished by empowering the participants to gather, present, and analyze their consumable world without excessive guidance or influencing behavior (Pink, 2015).

Informed by lived experiences, a group's culture often uses imagery to represent personal rituals, beliefs, and knowledge (Bach, 2007). The photographs that a participant share allows for

tangible objects (e.g., shirt from a local farm that they worked at) and lived experiences (e.g., moving across country to rekindle familial relationships) to intertwine within their personal narratives and illicit a meaning (Bach, 2007). Thus, the volunteer elicited photography within the closet interview allowed for participants to elucidate their photograph, visually seeing each photograph, while holding the physical object, while explaining the meaning behind each image (Benjamin et al., 2017). The staged photographs therefore established apparel choices that represent the ways in which psychological trauma influenced their consumption of fashion during the confines of the COVID-era.

For the closet interviews, the participants were asked to email or text photographs of the items they chose to discuss with me. Each participant chose to submit their own images instead of opting for a screenshot taken by a Zoom call, and therefore I was provided access to the images prior to the interview. I created a mood board/collage of the images on Canva since some participants provide only three photographs while others provided up to five. The mood boards found below improved my ability to examine the images in the context of the fundamental questions from the analysis guide accessible by Bach (2007): (1) What is the content of the photograph? (2) What does the photograph communicate? (3) What is missing? (4) What are the participants trying to express? Alternative consumption practices and specifically, alternative hedonism informed the analysis of this work by situating the material object into the previously identified tenets. In conclusion, the images were produced by the participants and enrich the data corpus allowing for additional insight into RQ3. How may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices?

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is paramount in qualitative research design in order to support the rigor of the reliability, objectivity, and validity of the dissertation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To demonstrate transparency and trustworthiness I followed the outline proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Confirmability, *the extent to which there can be corroboration within the data*, was utilized by reviewing both the transcriptions and audio files to ensure accuracy along with taking field notes and memos throughout the interviews. I also made sure to provide a holistic thematic overview of our discussion at the end of each interview to receive verbal confirmation from the participants that I was accurately representing their experiences. The audio recordings were transcribed, over the course of four months in 2022, and read through several times along with replaying the audio recordings to account for any additional nuances. Then, credibility, *the accuracy of the interpretation from the data corpus*, was conducted through theoretical, data, and investigator triangulation of interviews, memos and journaling, and photographs, as well as verbally confirmation with the participants. This criterion was used to establish that the researcher's interpretations are true and accurate. Next, transferability, *the generalizability of the study into other contexts*, is recognized through the meticulous details and in-depth methodological design regarding the context of the dissertation. And lastly, dependability, *the reliability of the findings over an extended period time*, was enacted through the rigor of the design and execution of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Emic Perspective

For this dissertation, I adopted an emic, or insider, perspective as an active participant in alternative consumption practices. The emic relationship assists in synthesizing the human

phenomenon and aids in providing a deeper understanding of the interview data (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Qualitative research and emic approaches often coincide because there are no hypotheses to verify but simply a phenomenon that can be explored from the inside (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Through my emic viewpoints my perspective helped guide the research into a holistic understanding within the data. I also used reflexive journaling, field notes, and ethical dialog (Woodward, 2016) in the ethnographic interviews to acknowledge my preconceived notions and biases along the way.

Gaining access and sharing empathy around psychological trauma discussed by the participants helped to facilitate the organic growth of our relationships and enriched the feelings of consolation allowing for vulnerability with me. This created a space of comfort that allowed the participants to speak to me, cry with me, and take moments to pause and reflect during our interviews. Specifically, I had two occasions, one with Alexis and another with Ella, where we had to pause the interview, Ella choosing to leave the room for several minutes, because they were crying recalling experiences of intense psychological trauma. This research was heavy and difficult at times and being able to share some of my experiences helped to engage with the participants in a way that demonstrated that they were not alone. We are not alone. Below, I touch on how my positionality and subjectivity are an amalgamation of emic perspectives that allow this dissertation to be situated within an emic approach.

Epistemology

Epistemology, one of my philosophical assumptions mentioned in the conceptual framework, is how and why we know what we know. The views of a researcher can often be seen as direct, and this influences the perspective on *how* a phenomenon is experienced and

openly impacts how research is conducted (Gobo & Molle, 2017). Therefore, my epistemology is situated in the belief that everybody has their own truth, and their perspectives are based on that reality- *perception is reality, man-* and this aligns with a constructivist epistemological approach. This directly influences the way I have designed this project, accumulated participant data, and finally the interpretation of the experiences.

The constructivist inquiry paradigm (Charmaz, 2003; Lincoln, Lyman & Guba, 2011) adopts a theoretically based semi-structured approach with open-ended analysis and empowers the participants by pursuing their input in the research. Within the paradigm of constructivist epistemology there is an understanding that acknowledges multiple truths and realities which may be different than mine as the researcher. I am aware of some of my biases, but I continued to utilize memoing and journaling as a way to attempt to unpack some of my unconscious and newly discovered biases and perspectives that may of influenced the interviews.

Ontology

Paradigms act as overarching philosophical systems which designate particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies; therefore, we as researchers and participants alike, cannot easily ebb and flow between them. This is because the paradigms represent complex belief systems that root an individual to a particular worldview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Ontological assumptions, or simply put, ‘what is’, are concerned with what constitutes reality. The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism which is the notion that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Lincoln, Lyman & Guba, 2011). Our realities, formed through meaning making and understanding, emerges when we consume objects which

already have a preconceived meaning and therefore the individual can construct multiple realities (Crotty, 1998).

Subjectivity

I wear my identity on my sleeves- literally. I identify as a white (or tattooed), Jewish, queer, cisgender mother, that engages in countless alternative hedonistic practices. I have been participating in these types of activities for almost 10 years prior to learning about the theoretical perspective of alternative hedonism but fell in love with the theory as soon as I read about it. I started to feel empowered by the theory and started to unpack my philosophies and actions over the years - finding that 2020 acted as a catalyst – and wondered how other people might have experienced the COVID-era. I also approach this dissertation, along with my budding research agenda, centered firmly on critical pushback to traditions in academic research. I continue to argue that arts-based approaches disrupt the hegemonic landscape of traditions research methods while offering an insight of inquiry, and in turn representation that not only relies upon discursive constructions in representation, but also allows for ‘nondiscursive means such as pictures, or music, or dance’ (Barone & Eisner 2012, x; Coda 2019).

Reflexivity

My firsthand experiences around alternative consumption practices have been criticized by friends and family as “extreme”. I have worked diligently and tirelessly to educate myself (and others) about the harmful effects of over consumption, to the point that I have actually lost friendships with people because I have been labeled “no fun”. This militant mentality that I have had has led me to spend time reflecting on what truly matters and how I can make an impact.

The self-interest of alternative hedonism has therefore become extremely attractive to me. Focusing on enjoyment of consumption through nontangible means has helped me focus on my spiritual needs versus my tangible needs. During the first few months of lockdown, I experienced a variety of psychologically traumatic experiences that also brought my mental health into question. I found aid with medication and therapy but started to focus stronger on aspects of my life that I could control... like spending money. I started reading more and uncovering deeper meaning in Kate Soper's work that I adapt into my daily life. This reflection also brings to the surface the privilege I have been able to experience around working on my mental health and educating myself in heady theories of what the good life looks like for myself and my family.

Positionality

My positionality in this research comes from my previously mentioned identities (white, Jewish, queer, cisgender mother). Because of these identities building a rapport with the participants helps to mitigate a variety of ethical concerns around power dynamics. I am able to relate to the experiences and insight they share with me, but I am also aware of the privilege I have as a researcher and lack of understanding of various structures of oppression that my identities protect me from. It was of the up most importance to continue my reflexive journaling throughout the data collection processes to bring attention to my position of power and privilege as not everyone holds these positions. I want to use my power to not only challenge the hegemonic landscape of methods and methodologies but also to amplify the voices of traditionally silenced or overlooked experiences in academic research.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETATION

This research sought to provide critical pushback toward addressing hegemonic narratives in academic research by exploring Gen Z consumers' experiences of psychological traumas during the COVID-era and the ways in which those compounding psychological traumas influence alternative consumption. The following participant vignettes provides contextual information about their consumption practices, apparel presentation, and experiences during the COVID-era. Specifically, the research questions guide the interpretations.

RQ1. In what ways have Generation Z changed their consumption views during the COVID-era?

RQ2. In what ways does trauma inform the lived experiences of Gen Z's apparel consumption during the COVID-era?

RQ3. How may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices?

Participant Introductions

The following section acts as a space for illustrative introductions and context for each participant based upon their interviews and photographic datum. As mentioned, the interpretation from photographic analysis continues to provide deeper and unspoken meaning from our conversations and will be woven through the interpretation below. Therefore, to add rigor and richness to the methodological design, the participant's photographs are used to situate the apparel/tangible object into the discussion and capture a deeper understanding of the ways in which alternative consumption manifest (Bach, 2007; Benjamin et al., 2017). The mood boards,

created for ease of presentation and recall with participants, for each participant are shown below
Lily (**Error! Reference source not found.**), Alexis (**Error! Reference source not found.**),
Clover (Figure 3) Bailey (Figure 4), Ella (Figure 5), and Erica (Figure 6). Full images available
in Appendix H.



Figure 1. Lily

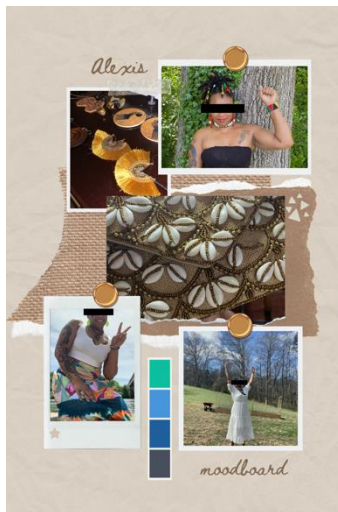


Figure 2. Alexis



Figure 3. Clover

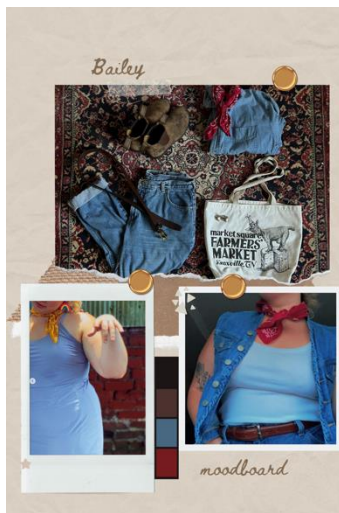


Figure 4. Bailey

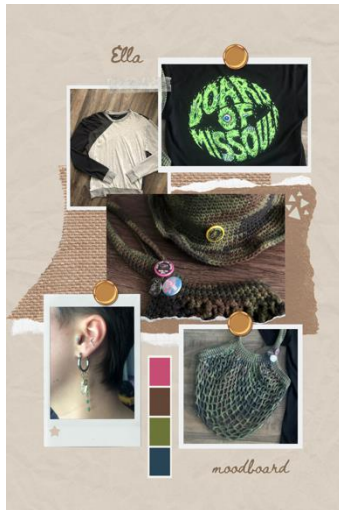


Figure 5. Ella



Figure 6. Erica

Lily

Lily is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 20-year-old White woman who is currently a student at the University of Tennessee. Lily identifies as bisexual though is currently in a relationship with a man. Lily was visiting her parents at the time of the first interview and was currently unemployed besides working her side hustle of selling vintage and repurposed fashion items on Depop and Instagram. She recalled her love of thrifting and engagement with customer service when she shops for clothes,

And I was like, honestly going, like going to thrift stores and stuff brings me more thrill [than shopping at chain stores] and really good customer service. Because I can like, when I find something cool, that's unique. That's so much more exciting to me and fun to me, than going to a store and getting this amazing customer service experience.

Lily engages in thrifting to not only style herself but to support her own shop that sells repurposed clothing. She goes to thrift store and buys vintage shirts and then bleaches and dyes them for fun. She recalls, "I would buy shirts from the thrift store. And I would bleach dye them and I would just sell them to my friends".

Throughout the closet interview Lily and I joked about how our styles are so similar and our love for dressing like our fathers. Embracing sweatpants instead of yoga pants and opting for a hand-me-down button up shirt from our fathers gave us both a sense of nostalgia and comfort. She chats about her dad style,

This button up, I wear it once a week, it was my dad's old shirt. I wear a lot of my dad's [clothing]. So, I thought it was perfect. He has like a lot of like old T shirts and stuff that are like, vintage shit... I wear [the button up] all the time. Also just another one of those

pieces that I can just lay or like I I wore it, like to the beach with my friends as like a cover up. But then I also wear in the winter with like a sweater... my dad shirt, I'll even view- like when I'm visiting family, we'll see like a picture of him when he was younger, like wearing that exact shirt. I'm like, Oh, that's my shirt. Yeah, it gives more meaning to it.

The connection between male hand-me-down and her sexuality were hinted at on the surface of our conversations. She mentions her morphing gender styles passively, "...my roommate [and I] joke about this, sometimes I'll be dressed like, super girly stuff. And then like, one day, I'll be just like, a 12-year-old boy, I just have a lot of different things I wear, which I think that's fine". The androgynous and genderfuck styling that she engages in is not only for comfort but also to help signal her identity to others (Keane, 2005). Overall, Lily's love of thrifting to refashion old items and selling them online is apparent in her photographs. She styles the items she spoke about during her closet interview in a way that is appealing for social media consumption. The portrayal of her apparel items demonstrates her that her flair for online merchandising and presentation on social media is part of her aesthetic.

Alexis

Alexis is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 24-year-old Black, heterosexual, woman. She is a first-generation college student and is pursuing her degree in the medical field. She is a mother of two children, both she had at a young age, and is currently casually dating a man she met online. She has a fondness for shopping that stems from her energy work and love of colors. She explains that "I really enjoy like antique vintage things. So like, just going to like old vintage stores and just like looking around to see like what gravitates to me or like, catches my eye".

Since the start of the COVID-era, Alexis has focused on energy work and using the objects she adorns her body with to help transform her mental state. She expands on this with the reoccurrence of shells in her jewelry and locks, “And my necklace is you know, the shells. Those are really big. Love, I love wearing my shells. It kind of gives me my ocean energy, which is like a goddess. And I just really I just love I love I love those... And I love my shells to kind of just remind me of ocean energy, which is you know, feminine energy of a goddess”. Her connection with shells and adorning her locks is a part of her self-expression around her heritage and styling which embraces “Afrocentric slash vintage” vibes. In several of her outfits she mentions the importance of styling her locks with her outfit and accessorizing with hair scarves.

Clover

Clover is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 21-year-old, White, pansexual, non-binary individual who has a longer-term mental health condition. Clover has been attending the University of Tennessee and juggling their life with a heavy academic school load. When talking about shopping and fashion Clover recalls,

I have always enjoyed shopping and clothes. I used to make my own clothes before going to college. I didn't really have time to sew or anything with my course load, I just did school and work. But I loved going to Jo-Ann's and buying fabric or shopping [on] eBay for weird shirts from other countries. I also, like before the pandemic, use to love going to the grocery store with my girlfriend. It was like our date. We would walk down every isle and take our time, I'd play with her hair, it was just a little bonding thing that we did. Which is weird since now the grocery store gives me anxiety but I'm sure we talk about that more later.

Clover introduction highlights how time limitations due to school (her work) have forced her to be redirected from the enjoyment she had with sewing and creating clothing to being short on time. The discussions around time and work continued to rise to prominence with Clover as they mentioned how much time is wasted on scrolling on social media, doing mundane work, or watching videos. Clover says, "...people who just want to hustle and make money, that isn't for me. I don't want that, I want to enjoy my time and be with what makes me happy". The photos Clover provided (Figure 4) portrayed their desire to redirect back to a time when they enjoyed slowing down. Clover enjoys knitting, sewing, and crafting. They mention how they were not a great cook but enjoyed learning how to cook, and spending time outside. Lastly, supporting crafters by buying items like jewelry is a way they support the queer community without spending too much money.

London

London is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 24-year-old, Black, non-binary lesbian. They currently hold a position at a Black community space [name omitted] as "youth facilitator and facility service manager". At the start of 2020 London lived in Austin, Texas but moved to Knoxville after the pandemic started due to a broken engagement and to be with their sister. Once coming to Knoxville, London found a community at a Black community space [name omitted] Due to the support found at a Black community space [name omitted], London has started doing podcasts, opened their own pop-up taco shop, and mentors' youth learning to sew. London recalls how isolated they felt in a new town, but the support found in the Black community helped London experience empowerment and fulfillment through community engagement,

Yeah- is like a big sense of community and family [at a Black community space [name omitted]] because that like I said, I came to Knoxville with only knowing my sister. And then she turned turn her back on me. So I came to a Black community space [name omitted], she actually introduced me to a Black community space [name omitted] - and never, she's never been back. But I've been back ever since. And like, they gave me a job, they support my [pop-up food] business... They inspire me to get back into writing, you know, just all into the community. It's really nice.

London lives on a limited income due to pursuing their interests in running their own business and working for a small community space. Therefore, they do not have a car and spends a lot of time walking around outside, thrifting, or playing on their cellphones. In their spare time, London enjoys listening to podcasts and specifically Black influencers, like *Secrets to Success* where they work to better themselves through sharing knowledge. "... don't waste your freedom, like we're in an Age of Information and Technology and folks are on the phone anyway, so why not use it to better yourself?". Currently London has not been able to provide any photographs for analysis.

Bailey

Bailey is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 22-year-old, White, bisexual and queer, woman who has a longer-term mental health condition and additional disabilities that were not disclosed. Bailey is a student at the University of Tennessee and works as a barista at a locally owned coffee shop. She recalls how she has always thrifted, even as a child, as a way to save money. The thrill of hunting and finding inspiration at thrift shops is just as good as buying, she mentions, "I think it's fun to [go thrifting], I always plan out my outfits, like a week in advance

usually. And so I always find like inspiration every time I go thrifting or something. You have a don't buy anything". Her love of clothing and planning outfits is something she enjoys with her friends- she mentions how she would use a group text with co-workers to match their outfit themes. She says,

I got my partner to get a pair [of boots] as well. I love matching. I like matching with people. That's why this the old crew at Wildlove- like because we always text on a Friday night to match our outfits together for Saturday because I knew it was gonna be [cute]. But yeah, so I am on board with matching. I love matching.

Overall, Bailey has always loved fashion and sourcing her fashion second-hand. She discusses her favorite red bandana that she got from Goodwill.

I love clothes. And I like I like picking out outfits and I always have my outfit laid out in advance. Um, the next thing I get if I'm not wearing [the earrings], it's in my purse as well... My favorite red bandana. I lost it during the move for like five days. And I those were some of the worst worst days of my life. I'm just kidding, but very stressed because it's the it's the perfect shade of red. The perfect shade of red and it's so soft and just worn. And it smells like how I want to smell.

Bailey fashioned her items like "a fashion blogger" and in a way she felt was ascetically pleasing (Figure 5). She also provided a few images of her styling her staple items, denim, and her red bandana.

Ella

Ella is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 23-year-old, White, non-binary and trans person who identifies as pansexual and queer and disclosed that they have a learning disability

and longer term mental health condition. Ella, like London, have moved to Knoxville during the COVID-era. Ella completed their degree in environmental science and took a job at the University of Tennessee's Compost Facility. Ella believes that their degree in environmental sciences influenced their alternative consumption practices, but COVID elevated it. Ella says,

I started going to the farmers market, like almost every weekend, the first went up before I moved here when I lived in Montana. I've struggled a bit to do that here...[when sourcing fashion or home goods] I'll check Facebook marketplace or thrift shops first. And I was already like kind of doing that. But I think it COVID did give me a little extra push with the money situation.

Ella believes that working less provides them more time for enjoyable activities like crocheting, skating, biking, cooking, and composting. The downside though to limited financial resources is that Ella cannot afford to continue with therapy which they started during the pandemic.

I actually started going to therapy, and that really, really helped. I probably would still be going if I hadn't have moved. So I moved to Tennessee last summer. I just like I couldn't really afford to get another therapist and I honestly felt like I was in a pretty good place. I did learn better coping skills for sure. When I realized I needed a therapist it was because I was just like crying all the time and didn't know why and had all this anxiety.

Ella has added mental health coping skills to her daily routing through engagement with her environmental work and her fulfilling job and crafting. Ella's enjoys using fashion to present masculine and feminine, flowing between the two gender identities, depending on their mood. They mention,

I guess my style- it changes a bit. So, I feel like sometimes I dress a lot more femininely. I like to wear dresses and skirts, but also sometimes I like to just wear like, more of like a skater style. Which makes sense because I do skateboard and then that also just like, makes me feel more masculine. So it can range between - also a mix between - those things or like just one leaning. Yeah, I also wear like a lot of work clothes like Dickies.

Ella, similar to Lily, London, and Clover, has found enjoyment in creating clothing through craft- specifically crocheting. Crafting is an act of engagement with alternative hedonism because it provides an experience of enjoyment while also allowing for fashion consumption outside of the Western capitalist system. Ella was extremely excited to show off their bucket hat and matching bag that they crocheted (see Figure 6). They mention that they attended the Punk Rock Flea Market and was able to add some “flair” to her items,

...[motioning to the buttons and pins] it's just like adding to the the flair and the style to [the hat and bag]. I really like to add like buttons and things like that, like my backpacks, or fanny packs that I wear. So it's nice when it's like local businesses or decisions or things I stand for.

Ella’s desire to support small local artisans is apparent on the “flair” they chose for decorating their apparel to the skate shop they represented on their shirt, to the earrings that they wore during the interview.

Erica

Erica is a participant chosen pseudonym for a 23-year-old queer mixed ethnicity Latina woman who works for AmeriCore and is currently a resident of Knoxville, Tennessee. When

discussing her personal style she amplifies, like many participants, the fluid nature of her apparel.

I get frustrated with the genders being separated so frequently because like, I like men's pants a lot more than women's pants. I feel like most of my pants now are men's pants. And just kind of - I would say it's more- my style is not like super androgynous but it's not really feminine. And it's not like masculine either. So it's just kind of in the middle there. I look like an eight-year old boy just going through the woods.

The desire to mix clothing in a more gender fluid fashion was a part of Erica's fashion repertoire prior to the COVID-era, but there was a shift towards "the middle of the spectrum". She found a new love for dressing her body as she learned to navigate fit and styles. The largest influence at the moment is the fact that she works outdoors with gardens and farming and so a working style must be functional and utilitarian while still letting her feel good in the clothes she wears.

Erica came to Knoxville from Raleigh, NC where she was working on a community farm before joining AmeriCore and relocating to Knoxville at the end of 2020. She notes that the farm she worked on changed her life- changed the trajectory of her career- and played a pivotal part in herself discovery during the COVID-era. She recalls,

...and [the shirt is] from the farm that I worked on in Raleigh, NC. So the front is has Sir Walter Rabbit (see Figure 7). Sir Walter Raleigh is the guy who like, the old colonial guy, who the farm is named after. And on the back who says 'Dig Where You Live'. And that's the shape of the farm is that little, like, rectangular kind of thing. And then there's like root vegetables and stuff. So I really, like I like to wear it a lot. The color- I like, it has those like earthy tones. And it's just like, you know, I purchased, but it's not like,

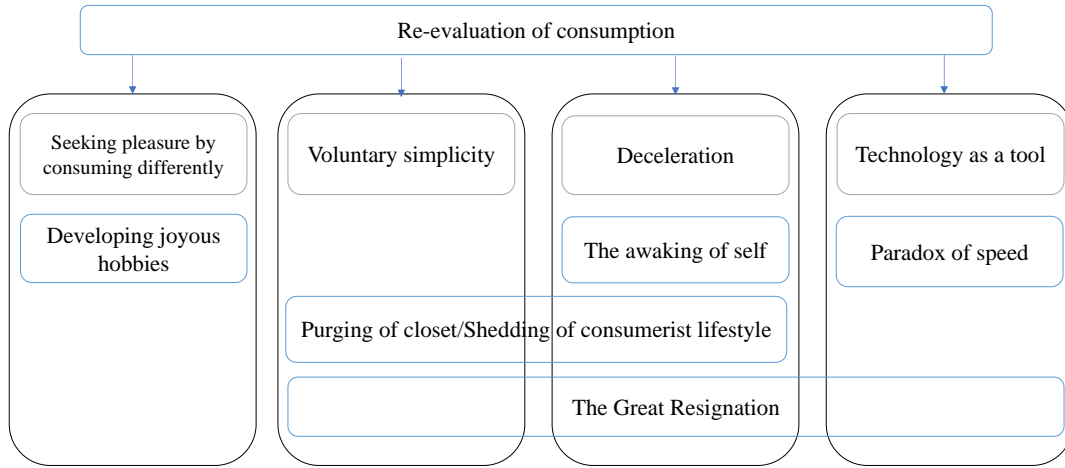
secondhand or anything, but it reminds me of [being] connecting to that community there.

Currently, as Erica continues to transition into her new career in Knoxville, she is finding new community and friends. She wants to outwardly present in a way that shares her values but also makes her feel happy about her physical appearance, “[my shirts are] representative to me of how I’m kind of like shifting and like changing my style and trying to find like, what makes me comfortable and what I like and I just like get a lot of joy”.

Study Themes

The data corpus (personal journaling, memoing, and interview transcriptions) was entered into the coding schema as mentioned above. A total of 41 codes were generated, then refined into 10 second-order themes and finally condensed into six final themes. The six overarching themes divulged in this study include: (1) *re-evaluation of consumption*, (2) *developing joyous hobbies*, (3) *the purge*, (4) *The Great Resignation*, (5) *awakening of the self*, and (6) *paradox of speed*. *and are presented below in Figure 7.*

Adoption of Alternative Hedonism by Marginalized GenZ Consumer After Experiencing Psychological Trauma



Note. The grey tenets originally identified by Soper (2008), and the blue tenets are from the dissertation

Figure 7. Adoption of Alternative Hedonism by Marginalized Gen Z Consumer

Theme 1: Re-evaluation of Consumption

Robust meta-analysis around the rapid and unexpected changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-era are continually being published in academic journals. Some highlights taken from Yin, Yu, and Xu (2021), who analyzed published academic studies from 1981-2021, revealed changing consumption patterns through decades. According to their meta-analysis the most significant changes in behaviors focused on consumers' interest in food and technology making shopping easier. Food preferences, such as eating healthier, sourcing local, or learning to cultivate, have gained traction through the years as reflected in consumer lifestyles, but Roubal (2022) adds that the COVID-era intensified this trend due to scarcity and insecurities around panic shopping and loss of income.

Diving deeper into the participants' experiences into consumption changes that reflect their psychological traumas during the aforementioned time period, a clearer picture is crafted around the ways in which consumption has changed, starting with food, and manifests in other aspects. Specifically, Gen Z participants have changed their views around consumption during the COVID-era is multifaceted and manifests in a variety of ways- but the prominent constant is that with the mandated lockdown there was more time. Time is finite and people are consuming it at rapid paces, competing for material goods, working more to afford leisure activities, or driving the consumption of certain products that are associated with time saving (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). The time famine, experienced in consumer culture, has been interconnected to mental health issues and a disenchantment with consumerism (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2016). When participants were able to spend time exploring social media or news outlets, they were able to become more informed of consumption practices that were often

never before reflected upon critically. This exploration is situated in the alternative hedonism tenet of re-evaluating consumption to find pleasure in consuming differently. The re-evaluation came from two facets that culminated into a larger re-focus on sourcing food; first COVID's destruction of restaurants in communities due to lockdown and supply chain issues, and then through the desire to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on the supply chain and businesses to meet consumption needs.

Consumption of Food

Lily is a 20-year-old college student who came out as bisexual during the COVID-era. During COVID, Lily, like so many other college students, had their life turned upside down. From being the social butterfly around friends, classmates, and co-workers, Lily was hit with the hard reality of her baby brother's high-risk status and the limited job options for a student working retail. Early on in April she was unable to afford living with a roommate and was forced to move home to Nashville with her politically conservative and traditional family which exacerbated to her long-term mental health issues. During times of household peace, albeit it rare for Lily, she shares her family's desire to try and make a difference by supporting local small restaurants during the lockdown,

We found ourselves ordering from these other small businesses and restaurants that we hadn't tried before. Just because, you know, we had seen them posting [on social media] like that they're struggling and even seeing them close for months [we could see how COVID] affect[ed] the town that we live in.

Lily became aware of the struggles facing restaurants because of her social media consumption, which was drastically increased during the lockdown at the start of 2020. Discussions of

supporting small businesses during the peak of panic flows through each participants' account as a way to enact autonomy over the situation. Making a difference or supporting restaurants and retailers became the reason for consumption, not just acquire material goods.

Clover, a 21-year-old non-binary, pansexual White person, also directs our interview to how they attempt to make a difference with their consumption. Clover's curls are alive with pink and purple accents as their cat, Neko, continues to cross over their keyboard during our Zoom call. I have chatted with Clover a few times over coffee in the past and have learned that Neko was a rescue kitten they have had for years. While fostering cats is important to Clover, the discussion around their volunteer work was not deeply touched upon during our interviews. Alternative consumption for Clover manifests in mindful purchases where their money goes to make a difference. Consuming with a commitment to responsible and politically oriented buying is not always afforded to all consumers but dutiful buying does challenge traditional consumption leading towards more self-fulfillment (Soper, 2020). Clover shares how sourcing a gift for their father took time and energy because they wanted to make a difference with their consumption by supporting a traditionally marginalized group,

...my dad's birthday was a few months back and I went looking to find just a little wolf painting or something small and ornamental but from an actual indigenous artist, and it took like an hour. It would have just been easy to find something on Amazon, but I spent a lot of time on Etsy making sure the artist was legit. I am proud that I am spending my money that way, since I have to spend money to be get shit. Well, not always, I guess sometimes I can trade or make it, but if I have something particular in mind, like I did for my dad's gift, I put a lot of effort into spending my money.

Similar to Clover, Alexis mentions that it is important to her to use her money to make an impact. She says, “I would shop at Walmart [prior to COVID] and...now I think okay, I'm not circulating the black dollar for my community.”. The desire to be frugal and the self-policing to limiting consumption and consciously consuming with specific producers or makers exhibits actively engaging with alternative hedonism principles. Their self-policing means that they have to put more time and energy into sourcing physical goods instead of quickly accessing an item through a major retailer like Walmart. The luxury of time, devoted to conscious sourcing and consumption, led to a shift in consumption due to the ability to enact self-policing tactics (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020).

Food as a Catalyst

Expanding more upon Alexis's narrative we become aware of how the COVID-era changed her perception of consumption. Alexis is a 24-year-old Black woman who currently works as a doula and is working on her degree to be a registered midwife in Knoxville, Tennessee. We meet on Zoom for interview though we have met in person countless times before. She is exhausted from assisting with a delivery and just got her children home from school. She is in her home office, a modified closet, with vibrant pink walls that put mine to shame. Behind her is a large piece of artwork of a Black woman's profile, luscious locks flowing and pinned by a barrage of colorful flowers. Alexis does love colors – from her walls to her art, to the wrap she has around her own locks – she is radiating. At the start of 2020 Alexis worked fulltime in fast-food as her only way to support herself, her father (who developed cancer at the start of 2020), and her two children. When discussing work and consumption, Alexis opens up about how the book, *Sacred Woman: A Guide to Healing the Feminine Body, Mind, and Spirit*

by Queen Afua changed her perspective on food which created the foundation for her desire to heal her body and mind during the start of the COVID-era,

I realized that I was depressed ... I used to snack a lot through the night. So, I wanted to change my weight and all over [health] so that we can have the best health down the line, because I'm still young. And so I wanted to be mindful of that. But it really like sparked when I found that [Sacred Woman] book. And it talks about, you know, certain foods, diet, what certain foods do to your emotional state. And it resonated with [me] a lot. I really wanted to shift my way of eating as a whole. And that was just part of my renewal in trying to better myself and see mentally and see things more in a positive light a positive way. I will definitely say [going vegan] that's the biggest thing that like, kick started a lot of different dynamics in my life [in regard to] overall health and in personal relationships. So, it's just meaning things in that book that it teaches. It teaches [things like] womb care, Sister Circles, you know, like connecting. So, it's definitely like, huge[ly] beneficial to me in my life.

The connection between mental health and clean eating acts as a catalyst for Alexis to explore different facets of her consumption. By expanding her knowledge and enacting changes to her diet, Alexis experienced spiritual growth that allows for her to explore meaning and purpose through nurturing a desire for a more meaningful existence (Decker, 1993). The empowerment that Alexis embraced around changing her diet and mental health also lead her to rekindle her passion around birth work and leave her job in fast food to pursue a more fulfilling career pathway along with starting the collective for Black birth workers in Knoxville.

When it comes to the re-evaluation of consumption, Soper argues that consuming differently can occur by finding enjoyment in the processes that are often lost or overlooked in consumer culture (Soper, 2008). The negative byproduct of accommodation of food, apparel, material, and financial wealth can be mediated by focusing on finding joy in the creation and reliance on the self. One example is uncovered through Ella's experiences around gardening and sewing. Ella is a 23-year-old non-binary and transgender White person who experienced hardships during the COVID-era. Ella meets with me on Zoom, in what appears to be a shared living space, full of bicycles and plants. They are seated at a chair with their partially shaved hair highlighting studded ears and a baggy shirt. Ella has just woken up to take my interview and desperately needs a cup of coffee which they bring into frame occasionally. I later learn that there are tissues in the other room which Ella leaves to grab during our interview. Besides talking with Alexis about the murder of Black student, Anthony Thompson, at Austin East, this particular interview with Ella leaves me distressed and aggrieved which takes me hours of journaling and walking my dogs to shed. The fear and loss that Ella experienced while trapped in an unsafe situation with their previous roommate has left lasting scars upon them and bubbles up to the surface during our interview. We do have to pause during the recounting of their roommate's mental state so Ella can walk away.

During lock down they experienced psychological trauma around her roommate's psychological break that caused a violent and unsafe living environment. Ella had to create distance to maintain their physical and found solace in becoming more self-reliant. Turning to creating apparel items and growing food allowed Ella to feel in control in the situation which was hazardous and scary. On top of concerns with their living situation the scarcity of accessing

products highlighted Ella's desire to become more aware of their consumption and the ways they could mediate their reliance on traditional capitalism. Ella explains,

I turned to crochet as a way to keep myself busy, that felt really healthy. Because I was like creating something with my hands. That's always been I feeling that I enjoy a lot.

And I really wanted to be more self-sufficient. That was something that came up in the pandemic, when everyone was terrified that there was no toilet paper and things like that.

It would be cool to be able to make my own things, especially like apparel items.

Ella's practices help to provide insight into how food production acted as a starting point for them to re-evaluate overlooked enjoyment in creation. They found enjoyment in a time of unease by keeping busy and engaging in a skill to create a more self-sufficient and empowering consumption experience; the acquisition of goods therefore becomes enjoyable without negative byproducts (Soper, 2008).

COVID-era intensified fears around scarcity and income insecurities that influences consumption patterns (Roubal, 2022). Moreover, significant life events and external triggers – such as job loss or severe illness - leads to actions that help a person regain control over their physical environment (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). These actions can manifest in a re-evaluation of consumption, and specifically food consumption and sourcing, that triggered an exploration into other forms of alternative consumption. The desire to support small restaurants that were hard hit by the pandemic along with taking steps to learn more about how to cultivate food and in turn empower a participant to explore creating apparel items is a process that prompt finding fulfillment in consuming differently (Soper, 2008). The re-evaluation then allowed for participants to initiate their exploration into other means to spiritual fulfillment such as finding

enjoyment in alternative consumption and regaining some control of their time through leisure activities such as food preparation, gardening, cooking, and other hobbies.

Theme 2: Developing Joyous Hobbies

Consumer culture propels consumers into an insatiable quest for satisfaction through acquiring tangible goods and financial status (Anttila et al., 2009; Florida, 2019; Hochschild, 2014; Soper, 2020). This perpetual rat race of consumption leads to dissatisfaction, exhaustion, and mental anguish that has been compounded by the psychological traumas of the COVID-era. Consumer culture propagates the feelings of time pressure which surface from feelings due to an individual's lack sufficient time to enjoy leisure activities (Rastegary & Landy, 1993). Many of us have let leisure activities falls to the wayside as we engage work and even side hustles to cultivate financial standing. We are sold the idea that wealth can help us find happiness because we can afford luxuries like vacations and designer clothing. Soper argues that consumers need to consider what our needs look like and the tradeoff that comes when we focus on physical needs (such as jewelry, handbags, houses, cars, traveling abroad). As mentioned before, time is one of the largest intangible luxuries; leading towards the non-tangible wishes for leisure and free time often not offered to the non-affluent consumer (Aderaldo et al., 2020). Everyone who was exposed to the mandated lock down were afforded a facet of free time that was capitalized upon in various ways.

The lack of time pressure allowed for reflection around needs and wants. Therefore, in a deliberate act to rethink consumption needs, participants in the Gen Z cohort find empowerment through engaging in hobbies; developing joyous hobbies occurs through challenging consumer culture by reprioritizing time and slowing down which allows for more enjoyment to occur

around hobbies and leisure. This manifests in finding time to slow down and rekindle previous hobbies that have been lost due to the speed of modernity or seeking new hobbies through social media as a way to empower a revisioning of needs of the spirit.

The subthemes explore how the participants find pleasure through consuming differently, by re-prioritize spiritual needs over their physical needs which are met through tangible consumption. When they re-evaluate their needs, they find that they can discover spiritual fulfillment through enjoying their hobbies, either rekindling long forgotten hobbies or finding new ones to ignite. These hobbies provide opportunities for a site of aesthetic revisioning through their self-made apparel.

Rekindling Old Hobbies

Countless times one must decide if they have time for enjoyment. Trade-offs occur to make accommodations for other demands of the day leading to eventually looking back at hobbies as the good ol'days when we had time to enjoy a slower paced life. The mandated lockdown and slow-down experienced at the start of the COVID-era allowed participants the privileged of leisure which continually is referenced as a catalyst to rethinking and reprioritizing. Erica, a 23-year-old mixed Hispanic queer woman, takes my Zoom meeting in her kitchen with huge, beautiful plants spilling into the camera frame. I immediately feel envious at her green thumb and wonder how long we will chat before her beautiful plants get brought into the folds of conversation. When our chat turns to her experiences around mental health her plants and other interests are brought to light. In a deliberate act to gain control over her spiraling situation she directed her free time towards renewing her previously abandoned hobbies as part of her quest for satisfaction through hedonic consumption. She mentions that while she was home more, she

was able to slow down and rekindle fulfillment in her spiritual needs such as horticulture and music,

...I was able to do more things with plants around the house. I've got like, a keyboard, so I've been like redoing, like piano and relearning like French and Italian and things like that. So it's like, I've been able to kind of slowly get [back] into that. But I had to give myself a lot of grace of like, we're still there. That's what my therapist always told me was like, we're still in a pandemic, like we're all doing our best and like just trying. And it is okay.

Erica took advantage of the luxuries afforded to her and through taking action she worked to improve her mental health by shifting focus onto the hedonic aspects of reigniting previously enjoyed activities.

Adopting New Hobbies

The mandated lockdowns caused many people to turn to their cellphones for a sense of connection and community. In that space the usage of social media grew to bridge the gap and inspire individuals to nurture hobbies, explore new content, educate themselves and produced some harmful byproduct such as fear, avoidance, and wasting time. To regain control over the isolation London, a Black lesbian, attempted to regain a connection with their sister and left Austin, Texas to come to Knoxville, Tennessee. After the move London reflects on the situation where they knew no one except their sister and the comforts of their phone. They put down the phone, temporarily, and went searching for a community. London recalls,

Because it's like, it's crazy. You go outside and jog past parks and kids are not outside playing. Like all the kids are in indoors on their iPhones and their tablets. You know,

they walk with their head down, they don't know how to have conversations and stuff. So it's like, The a Black community space [name omitted] has been that for me. Because when I was coming up ahead, I was the kid that likes to play outside and get involved in the community and do stuff like that. And I mean, I'm still a kid, I'm only 24 and I get to joke and play with the kids and the students here. So it's like a big brother, big sister relationship or whatever. But a Black community space [name omitted] is definitely it's like a safe space. It's not just for Black people, but we you know, they we show up for each other here we have different events.

A Black community space [name omitted] is where London takes my Facetime interview, during the call they are interrupted a few times by other people there asking her for help or where certain things are. Besides spending time *working* at a Black community space [name omitted], it is apparent that London is deeply engrained in the community there and on two occasions pauses our interview to go assist others which again exemplifies their commitment and prioritizing of their community.

The intentional act to find a community to foster ties with was an act of rebellion against the isolation she had been feeling due to mask mandates, businesses closing, and the end of a long-term relationship. This sparked her desire to engage with the local community. She became active at the community space a Black community space [name omitted], which was founded by a local sociologist studying race, place, and Black Communities, was named after the Black neighborhood in East Knoxville that was devastated in the 1950s by institutionalized racism. A Black community space [name omitted] came from research and community interviews that she uncovered which emphasized a feeling of displacement and loss of community amongst

Knoxville's Black elders and youth. Now, a Black community space [name omitted] stands as a collective working to reclaim and reimagine Black space in Knoxville. They offer community rooms that include, a tearoom, podcast studio, sewing studio, and Black bookstore focused on providing a sense of comfort and fostering local change.

Not only did London find purpose through helping with the upkeep of the space (chores, lawn work, maintenance) they found encouragement to pursue writing and her desire to cook. She also became involved in the sewing program, 'Sew It Sell It' which is a sewing and entrepreneurship program in which community members can creatively express themselves, learn a vocational skill (such as sewing, pottery, or screen printing), and cultivate a sense of self-reliance through the creation and selling a product. Putting energy towards giving back and trying to foster relationships with girls in the community has been a source of pride and joy for London. She is actively combatting the escapism and isolationism that the cellphones provide while also helping to teach a life skill.

In a similar vein, Ella finds fulfillment in creating. During our closet interview Ella wore every item they wanted to share, beaming with pride and excitement to talk about each piece. Their bucket hat and fisherman-net style tote was crocheted with various shades of green, reminding me of camouflage, like the forest foliage, which also echoed Ella's love of nature and plants. For enjoyment during the past few years, they crochet some of their own tops, bags, and hats. Ella finds joy from completing a project, choosing a bag that can be quick and easy, which started their exploration of additional hobbies. Ella shares,

I started crochet. And I could actually show you some of the things if you want it. Yeah. I've made I like to make bags, mostly because they're really easy and fun... [then I started] sort of like roller-skating [and also in 2020 I] start[ed] trying to garden.

Sewing and fashioning apparel items through craft (i.e. knitting or crocheting) acts as a way to outwardly wear one's beliefs and create satisfaction through the empowering act of creation. The embracing of hobbies around apparel is a physical manifestation of Soper's aesthetic revisioning (2008) by using physical items to represent commitment to alterative hedonism. Soper explores the ways that the ethics and politics of an object, in this case apparel made through self-creation, demonstrates one true belief about and acts as a response to material culture: expanding the notion of anti-consumerist aesthetic beyond simply a response to environmental degradation. The pleasure gained through the experience of constructing a garment and fashioning it to the body as a way to aesthetically portray commitment to alterative hedonism and alternative consumption propagates pleasure in a way insurmountable to the consumption of tangible goods. Soper allows room for a deeper understanding around how aesthetic revisioning can manifest beyond public displays of artwork (see 'RSA Wee Man') and maintains that the spread of pleasure from aesthetic revision discourse can provide a renaissance of consumer compulsions (2008, p.581).

To summarize, I found that the data identifies rethinking needs, focusing on the importance of spiritual needs, instead of physical needs, allows for participants to challenge the notions of what satisfaction looks like in consumer culture. In their quest for satisfaction, enjoying the hedonistic aspects of intangible consumption provides control and empowerment that allows for creation of apparel through fulfilling hobbies such as teaching others to sew, re-kindling the love of knitting and crocheting, or re-vamping secondhand fashion. The embracing

of hobbies around apparel is a physical manifestation of Soper's aesthetic revisioning (2008) by using physical items to represent commitment to alternative hedonism.

Theme 3: The Purge

The participants experience consumer culture's insatiable demand for devour tangible goods due to corrosion and being sold all their physical while simultaneously neglecting their spiritual needs (Bauman, 2001; Soper, 2008). This continual acquisition of material goods leads to an abundance of stuff. This is a phenomenon well documented in America, where consumers living spaces are so full, they are bursting leading to secure rentals and added storage space. The material overflow and excess has led to the exponential growth of storage units. Jenkinson (2022) writes,

One in eleven Americans pays an average of \$91.14 per month to use self-storage, finding a place for the material overflow of the American dream. Storage facilities are a \$38 billion industry, one of the surest business investments in America, with an annual growth rate of over seven percent. In 1984, there were about 6,600 self-storage buildings in the nation. Now there are approximately 50,000 such facilities in the U.S. (900 per state), with a combined storage capacity of 2.3 billion square feet. In other words, every one of the 340 million Americans could simultaneously find a place to stand inside one of the nation's storage facilities... According to 2018 statistics, there are more than 23 million individual storage units in the United States. That's one for every 14 Americans. Self-storage facilities employ more than 170,000 people in the United States. The existing infrastructure is at 90 percent capacity. Americans apparently cannot get enough external storage space.

This consumerist trend, to acquire more than needed, can influence feelings of overwhelming, anxiety, and perpetuate a loss of control. The loss of control, when experiencing psychological trauma permeates the human spirit, and catapults a person into a state of confusion, turmoil, and disbelief; leading to the victim of trauma to embody a sense of existential meaninglessness (Wilson & Moran, 1998). For the participants, at the start of the lockdowns, when they were experiencing compounding psychological traumas and had little control over their situation due to external factors, a trauma response was triggered. For some participants, to regain control over their situation(s) in crisis, they found empowerment through decluttering (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). This empowerment manifests as a deliberate act of new meaning making for the participants which allows them to become autonomous self-authors through the removal of possessions (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). Therefore, apparel and removal of apparel, represents a visual representation of the new political imagery fashioned to the body (Soper, 2008).

Closet Purge

Decluttering and donating clothing, apparel, and household items has been occurring long before the pandemic, thanks Mari Kondo! Most of the participants mentioned that they attempted to engage in a closed cycle of fashion consumption where they would donate clothing and then procure additional items to fill gaps in their closets. Specifically, Ella was already practicing sustainable and alternative consumption but others like Baily and Lily *started* to go through their material possessions and donate excess without replenishing their closets and drawers.

On our Zoom call Bailey and I talk about her new apartment. We both are getting through a move, both of us use boxes to hold up our laptop and we laugh about what a mess our lives are

in at the moment. She has just ended her shift at the coffee shop, and I can almost smell the espresso through the computer screens. I enjoy talking with Bailey, she is high energy, probably due to all the espresso, and becomes excited to reflect upon her experiences around one of her favorite topics, fashion. She shares that at the start of the pandemic she was living with her mother and spending a lot of time alone in her room. While in her space she was consumed with social media, which is what planted the seed of purging her closet. Watching TikToks and Reels of people doing closet purge challenges inspired her to go through her possessions and donate the excess. Bailey shares,

I also went through like this huge, huge closet purge in 2020... there was 30-day challenge [you] have one thing [on the first] day and two things and so on. I wanted to do that. I don't know how many things [I got rid of]. And like so much of the closet is just like stuff you don't want to reach for - a lot of the things. And yeah, it was getting rid of all the crap. I guess [what I have now is] called capsule wardrobes?

A person creates meaning in their lives by removing possessions allowing consumers to become autonomous self-authors (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021), creatively expressing their identity through the limited selection of their wardrobe. The remove of excess apparel items and the refining of what items represent the wearer the best is an explicit act of rebellion against consumer culture. Taking back time to curate the items of a capsule wardrobe along with re-fashioning and envision alternative ways to wear and style items allows for expression and critical thinking with limited resources. What transpires is a process of political revisioning around fashion and consumption. Instead of being gears of the consumption machine and consuming 'crap' (as Bailey calls it) the self-policing and reduction of excess leads to a violent

ejection of excess via purging of the closet and the abstraction of the consumer lifestyle.

Therefore, capsule wardrobes can be seen as a site of visual representation and self-restriction representing the new political imagery that alternative hedonism proposes (Soper, 2020).

Shedding the Consumer Lifestyle

Consumption manifests in all facets of one's lifestyle, at time suffocating and consuming. The participants found themselves becoming aware of the insatiable demand for devour tangible fashion items (Bauman, 2001; Soper, 2008). This continual acquisition of material goods leads to an abundance of materials that were removed in an act to regain control. Bailey shares her struggle with realizing that she was part of the problem of over consumption of fashion,

I was like taking [my clothes] to Planet Xchange and then when things ... were rejected from there I would take them to Goodwill or whatever. But in my head, I was like, 'wow, this is just a bunch of shit no one wants this and now it's just gonna be sitting in Goodwill and [if] someone else buys it, it'll just be sitting in their closet, and then [the cycle] just keep happening and it'll just end ... in a landfill somewhere'.

Bailey became aware of the issues around apparel waste and over consumption when she started to purge her closet but others like Lily were already engaged in the desire to limit perpetuating the cycle. Specifically, Lily shares how her experiences on social media impacted her consumption by expanding her desires to avoid fast-fashion. She gained knowledge from advocates against fast fashion in caused her to reflect on her own consumption practices. Instead of perpetuating the consumer lifestyle she opts to be more mindful and avoid the excess of fast fashion. She explains,

Being at home and being on social media so much opened my eyes, I was already aware of fast fashion industry and all of the negative things that come with that. Just seeing that stuff constantly [on social media] and I've followed a lot of these big fast fashion advocates. Yeah, [the advocates work to educate] reducing fast fashion people advocating for the people who are like working those sweatshops. And that just like opened my eyes even more and made me want to share that stuff even more and made me more aware. And when I was quarantined for months, I realized like, oh my gosh, I have all these freaking clothes that I've got from these fast fashion and I don't even wear them and like I don't need all this stuff. And if you know when you're sitting and just looking at the things you have, I'm like yeah, I'm sad that I've bought all these things from these companies that are so terrible and it's just really opened my eyes and so that definitely intensified I guess my passion for not shopping fast fashion and speaking up about it more. And now I really don't buy from any fast fashion brands and it became more prominent during COVID. Just, like I said, reading the stories and, and looking at the stuff I had and realizing I don't need it.

London, who wants to be a conscious consumer, is also living on a tight budget. It is easier for them to not participate in consumer culture as much due to their financially restricted situation which forces frugality. But London enacts consciousness in other ways, mentioned that “we put everything into our bodies, like, what I’m listening to I consume. I listen to a weekly Black podcast called “Secrets to Success” and they talk about not spending your freedom”. For London, shedding consumer is not just about mindfully shopping but a broader sensory experience around alternative consumption.

Removing/Decluttering

Many people found their world turned upside down at the start of the COVID-era. Home became offices, schools, daycare, therapist offices, and family spaces. Some participants spoke about their desire to clean, re-arrange, and remove clutter from their areas. For example, Lily briefly mentioned clearing out an old closet and painting it to take pictures of visual merchandise. We both chat about creative displays we have seen made of recycled materials. While not explicitly doing so in a political act, Lily was navigating her physical space to create an aesthetic setting for her small fashion business. For others, the newfound spaces freed up through resisting consumption and simplifying voluntarily allow physical and mental space to appreciate non-material. Experiences took the mantel while material things were removed. The space opening also allowed amateur hobbyists to explore avenues like photography for Bailey to help preserve memories. Removing the collection of material things enables the person to feel empowered by taking the reins of consumption and decluttering (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). Bailey expands,

I think the first time I started to get rid of stuff [I started re-evaluating my consumption], like I had like all these trash bags, just stuff that I've had had since, like 10th grade or something... I have started consuming less because it feels like I've been going to the store less... The most important [things are] the people and the experiences we create together. I like taking photos a lot. Like I'm not great at photography, but I always want to keep those memories.

Decluttering, removing of the old stuff taking up living space, as a response to crisis led to participants becoming their own self-authors and using their (limited) wardrobe as a space for

political imagery (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). Psychological traumas along with individual experiences are the external triggers that push the marginalized Gen Z participants to enact political resistance and prioritize experiences and happiness over the endless quest for buying more.

Theme 4: The Great Resignation

The COVID-era led to a media frenzy around ‘The Great Resignation’ in which nearly unprecedented numbers of people left their place of employment in the U.S. labor market. Widespread job losses in the early weeks of March 2020 lead to tight labor markets in 2021, with the nation’s quit rate reached a 20-year high in November 2021. Specific to Gen Z, reports from Pew Research found that adults younger than 30 were more likely than older adults to have voluntarily left their job in 2020: 37% of young adults say they did this, compared with 17% of those ages 30 to 49, 9% of those ages 50 to 64 and 5% of those ages 65 and older (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). The reasons for leaving their current workplace vary but notable themes include the following; not enough flexibility around choice of hours, desire to work from home, pay was too low, disrespect/bullying in the workplace, and childcare issues (Parker & Horowitz, 2022).

‘The Great Resignation’ centers around the re-evaluation of previously conceived notions of work and work-life balance which facilitates a trajectory change for more fulfilling and less strenuous work. In a 2022 article for the BBC Kate Morgan investigates why people quit during the early months of the pandemic and why the work force continues to see turbulence. Some of the moves are getting even bigger, as people leave not just their jobs, but their professions entirely. The last effects of ‘The Great Resignation’ also support the notion that people are

looking for a change coming out of the pandemic, and some are completely switching to new industries or leaving their careers in search of more fulfillment (Morgan, 2022). Morgan expands by arguing the role of work has shifted and young people are also looking for some connection and meaning in what they do. Workers may be looking for ways to restore wellbeing which exemplifies the notion that moving to a new job is often an attempt to reclaim wellness (Morgan, 2022).

In another BBC article focusing on the youngest in the labor force, Ali Francis discusses how mental health, emotional fatigue, and the demand for work-life balance to explore hobbies is predominant to Gen Z.

Gen Z are insisting we write a new script for work. Having observed older workers experience burnout, time poverty and economic insecurity at the grindstone, they're demanding more from workplaces: bigger pay checks, more time off, the flexibility to work remotely and greater social and environmental responsibility. Many of these values were millennial preferences, but for Genzers, they've become expectations – and they're willing to walk away from employers if their needs aren't met. [There is an emphasis on the] values work-life balance, mental health benefits, the flexibility to work when and where [they] want and companies that invest in developing workers in a diverse and inclusive environment (Francis, 2022).

Mental well-being and the influence of finances (whether it be higher job wages or a focus on frugality to enjoy more leisure) continues to be a top priority for Gen Z workers. The pandemic has intensified economic precarity for everyone; about half of Gen Z who are over 18 witnessed someone in their household lose their job or take a pay cut due to the COVID-era (Francis,

2022). These experiences led to psychological trauma around security and family life. Lily, a college student, had to move home to Nashville during the start of the pandemic to help her family around the house due to her high-risk brother. While living at home she experienced additional stressors around her sexual identity and her conservative family. She recalls,

...Even though my family is vaccinated, we still are like super careful just for my family members that are at high risk. And [my family] didn't necessarily deal with me coming out [as queer], especially my father. So being with him in my household, like every day like was kind of difficult because I knew how he felt towards me during that time. And that that was just something that was super difficult. If it wasn't for COVID I wouldn't be in my house with them so often not really going anywhere. So being constantly around them. While I know that we're having this kind of like disagreements [around my sexual identity], I guess was pretty difficult for me mentally. You know, like little things like avoiding going upstairs to get, like something to eat or something to drink because I didn't want this, like, awkward interaction that I wasn't used to.

Lily's experiences around avoiding her family while being home caused her to experience additional psychological triggers that drove her to seclusion and avoidance. She would spend hours online and social media learning about the impacts of fast fashion on the environment, sewing, and repurposing fashion items which ignited her passion for upcycling thrifted clothes. On top of the mounting tensions around being confined at home in a combative environment she mentions her need for income. She says, "I need a job, like I need to work to pay for school. And I didn't want to like go work somewhere because I was scared of getting exposed in the

workplace and stuff like that”, so she turned to repurposing fashion and selling it on her personal Snapchat or Instagram. Next, she explains,

Well, I actually started with clothes that I had that I wasn't wearing, because I was too skinny. So it first started, I was like, Okay, I'm just gonna, like, get some of these clothes that I like haven't been wearing and I'm gonna dive in and just sell them just to get some extra money. And so I did that a couple of times. And then I was like, okay, like, maybe I should make like an Instagram page and do this. And it got a lot of good response. And I was like, Okay, well I'm out of clothes that I have in my house. [I needed] to go buy some stuff I can't just keep like using my old clothes. And so I masked up and I went to one of my local thrift stores... So I would go like an evening, pretty soon before they closed and there weren't many people there and I would go in and buy stuff and then I would come back [home] and immediately throw everything in the washer and like you know, just being so scared of everything. Like it was just that was my cycle every single day, during COVID. And if I wasn't at home, during that time needing a job, I wouldn't have started doing that. And having been successful, and people like wanting more of [repurposed fashion] and buying it. And I also like [being] at home all the time... You could be creative with [this job]. But I was like, I want to do some more. So eventually, I [found] my mom has a sewing machine. So eventually, I had to teach myself. But because of COVID and being at home and needing money and starting bleaching shirts that led me to wanting to sew things and learning to sew things. And now I've learned so many new skills, and I'm still doing it two years later.

This vignette highlights that Lily's life required her to generate income and she found fulfilling work in crafting clothing. She continues, "my little decompression, like, just get away from everything else and just create something that I want to make". Moreover, the Great Resignation plays a pivotal role in understanding how psychological trauma informs the lived experiences of Gen Z's apparel consumption during the COVID-era by providing insight into finding healthy relationships around consumption and work. Leaving work to find more fulfilling avenues to generate income influenced many while others found that there was a larger issue besides earning wages.

The changes that occur during the pandemic along with compounding psychological traumas inspired Clover to continue to question the "cogs in the machine" that perpetuates work culture. During their interview, Clover became louder and more animated when talking about what they perceive as *toxic* in regard to work and relationships. This tone and vigor kept Neko from snuggling up with Clover as they discuss their newfound passion for what Morgan (2022) refers to as the search for fulfillment. Clover laments,

It reminded me why I want to fight this capitalist machine. How fucking gross this whole thing was. Disillusioned. I no longer wanted anything to do with money or working. How can money and a job be so important at a time like this? I wanted to drop out of school and just survive, not hustle like I have been. Like I was going to keep doing the rest of my life. I guess I started questioning the point of living, not in a suicide way, but in a cog in the machine way. I didn't want to be apart of this anymore, this system is broken and COVID not only reminded me but highlighted so many flaws... I actually have cut some toxic relationships from my life because of this, the people who are all like, 'rise and

grind' or just toxic work people. People who just want to hustle and make money, that isn't for me. I don't want that, I want to enjoy my time and be with what makes me happy. I am not alive to work for someone else, I am not alive to work. I am alive to live.

The search for fulfillment looked different for every participant. London shared and even demonstrated during the interview their fulfillment in service to their community. London gives everything to a Black community space [name omitted] as a way to enact true change, but it comes as a cost. That cost is being cornered into frugality and voluntary simplicity. For some like London, the COVID-era has allowed them to refocus on important things, such as working and volunteering at a local book store and community space, and make less money which leads to frugality and sourcing fashion through alternative consumption practices such as “thrifting at The Ladies of Charity”.

Trajectory Changes

Marginalized communities have been historically riddled with undiagnosed mental illness, socioeconomic disadvantage, social conditions, and interactions, which all play a part in the various psychological traumas that created a synergistic epidemic that is amplified by the co-occurrence of COVID-19 (Wildman et al., 2022). Specifically, to the Gen Z cohort, the qualitative levels of openness to change and self-enhancement surpass other generational cohorts in a comparative analysis of attitudes and consumption during the COVID-crisis (Harari et al., 2022). This is apparent in the ways which the participants navigate their situations and what constitutes as work through their trajectory changes.

Erica's green thumb comes back into the conversation when we chat about her career path prior to 2020 and post. In 2020 Erica was on her way to graduate with a BA in engineering

but her graduation date was being delayed due to her burnout and emotional state. The lockdown, along with her deteriorating mental health, and mounting student loan debt, she (like Clover) turned to self-medicating as a form of escapism through alcohol and drug usage; drug usage/abuse can be argued as evidence of psychological stressors and how psychological trauma manifests in the body (Bailey & Williams, 2023; Wildman et al., 2022). Erica recalls,

I was self-medicating a lot [at the start of COVID] and doing that. And then I did end up working on a farm that summer of 2020. And I think that really changed my trajectory. I was in school for engineering. But now I [have a] position [where I am] managing like a permaculture garden at school and doing like environmental practices like that.

At the start of the lockdown, Erica realized that when she was away from school and STEM she was in less distress. She turned to areas of interest, plants, to help guide her towards a new career path. She mentions,

Yeah, so I would say that [my psychological traumas] definitely changed my trajectory. I really realized because before [2020] I had been in such a low mental state, but I didn't understand. I couldn't separate me not liking what I was going to school for or me just not liking life in general. Do I even want to [be an engineer]? Do I like this or is this just like a product of where my brain is right now? ... I ended up finding an internship at the farm. And I learned so much so many things about growing food I had never really had experience with before... [working on the farm].

Working on the farm in Raleigh, North Carolina helped Erica build relationships with new people, like her old farm manager, and re-connect with the earth. This connection to place, earth,

and community is something she wears proudly on her Sir Walter Rabbit (a pun about the farm she worked on) t-shirt.

So I really like the color [of the shirt] I like it has those like earthy tones. I [didn't] purchase it- it's not like, secondhand or anything, but also, as it reminds me of that connecting to that community there. And also like the sustainability aspect of like, like digging where you live, and like growing food where you are, and getting your food, like locally and I noticed is like more focused on like apparel, and things like that. But I feel, through the pandemic, the sustainability of where I'm getting my food from has been a lot more important and has like changed a lot.

Erica's shirt was bought new, though she almost exclusively shops secondhand due to income restraints and her desire to reduce waste, demonstrating that her desire to connect to her community and to the site where her life trajectory changed is telling. Her experiences working on the farm recentered her joy and alternatively led her down a pathway to more fulfilling work with less income. In exchange for centering her joy around relationships with the Earth, the community, and horticulture she faces financial restraints that influence her consumption. She mentions on several occasions during the interviews that if she can do without or if she can borrow something from her roommate (specifically mentioning books or a bicycle) she rather do that than buy new. Erica's story highlights how the deceleration of the lockdown leads to her self-medication which awoke the desire to prioritizing mental health and re-evaluating work. These experiences prior to COVID had her situated in a work driven existence that was spiritually depraved and by centering joy and decentering money and career she embraces alternative hedonism principles. This shift also introduced a new focus (though as a student

money was never that abundant) leading to a lower income career and thus frugality in consumption. Therefore, frugality plays a role in influencing consumption by causing participants to source second-hand or go without.

Soper's (2020) ontology of craft, also referred to as 'craftivism', is a political movement where one escapes mass consumerism and instead support slow work. For some participants developing a hobby acts as political resistance and empowerment but for others a trajectory change on what work looks like occurs. Once exposed to compounding psychological traumas, Gen Z redirect their future outlook and embrace change which can lead to consumption changes. The participants find fulfillment in slower work like crafting and creating apparel and, like Lily, take this newly found yearning to craft and use it to create opportunities for (slow) work. Through craftivism, Lily emboldened herself to become her own boss and started an online fashion business while also changing her school trajectory to better align with her online apparel business; she mentions,

So that definitely COVID definitely influenced [the creation of my fashion] business in my eye. And I also, that's what pushed me to be working on a retail and consumer sciences minor. Because I was like, Oh, I really, I really like doing this. And you know, maybe this is something I want to do later on, or maybe because I study interior architecture, I'm like, okay, maybe this is something I want to do on the side. Or maybe this is something I always want to do. But I don't want to just drop my two and a half years of hard work in architecture, because that is so much time that I've spent doing that, and I really do enjoy it. Um, so I'm like, okay, maybe you know, I'll do an RCS minor and see how I like this. And, and so really COVID and starting to make those shirts and

make this little business have pushed me to make a lot of different changes. And now I'm like super interested in like, retail design. So maybe that's something that I will do that I will pursue in my professional endeavors. I don't know what I'm going to do next. But yeah, that's inspired my love for retail design and stuff as well.

The political movement where the participants escape mass consumerism and instead support slow work also influences frugality. Slow work has less financial benefits but the psychological well-being and focus on self-care appears to coincide with the theme of trajectory changes. Once the re-evaluation of the notion of consumerism's good life is shattered, empowerment occurs through finding more fulfillment in work and even hobbies.

Theme 5: Awakening of the Self

The experiences of everyday life dramatically changed consumer behavior due to widespread lockdowns and interruptions to routine consumer activities (Roubal, 2022). Roubal (2022) postulates that the COVID-era created an opportunity for the dematerialization movement that transformed society with fresh value orientations focusing on a return to simplicity and tranquility. Specifically, the psychological trauma around the pandemic, violence, scarcity, inflation, and -most recently- the threat of global war due to Russia invading Ukraine, provide the context for a shift in consumers' life attitudes that are reflected in emerging adjustments to consumerism through enacting (alternative) choice as a response.

For example, participants experiencing psychological trauma found themselves looking inward during a time of economic and social deacceleration. Using time to reflect and acquire insight is a form of economic and political resistance fighting against the systems in place that suppress personal liberties (Soper, 2020). This time to reflect, previously associated with luxury

(see time scarcity), led to unpacking of psychological trauma and acknowledging mental health concerns that motivated consumers to seek professional help and further explore sexual and gender identities. This awakening of the self-influenced alternative consumption practices by shifting apparel choices that supported newly uncovered self-identity themes.

The overt confrontation with time scarcity exemplifies an undercurrent of political resistance where upon reflection, a person modifies their self-interests to seek their own unique, personal fulfillment rather than societal expressions; this creates a new reconsideration of Soper's self-interest where self-care and prioritizing mental and sexual health arises and is prioritized over more generalized examples self-interest.

Exploration of Mental Health and Sexual Identity

Erica had always felt uncomfortable in her lanky frame. Long slender arms, boxy torso, and sharp facial features had led her to feel self-conscious of how feminine or masculine she presented. Getting dressed was not a way to express her identity but more of a way to armor her body against the onslaught of mainstream beauty standards, by reinforcing her biological sex. Once Erica was afforded some time in-between work and school, she started to spend time reflecting on her mental state- with the first amendment to her lifestyle being a trajectory career change- followed by a deeper dive into mental health. This deep reflection allowed her the grace and space to explore not only her mental health but also her gender identity which she had been suppressing under her clothing. She shares,

I started to explore my sexuality, which then led to me exploring my gender. And so those two things really just kind of helped me explore that more. And it really like I don't know, it made me like, you know, putting on more masculine clothing, I realized I really

liked it. And it kind of helped me be able to play around with those ideas easier. I still like to wear really feminine dresses and skirts, but I also really like to just wear baggy clothes where no one can kind of see like what my body really looks like and kind of more androgynous looking, where people can't maybe tell my gender right away, or what they think to be a woman.

Like Erica, Ella embraced the time afforded to them when they were in their chaotic living situation during 2020. Spending a lot of time locked in their room for personal safety, Ella looked inward to find control and power. At this time, social media fatigue had set in deeply for them and Ella found themselves trying to avoid mindless scrolling on their phone and instead put energy towards positive change. Erica's mental health had deteriorated so drastically that social media became a tool to mindfully connect with community during their lowest lows. They mention,

...I got to a point where I was just like, realize that I am not okay. And I've just been pretending that I'm okay. I'm probably gonna get emotional during this... I'm gonna grab a little tissue - see all that kind of started happening and realizing that, you know, life is changing, and things were just really hard and I turn to social media to connect to my community...

Ella's situation highlights the ways in which social media acted as an anchor to the queer community for them during their psychologically traumatic experiences at the start of 2020. This occurrence has led to yet another facet of alternative consumption and alternative hedonism in which the breakneck speed of modernization can be beneficial in some respects while also detrimental in others (Soper, 2020). Regardless, we see that embracing reflection and self-

exploration (around mental health and/or sexual identity) is a luxury lost in consumerism. Moreover, Gen Z is experiencing a reimagining of Soper's self-interest as self-care. Mental health and sexual identity have manifested in consumption choices, echoing the new political imagery where centering the self is paramount to change.

Theme 6: Paradox of Speed

There continue to be evident ambiguities in engagement with consumerism and alternative consumption that have led to some complex contradictions (Soper, 2020). There is nowhere that these contradictions and complexities are more apparent than when it comes to social media usage by Gen Z. This phenomenon is an amalgam of quick access to knowledge, virtual connection, and mental distress. The paradox of speed manifests in social media consumption where there is continuous contact with information which allows for community connectedness but generates extreme mental fatigue as a harmful byproduct.

The Double-Edged Sword of Social Media

Social media's grip on consumers' phones and computers grew exponentially in 2020 with over 500 million new social media users (Liu et al., 2021). Heavy social media usage negatively impacted Gen Z's psychological well-being and exasperated their social media fatigue during this time, while simultaneously acting as a means to explore the community when they were isolated and experiencing trauma (Liu et al., 2021).

Ella, when discussing their academic background, mentions that because they were an environmental science major focusing on climate change studies, so they were aware of a variety of negative practices associated with consumer culture. One of the negative effects of being isolated was using social media to doom scroll. Ella would spend hours scrolling through social

media, being subjected to news of human rights violations, environmental advocates, and the activities of their peers which led them to make comparisons. Ella shares,

I have kind of always just struggled with social media, and I guess, social anxiety, just wondering how people perceive me, like, throughout my life, but it was kind of during [lockdown] when I started using it a lot to get those human needs met, that I needed, met, and then realized that like, I was spending so much time on there that it would make me anxious. And so it then just did the opposite. And so I, you know, it was probably like a year into COVID that I was like, I cannot keep living on my phone anymore.

Clover echoes Ella's decision to stop living on their social media accounts. Moreover, Clover shares a similar situation to others, that escapism through substance usage became part of the daily routine in 2020. As Clover shares this part of their narrative, they are having a hard time looking at the computer screen (where I am) and shifts uncomfortably in their seat, clearly nervous (or ashamed). Clover felt overwhelmed by social media and the constant bombardment of violence and racial disparities. They turned to TikTok to 'numb' their feelings and find enjoyment from dancing videos and brief moments of comedy through scrolling. Once they realized social media was acting as an irritant to their mental health they unplugged and turned to substances. On an aside, these parts of our conversations tend to be uncomfortable because the participant is divulging sensitive, possibly illegal, information. I never felt comfortable as a researcher asking more about substance abuse than what was willingly shared with me. I did not want to break trust, come across as unethical, or be unable to understand these struggles, therefore, I never asked for more information when the conversations went in that direction.

Clover mentions that they realized social media and substances were being used and abused and

action needed to be taken to overcome these pitfalls caused by psychological trauma. They recall,

[Social media] was a similar thing where I was using substances and trying to just not live in my reality really? Because it was just so difficult. And yeah, when I realized that I was using social media in an unhealthy way that it made me feel really bad.

Before the COVID-era, Clover never felt the need to re-evaluate their consumption of social media or substances. Searching for a form of escapism due to the triggering negative experiences following constant exposure to psychological trauma caused Clover to acknowledge unhealthy consumption behaviors and act to change them. Currently, they do not have social media and find they are seeing the positive effects of that decision.

Erica used social media to access her community of like-minded people, especially since they recently moved to Tennessee at the start of COVID and knew only other co-workers. Quickly Erica found herself relying on social media to stay up to date with a variety of issues and became overwhelmed. The constant exposure led to psychological trauma which made her feel overwhelmed and small. She discusses how she started using social media in 2020 and the devolution to negative feelings,

I would use [social media] to see what's going on in my community see, like mutual aid needs, what my friends are up to, of course, but also like, like following zero waste pages, and environmentalism, like news and updates or like LGBT pages, like Black educators, all kinds of things. And in a way, I think that also, like, there was so much information about so many different issues all the time that I did care about, but

ultimately didn't feel like I had enough time or energy to put towards like all of them... which made me feel bad.

Echoing what some researchers have found about social media usage benefitting Gen Z during the lockdown (Sheth, 2020), is a dark side to this constant exposure to information and misinformation (Dhir et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021). What the participants experienced centered around using social media to connect with friends, businesses, and political movements in addition to staying informed due to constant media attention and 24-hour news. At first, the information was used at first to inspire some to enact trajectory changes through entrepreneurial ventures and ignited a passion for skills and hobbies due to the free exchange of knowledge online. But some felt that social media triggered their anxieties and depression highlighting their need to seek out mental health resources, sometimes through social media, and ultimately reprioritizing consumption based on intangible enjoyment (on and offline).

Lily has loved fashion and expressing herself through apparel styling her whole life. She rekindled her love for making clothes and selling them online to help fight some of the problems she has been exposed to around fast fashion, human rights, and sustainability. She explains how social media helped to educate and empower her to become more conscious of her fashion consumption. She shares,

And just seeing that stuff constantly and I've followed a lot of these big fast fashion advocates. Yeah, like, reducing fast fashion people advocating for the people who are working [in] those sweatshops and stuff. I followed a lot of Instagrams that talked about that type of stuff. And that just like opened my eyes even more and made me want to share that stuff even more and made me more aware. And when I was quarantined for

months, I realized like, ‘oh my gosh, I have all these freaking clothes that I've got from these fast fashion [brands] and I don't even wear so many of them, and like I don't need all this stuff’.

Lily utilized social media as a platform to access knowledge from advocates on social media. She has always been acutely aware of the situation, but through exposure online she decided to take more decisive action to address issues she saw within apparel consumption. Due to the COVID-era, she changed her career course to more fulfilling and joyous work (consuming and designing second-hand-fashion) and selling it online where she gained knowledge and became empowered to combat fast fashion’s harmful industry practices.

London also discusses the importance of using social media and access to technology to become better. They capitalize on social media to connect to Black knowledge (through podcasts online and/or at a Black community space [name omitted]), learn about small thrift businesses in the area, and continue to be a mindful consumer. They mention,

...folks are on the phone anyway, so why not use it to better yourself? I do a lot of shopping now [at the Community Chest]. My girlfriend, she put me on to shopping and she's hoping to get my swag in order. I like to be intentional. I don't want to look like everybody else. I don't want to do what everybody else is doing. I'm my own person. And I do what I feel when I feel like doing it.

London demonstrates the other side of the coin for social media consumption. They find support, and knowledge, and feel empowered to make apparel decisions due to the constant engagement online. They mention that young people need to be mindful of overconsumption, and a balance

between online and in-person is paramount to mental health, but London's experiences amplify the positive engagement with social media that facilitates their continued usage of social media.

This phenomenon within alternative hedonism is referred to as the paradox of speed; in which evident ambiguities surrounding engagement online through consumption (either as knowledge sharing, learning skills, and connecting with businesses and people) and mental anguish surfacing leading towards deactivating social media for self-interest and preservation (Soper, 2020).

Technology, specifically social media, is used to help alleviate isolation and educate self but also leads to anxieties and the need to 'go analog' to escape the mounting pressures of society. Exiting and limiting social media made more time for outdoor activities. Several participants found that they had been struggling with mental health issues and sought professional help or added mindful practices to their daily routines to help prioritize their mental health tying back into the awakening of the self.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The interpretation of the datum informs the discussion of findings. Specifically, RQ1 asked in what ways Generation Z changed their consumption views during the COVID-era. The data highlighted that the participants' experiences represent a better understanding of how psychological trauma catalyzes re-evaluation of consumption. For many individuals in this study, their food consumption was the starting point of their re-evaluation of their consumption— who focused on supporting small local restaurants – and then they sprouted off towards other forms of alternative and conscious consumption behaviors. Food consumption and supporting local businesses during these tumultuous times adds to the understanding of alternative hedonism as a theory by providing context for a precursor to alternative hedonism. This illuminates an additional consideration, more than affluent consumers indulging in self-interest, when exploring catalyst towards adoption of the alternative hedonism theory.

Moreover, food preparation and sourcing of food acted as a space of egalitarian consumption. This may be true because, unlike eating at local restaurants, nearly anyone can prepare a meal regardless of economic standing (Soper, 2008, p.577). Gen Z participants are putting less emphasis on money and resigning from previous career pathways to refocus on finding joy in either supporting small or re-designing themselves as a political act against consumer culture. Therefore, many of the participants in this study enacted frugality due to their self-imposed limited ability to financially support small restaurants and work less in the throes of rising inflation. This tension ebbs and flows, often exasperated by social media usage, and can

add to mental fatigue due to a participant's perceived inability to do more to help their community. The mental fatigue and strain that social media exasperated during the psychologically traumatic experiences pushed several of the participants to go analog and find joy in more simplistic things such as preparing food.

Next, the participants all experienced various psychologically traumatic events throughout the COVID-era, and those events influenced their fashion consumption; specifically, RQ2 states, in what ways does psychological trauma inform the lived experiences of Gen Z's apparel consumption during the COVID-era? The interpretation of the data uncovers that reprioritizing occurs around what is essential when a person overcomes a psychologically traumatic experience. For the participants, this manifested in taking back power through purging their tangible goods from their homes and shedding their consumerist lifestyles to find gratification in different ways. The refocusing on consuming and possessing less is more allowed for self-policing to occur and more mindful sourcing for secondhand fashion online (through social media or marketplaces). Social media created a paradox of speed for several, but others utilize it to allow for small fashion business ownership or community building. The paradox of speed due to the connection and onslaught of access to shared online knowledge caused isolation, anxiety, and depression which forces some to act and re-evaluate social media their consumption; while others were able to access and target customers to help finance the participant's counter-stance to fast fashion.

Finally, the last research question explores participation in alternative hedonism, RQ3 asks, how may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices? Joyous hobbies allow for self-fulfillment and expression through

fashioning apparel items through re-purposing or textile creation. This particular theme allows for an expansion of understanding around aesthetic revisioning, which is used to portray a commitment to alternative consumption and alternative hedonism. Alternative hedonism calls for a revisioning that will involve a dramatic shift from thinking that consumption is desirable and affluent and removing the glamour around unsustainably sourced materials. When a person finds enjoyment in creating their fashion items, the ideas of glamour and conspicuousness are replaced with concepts of empowerment and joy. Empowerment is deeply woven within the data, from finding time to rekindle hobbies to centering and prioritizing oneself. The theme, awakening of self, encapsulates the importance of mental health and identity. This theme reflects alternative hedonism's notion of centering the self (versus future generations). All the participants in this dissertation mention the need to focus on their mental health and sexual identities in some way because of the psychological traumas they experienced as individuals in vulnerable communities. Their apparel choices have become more of an inward approach (using fashion to share out their queer identity or community identity, instead of conforming to social and gender) norms around fashion and expression. The apparel the participants chose to wear, and showcase is often sourced secondhand, influenced by frugality. This frugality is a byproduct of the slowdown that comes with The Great Resignation.

Visual Presentation

The complex and psychological traumatic experiences that the participants shared was rendered into an interpretation of the journey through the COVID-era as a marginalized Gen Z consumer. Below (Figure 8) depicts the artwork made from mixed-recycled papers and second-hand watercolors and borrowed paint brushes. First, the sourcing of materials from packages,

friends, and a single participant occurred. The materials led the design of the artwork, thoughtful mixture of primary colors, influenced by nature and sunshine (green and gold), reflect the Western society's central focus on finances (gold and green). One side of the work is more structured and representing the oppressive powers that intertwine into the flowing energy found within nature (gravity and water). The empty space, mostly untouched by color besides a water wash, acts as the newfound space spilling and flowing within a person's experiences; ultimately the water touches the color to coalesce into a dynamic colliding of (unseen) structure and power. Ultimately, the use of the overarching mood informed by the emotions of the participants influences the creation of this work and will eventually be displayed as a way to promote deeper discussions around reflection and mental health for marginalized Gen Z consumers.



Figure 8. Arts-Based Approach

Arts-Based Interpretation

I chose to adopt an arts-based approach to the interpretation as a way of working through issues of Gen Z psychological trauma and alternative consumption behaviors during the COVID-era as it ‘represents an effort to explore the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations’ (Barone & Eisner 2012, p. 1). Arts-based approaches provide ‘use of our imaginations in social scientific study to document multiple truths and perspectives’ (Cahnmann-Taylor 2008, p. 248) which offer insight into the multiplicities and complexities involved in the qualitative research design (Coda 2019). Following Coda’s (2019) ethnography on teacher identity and Frankel, Benjamin, and Stephens (2021a) ethnographic approach to the female experience within the craft beer industry, I employed a structural arc to creatively present the interpretation to prevent the compartmentalization of the participants’ experiences. For this dissertation and arts-based approach disrupts the hegemonic landscape of traditions research methods while offering an insight of inquiry, and in turn representation that not only relies upon discursive constructions in representation, but also allows for ‘nondiscursive means such as pictures, or music, or dance’ (Barone & Eisner 2012, x; Coda 2019). Finally, art provides a platform for marginalized groups thus adopting a similar disruptive behavior to mirror the experiences of counter-narratives through structural arcs. Structural arcs, also referred to as emotional arcs, provide a visual representation of an overall mood found in a complex emotional phenomenon (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Therefore, the need to carefully scrutinize the participant’s emotions reveal the underlying tone and ethos of their challenges during the COVID-era.

The study participants were asked to send a text message or email photograph of a single line representing their journey through the COVID-era. My original idea for the artwork was to meet and co-creating a paper doll collection of recycled magazines. This was going to provide a space for group interaction, reflection, and comradery. There was a shift in the artwork construction due to participants overall exhaustion around COVID; it was impossible to secure a time for everyone to meet up and work together in the art project. Therefore, to demonstrate flexibility and transparency the participants were solicited to provide a simple line drawing in which I used as a launching point for a singular art project. The arc helped to set the tone for the execution of the interpretation; dictating the ebb and flow felt be the participants and myself as a researcher.

The creation of the artwork encourages reflexive practices on the part of myself, the researcher (Denzin 2000; Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane 2017). I used this artwork to represents the multiple realities and voices of the dissertation participants, while also providing a space for personal reflection upon critical issues (see. Chapter 6). An important takeaway from this data is that the experiences that were interpreted are valid, they do not represent all Gen Z's psychological trauma and COVID-era consumption experiences. Therefore, the artwork has space that can continue to be filled as more voices and experiences are amplified in future research. I think it would be amazing to keep this work a living piece that can be revisited over the years.

Finally, the finished artwork will eventually be on display around campus (e.g., Jesse Harris Building and/or Student Union) along with the businesses that allowed for me to post recruitment materials at (French Fried Vintage, Oglewood, Three Rivers Co-Op, and WildLove).

Bringing the artwork that this dissertation produced to the local community is quintessential to all visual methodologies (Denzin 2000; Finley 2018; Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane 2017). In line constructivist epistemology there is an understanding that multiple truths and realities exists, and this artwork must be made accessible to all peoples regardless of race, age, ethnicity, class, gender, and/or sexual orientation. Building upon accessing the information, the artwork is accompanied by a scannable QR code that will provide research take-aways and act as a launch point for resources and materials to facilitate discussion around the data interpretation and connect people to free resources (see Appendix E).

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical

Alternative hedonism is a fledgling theoretical perspective that offers an unconventional approach to conscious consumption by focusing on self-interest over limiting consumption as means of preserving resources for future generations. This dissertation provides novel theoretical insights that help situate this avant-garde form of consumption into the context of a generational cohort that has felt the impact of multiple pandemics. By exploring the experiences of marginalized Gen Z consumers, we gain insight into the ways in which alternative hedonism is adopted through alternative consumption and uncover additional aspects of alternative hedonism unbeknownst to prior researchers.

Soper (2008, 2020) posits that alternative hedonism starts with the global elite to create meaningful trickle-down policy change. Still, we cannot discount what is happening on the ground level with Gen Z consumers. While the financial and buying power of Gen Z has not yet surpassed Baby Boomers, their cohort cannot be dismissed. Gen Z consumers have been experiencing psychological triggers that have been uniquely explored during the COVID-era (Liu et al., 2021; Rozanov & Rutz, 2021). Through enduring racial prejudice, sexual discrimination, targeted political policies, limited support due to health restrictions, and loss of security, Gen Z consumers have had to find additional ways to empower themselves and address these psychological traumas.

Specifically, a deeper understanding of how consuming different manifests through the development of joyous hobbies demonstrates a reprioritizing of spiritual needs over physical needs. While Soper (2020) touches on aesthetic revisioning as a manifestation of disillusion of consumption, the data explored the ways that apparel can add layers of understanding to what Soper refers to as a renaissance of consumer compulsions. Besides finding fulfillment through creating apparel, the experiences of the participants expose a stronger desire to be self-sufficient due to the unique events occurring during the COVID-era (Rastegary & Landy, 1993).

The concepts of voluntary simplicity and the transition from a fast-paced to a slower-paced lifestyle that is embraced within alternative hedonism have room for expansion. Gorz (1999) argues that individuals should engage in self-oriented and community-driven activities focused on voluntary, cultural, and environmentally driven activities. The data unpack these concepts more within the context of psychological trauma as a catalyst by including a shedding of consumerist lifestyle and downsizing income due to trajectory changes around careers which leads to a self-inflicted frugality. The shift towards striving to find fulfillment from volunteering, hobbies, community, and political engagement supports Gorz's understanding of voluntary simplicity, but the enacting of self-regulation leading to frugality and dismissing excessive material and apparel is unexpected from marginalized consumers who should arguably be more interested in social mobility (Anatharaman, 2018; Muradian, 2019). Through understanding the unique experiences of this generational cohort, we start to understand the strategies enacted to counterbalance consumption and the prioritizing of spiritual needs over material needs.

The impacts of psychological trauma influenced marginalized Gen Z consumers to put less emphasis on the consumption of material goods and actively find more ways to achieve

fulfillment in work. This phenomenon, the deceleration of consumption and enjoyment associated with slowing down, was previously critiqued as a luxury afforded to the affluent (Anatharaman, 2018; Soper, 2008). The deceleration that is self-enacted through reconceptualizing the good life, along with the deceleration that was mandated during lockdown at the start of the COVID-era has exposed a facet of alternative hedonism that previously was simply introduced as self-interest. Self-interest, not the interest of future generations, is a pillar of alternative hedonism that causes it to stand apart from other forms of alternative consumption. Every single participant in this study shared that they prioritized their mental health and explored components of their identity due to having the luxury of time. Self-interest can be understood as more than finding joy in the intangible and basking in free time; for Gen Z, self-interest includes prioritizing mental health and scrutinizing their sexual and gender identities, which previously were left unexplored. This deeper understanding of the deceleration concept also expands to include reduced apparel consumption and decluttering practices along with slowing down and working less.

Finding fulfillment in work often meant becoming one's own boss. Participants found they enjoyed their jobs more when they worked less often and found an industry or field where they thrived, such as selling crafted items, services, or second-hand fashion. The newfound love for work in a fulfilling area often leads to engaging in social media to stay connected to the community, self-promoting, and learning new skills that can help support a frugal lifestyle. The more time participants spent on social media, the more they were bombarded with information leading to triggering emotional infectivity, which permeates and festers in the users' mental space (Liu et al., 2021). Technology plays a pivotal part in connecting Gen Z to community

support, igniting passion through hobbies; it acts as an effective tool for information sharing and news, but this has unforeseen consequences such as overstimulation, anxiety, and depression commonly referred to as the ‘info-demic’ (Rozaanov & Rutz, 2021). The long-term effects - positive and negative- of the ‘info-demic’ are still yet to be identified, but this study shows some light on possible avenues of further research. Lastly, this exploratory examination of social media can provide a site rich for a deeper understanding of Soper’s concept of technology as a tool that allows for more enjoyment (Soper 2008, 2020).

Practical

The study’s interpretation can provide practical implications for businesses wanting to recruit and develop young talent and communities servicing the needs of Gen Z. Based on the data and the anecdotal information shared by mass media; the great resignation is not going away (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Industry and leadership will need to re-imagine what work looks like if they want to see a committed workforce. Prioritizing mental health, hobby development, community support, and leisure will be paramount to attracting Gen Z. Gen Z workers looking for ways to restore their mental well-being. Companies can make strategic changes to facilitate individual fulfillment in the workplace (Morgan, 2022). Implementing shorter workweeks, flexible work-from-home options, and providing access to resources around mental health can help a business demonstrate its ability to listen and adapt to the demands of the workforce.

Next, there is an opportunity to explore ideas and solutions to mediate the adverse effects of social media by finding and creating community space. The long-term effects of the ‘info-demic’ are still being identified (Liu et al., 2021), and this proactive approach can help others traverse their psychological trauma in a positive and meaningful way by building community and

focusing on tactics to improve their mental health because mental health is of utmost importance to the marginalized Gen Z consumer. If they can find a safe space to thrive, they will be able to work for their communities and help to empower and amplify other marginalized communities.

Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation, like all works of research that have come before and will be conducted afterward, has limitations. While this research focused on a generational cohort, there was still a smaller amount of BIPOC experiences shared by the recruited participants. Future research should actively work to amplify the voices of BIPOC youth. This specific limitation could be attributed to the geographical location of Knoxville due to the White majority.

The lack of BIPOC youth representation within this dissertation leads to another limitation: this study focused on the experiences of individuals in East Tennessee, specifically Knoxville. While this is theoretically appropriate when examining alternative hedonism within a community, it is a limitation for a broader scope of understanding. Finally, to reiterate the importance of amplifying voices of those who have traditionally been oppressed in the confines of modernity, researchers who are themselves BIPOC should be involved in future research. This acts as a limitation but also an avenue for future research because of the power structures in place that act as barriers to meaningful content and dialogs (see Agyeman, 2008).

Future Research

Future research and academic recommendations include different sample groups and geographical regions due to the narrow scope of this study. Also, a deeper exploration of self-policing tactics as time progresses. Pandemic fatigue might lead to loosening the reigns and shifting back towards old consumption practices. Lastly, embracing a facet of Ella's discussion,

they mentioned a ‘missed opportunity’ for a revolution – true radical change – that might never occur again. Investigating the lost opportunities and burnout around pandemic fatigue and psychological trauma can add additional insight into the ways in which alternative hedonism might act as a self-imposed counterbalance to consumer culture.

Another avenue for future research could explore how the artwork and community access to information interpreted through this dissertation can lead to lasting outcomes and policy change. Visual methodologies fuel grassroots movements and facilitate change from the ground up. Future research could follow the artwork’s story and look at a more longitudinal impact of the outcome. Lastly, through my personal experiences as a researcher and participant of alternative hedonism, engaging in an autoethnography and quilt making project would be a way to gain insight over an extended period of time and could also explore the impact of the art-based (quilt) outcome.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation this dissertation explored the following questions:

RQ1. In what ways have Generation Z changed their consumption views during the COVID-era?

RQ2. In what ways does trauma inform the lived experiences of Gen Z’s apparel consumption during the COVID-era?

RQ3. How may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices?

The multiple methods of in-depth interviews, closet interviews, and participant photographs of apparel items were employed to unpack the multitude of ways in which psychological trauma

manifested into alternative consumption practices. The six themes identified include: re-evaluation of consumption, developing joyous hobbies, the purge, The Great Resignation, awakening of the self, and paradox of speed. These themes add to the richness and understanding of alternative hedonism and how psychological trauma can trigger a re-evaluation of consumer culture's good life. Specifically, alternative hedonism has been seen as a phenomenon that manifests with the global elite, which will trickle down through policy changes. The data highlights that – on the ground level – marginalized Gen Z consumers are enacting self-policing efforts that encompass alternative hedonism.

Moreover, the psychological trauma experienced by Gen Z provides valuable insight into the subjective concept of self-interest, which is paramount to alternative hedonism. Self-interest is not about the selfish preservation of one's interests but about the importance of caring for one's mental health and exploring sexual identities. This exploration around self-interest has occurred at various sites, in the community, at home, and online, which adds to the importance of social media for connecting and educating individuals about alternative consumption practices. The paradox of speed due to the connection and onslaught of access to shared online knowledge also leads to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression, which force some to take action and re-evaluate social media consumption.

Personal Evolution

Throughout this dissertation, which has spanned almost three years during the unprecedented global pandemic referred to as the COVID-era, much has changed for me as an individual, a partner, a researcher, and an agent of change. While conducting this research, I have had to pause to allow for participants to cry, leave the interview and return at later times, and

even wholly disassociate when talking about their psychological traumas. This work has been heavy and complex and led to my unveiling. Apparel consumption is so small in the bigger picture of how the compounding psychological traumas have changed the participants and their lives. I have personally become deflated in that reality; apparel and fashion do not truly add to the deeper understanding and meaning-making that occurs as the participants struggle with mental health and identity. This dissertation has left me with a simple rhetorical question that will be my most significant takeaway from this journey- are we perpetuating the emptiness in consumer culture by examining material consumption?

Epilogue

This is the space after the dissertation defense where I want to explore the conclusion. I defended my dissertation in front of my committee, department head, and childhood friend (Samma). The dialogue that occurred and feedback on the dissertation led to many valid and viable points that need addressing. This epilogue will serve as a space to unpack some of the feedback gathered.

First, the critique of Gen Z. The dissertation paints the experiences and struggles of the generational cohort in a way that seems one-sided. It must be noted that there is a considerable amount of literature in popular press that critiques the influence of Gen Z on the second-hand fashion market. Specifically, in an interview with Vox, Dr. Jennifer Le Zotte states, "...secondhand buying and selling has never wholly been for the altruistic reasons that are often championed, whether it be environmental or to aid people who can't afford to buy firsthand clothing...Despite its charitable and anti-capitalist face, thrift shopping is just as affected by the woes of capitalism as regular ol' retail... As with any trend, people began to find ways to profit

— hence the rise of resellers. In particular, Gen Z has taken to flipping their thrift shop purchases, adding to the perception that new shoppers are driving up prices.” The increased prices at stores like Goodwill or KARM have continued to rise due to the demand in the gems (like that cool Chyna WWE shirt from the 90’s that was \$5 but sold on Depop for \$300) buried within their stores ripe for Gen Zers to resell or repurpose. This leads to issues around access to clothing for other groups of people who are limited due to their socio-economic standings.

Next, the omission of the importance of socio-economic data when accounting for the participants and their experiences. As mentioned above, this ties in neatly due to the critique of Gen Z and the second-hand market. There are people who utilize second-hand markets for clothing not out of choice but necessity. This is also a facet of voluntary simplicity, frugality, and alternative consumption. There was a gap within the data collection and screening that should have explored the socio-economic positioning of the participants. This information could have provided more valuable information. In future work, socio-economic standings must be accounted for. Arguably, this is the largest gap within this project, and I believe it can be addressed in future (see my *eventual* autoethnography).

Also, Whiteness has been a space of tension through this entire journey. From the proposal where discussions around Whiteness was removed from the draft completely to the feedback in the defense about bringing it back into the folds. The intricacies and tensions when discussing race provides a time for deep reflection around my privilege as a White person. When discussing race throughout the dissertation there was a lack of a deeper unpacking of the historic roots and current implications. Market place exclusion perpetuates inadequate representation for marginalized populations such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and people

who identify on the queer spectrum (LGBTQ+) (Burgess et al., 2017). While the limitations of the dissertation mention this there needs to be a more explicit mention of MY Whiteness and the influence it might have had during the data collection (Agyeman, 2008).

Lastly, the complexity of the word “marginalized” led to multiple inputs on how to address the intersectionality of identities and representation. This piece of feedback led to a discussion around proposed solutions. Redefining, removing, shifting, changing. The committee did not come to a settlement on how to move forward with this. Regardless, this is a cite of contention that should be addressed. Is the intersectionality of identities, even if the majority of the participants are White, constitute membership in a marginalized population? I would argue that every person who participated in this study would self-identify as marginalized, but the definition that was used in the dissertation, a consumer population traditionally treated as insignificant or peripheral (examples include BIPOC, LGBTQ+, etc.), was divisive. Currently, there is no solution to this conundrum; future research, as previously mentioned, will need to account for the intricacies around race, identity, ethnicity, and the influence of Whiteness in the space of data collection and interpretation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Screening Questionnaire for Sampling

Preferred name or Pseudonym _____

Email and/or Phone number contact _____

How old are you? _____

With which gender(s) do you most identify?

Man

Woman

Non-Binary

Prefer not to answer

Other (please specify) _____

Do you identify as transgender?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer

What are your pronouns?

She/her

He/him

They/Them

Ze/zir

Ze/hir

Prefer not to answer

Prefer to self- describe _____

Please select the population group(s) that you most closely identify with from the list below:

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian or Asian American

Black or African American

Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latinx

Middle Eastern or Northern African

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Prefer not to answer

Another option not listed here (please specify) _____

How would you describe your sexual identity (select ALL that apply)?

Asexual

Bisexual

Heterosexual/straight

Homosexual/gay

Lesbian

Pansexual

Queer

Questioning

Prefer not to answer

Prefer to self-describe _____

Were you born in the United States?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Please indicate your veteran & military status:

Currently in military service

Veteran

No military service

Prefer not to say

Are you a first-generation college student?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Would you describe any of the following as applying to you (select ALL that apply)?

A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)

A learning disability or other diagnosis that interferes with your learning or ability to concentrate (e.g., dyslexia, auditory processing disorder)

A long-term medical illness (e.g., epilepsy, cystic fibrosis)

A longer-term mental health condition (e.g., depression, anxiety)

A mobility impairment

A sensory processing or integration disorder

An intellectual disability

A temporary impairment resulting from illness or injury (e.g., broken ankle, surgery)

A disability or impairment not listed above

Prefer to self-describe _____

None of the above

There is an optional open space below for you to discuss any other characteristics that you feel are important to describing yourself and relation to the study. _____

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials



ARE YOU A POLITICAL CONSUMER?

Do you find enjoyment outside of the traditional modes of consumption? Do you like to challenge the established norms? Are you over the age of 18 and identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC)? If so, consider participating in this study exploring the ways that the events of the COVID-era have influenced your consumption patterns.



Community Classes?



Eat local?



Shop 2nd hand?

This will involve:

This study will require you to (1) complete a one-hour interview (outside and in-person or online) and (2) participate in a 30-minute online interview discussing fashion items in your personal collection. You will be compensated a \$100 gift card to OGLEWOOD AVENUE or THE BOTTOM BOOKSTORE for your completion.

You can contact SARAH FRANKEL at sfrankel@vols.utk.edu or scan the QR Code to see if you qualify.

If you want to learn more scan the QR Code at the top of this flyer!!

Appendix C: Semi- Structured Interview Guide

Share with me one of your fondest memories of shopping? Dressing up? Etc?

RQ2. In what ways does trauma inform the lived experiences of Gen Z's apparel consumption during the COVID-era?

The effects of the COVID-era have impacted us all differently. Can you share any of your experiences around any potential traumatic moments or discomforts you endured during the COVID-era?

How might these traumatic or uncomfortable experiences relate to your consumption practices?

RQ1. In what ways have Generation Z changed their consumption views during the COVID-era?

How has your consumption changed during the COVID-era?

Now that we have spent some time talking about your experiences during the COVID-era and your forms of alternative consumption, is there anything else that you would like to share?

Next time we meet I would like to talk to you about some apparel items in your closet. Please pull 3-5 apparel items that you would like to chat about that reflect your engagement with alternative consumption practices.

A list of resources will be provided to each participant after our interviews (Appendix D)

Appendix D: Closet Interview Guide

Can you talk to me about your fashion style? What influences it?

RQ3. How may the apparel choices of Gen Z influence their current participation in alternative consumption practices?

Can you share with me some of your apparel items that reflect your engagement with alternative consumption practices?

Can you tell me more about why this item is important to you (repeated for each item)?

Now that we have completed the closet interview, is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

Appendix E: Resources for Participants



Scan the QR Code for Resources

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qsPbAiZSJ02kjnrB7OKNFt2-7upzHV3bCEU1woIDeB8/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix F: IRB Approval



June 02, 2022

Michelle Lynn Childs,

UTK - Coll of Education, Hlth, & Human - Retail, Hospitality, and Tourism Mgmt

Re: UTK IRB-22-06777-XP

Study Title: THINKING DIFFERENTLY CONSUMING DIFFERENTLY: EXPLORING GENZ'S PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AS A CATALYST TO ALTERNATIVE CONSUMPTION DURING THE COVID-ERA

Dear Michelle Lynn Childs:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), **Categories (6) and (7)**. The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application version 1.1 as submitted. You are approved to enroll a maximum of 20 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from June 02, 2022.

Approval Information:

- Expedited cat. 6 and 7
- waiver of documentation of consent
- N= 20
- No CR
- Application v. 1.1
- Informed consentrevFeb2022 v. 2.0
- Interviewguide v. 1.0
- Mental health resources v. 1.0
- Email scheduleinterview mar022 v. 1.0
- Diss recruit feb22revise v. 2.1

Any revisions in the approved application consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

The IRB has determined that your project does not require annual Continuing Review (renewal). Approval of

Appendix G: Informed Consent

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: *Thinking Differently Consuming Differently: Exploring Genz's Psychological Trauma as a Catalyst to Alternative Consumption during the COVID-Era*

Researcher(s): Sarah Frankel, University of Tennessee, Knoxville & Dr. Michelle Childs
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I am asking you to be in this research study because you self-identify as someone who engages in political consumption and/or alternative consumption behaviors. You must be age 18-25 to participate in the study. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

Why is the research being done?

The purpose of the research study is to explore the ways in which individuals potentially pivoted their consumption practices in response to various traumas experienced in the COVID-era.

What will I do in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to complete one interview (in person or online) that can last up to 1 hour. Then there will be a scheduled follow up interview (online only) lasting up to an hour to discuss 3-5 fashion items in your closet that reflect your

engagement in alternative consumption. Both interviews will include audio recording and the fashion item will be photographed. You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation could last up to 2 hours depending on the information shared in the interviews. The total involvement includes 2 interviews (1 online/in person and 1 online exclusively) to be completed before May 2022.

Can I say “No”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your grades, your relationship with your instructors, or standing with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, I ask that you please contact me and let me know that you are withdrawing. The information that was collected will be removed from the study and destroyed.

Are there any risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but I believe this risk is small because of the procedures I use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form. The interviews could trigger feelings of discomfort or inconvenience and I will be working with you to help minimize this risk by providing resources (in the form of a Google doc)

at the end of our interviews if you need additional assistance. Lastly, if you decide to conduct the interview in person, I will follow all CDC guidelines to help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Are there any benefits to me?

I do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about how the COVID-era has influenced consumption. I hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

What will happen with the information collected for this study?

I will protect the confidentiality of your information by using a pseudonym, limiting access to your information to the primary investigator, and always keeping the audio/transcriptions on a locked personal computer. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. I will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information, I've collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, I would have to follow that law or final court ruling

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

I will keep the audio recordings and screenshots/photographs until the study is completed and then the files will be destroyed. I will not keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted once the study is over. I will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will be compensated a \$50 gift card from either Oglewood Avenue Plant Shop (a Black owned small business) or \$50 gift card to French Fried Vintage (a queer owner small business) after completing each interview. The first gift card will be of your choice. The remaining gift card will be issues after completion of the second interview. They will be issued either in person or I will send them to you via U.S. mail based on your preference.

What else do I need to know?

About 10 people will take part in this study, this is important because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information I've collected from you. As additional security to protect you against being identified I ask that you provide a nickname/pseudonym. I will also follow the IRB's recommendation of using my university-provided OneDrive or Google Drive for additional security which requires a duo-login for additional security.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

Sarah Frankel

sfrankel@vols.utk.edu (865)719-1940

Faculty advisor(s) include: Dr. Michelle Childs (mchilds@utk.edu)

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1534 White Avenue

Blount Hall, Room 408

Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told whom to contact. By clicking the “I Agree” button below, I am agreeing to be in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can close my internet browser.

Consent for use of images

I agree that photographs from the second interview from this research may be analyzed for research purposes.

Appendix H: Full Size Participant Images



Figure 9. Lily Sweat Pants Green and Lilac



Figure 10. Lily Denim Distressed Jeans



Figure 11. Lily Hard Rock Café Shirt



Figure 12. Lily Distressed Jeans



Figure 13. Lily Dad's Shirt



Figure 14. Alexis Floral Skirt



Figure 15. Alexis Black Power Pleather



Figure 16. Alexis White in the Garden



Figure 17. Alexis Jewelry



Figure 18. Alexis Shell Purse

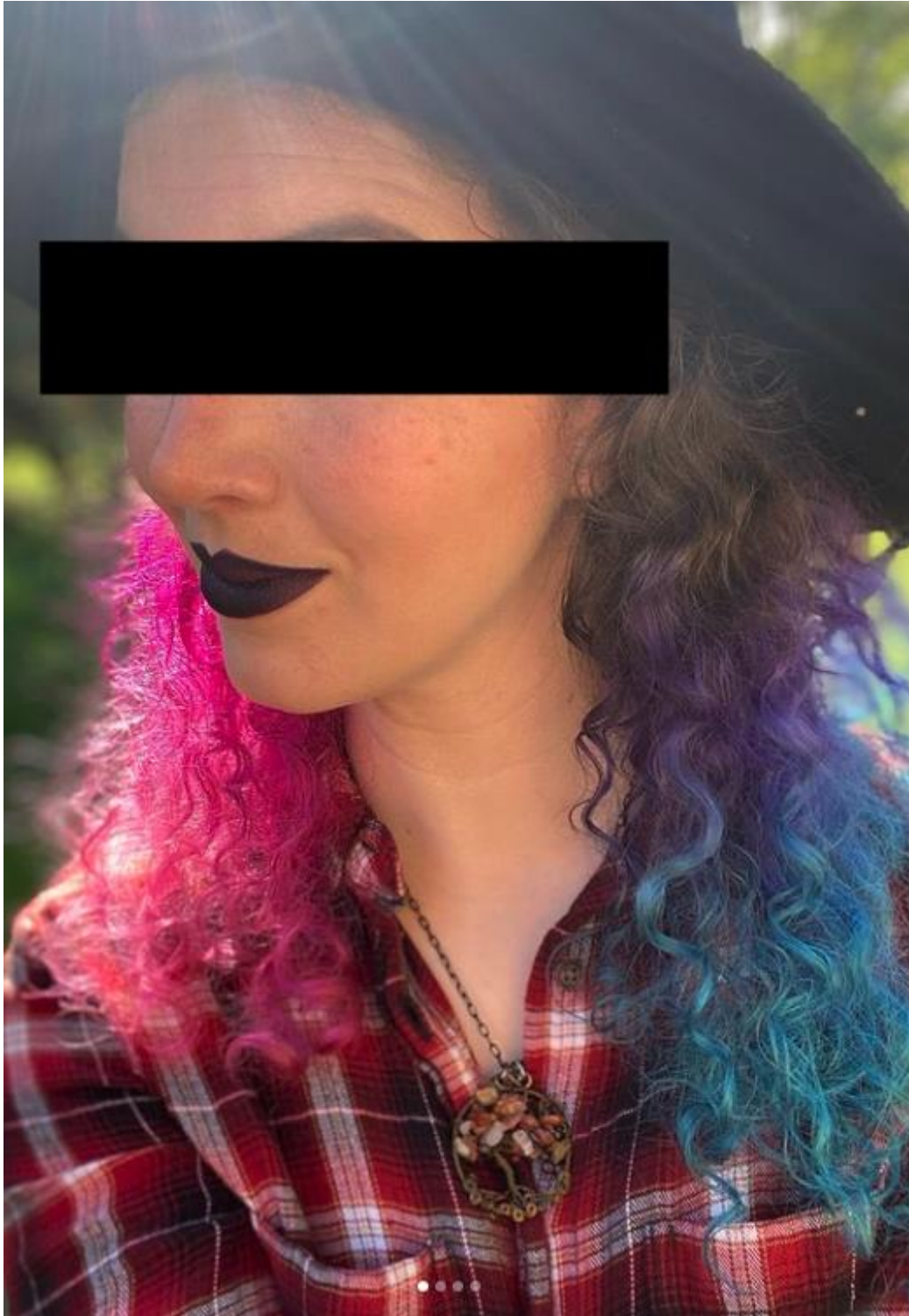


Figure 19. Clover Stone Tree Necklace



Figure 20. Clover Knitting



Figure 21. Clover Cooking Blouse



Figure 22. Bailey Queer Blue



Figure 23. Bailey Western Canadian Tuxedo



Figure 24. Bailey Staged Denim and Leather



Figure 25. Ella Handmade Earring



Figure 26. Ella Board of Missoula Shirt



Figure 27. Ella Crochet Hat and Bag



Figure 28. Ella Sustainably Designed Shirt



Figure 29. Erica Button-Down



Figure 30. Ella Farm Shirt



Figure 31. Erica Farm Shirt Sir Walter Rabbit



Figure 32. Erica Stripe Shirt

VITA

Sarah Frankel was born in Palm Bay, Florida to Jay and Valerie Frankel.

She obtained a Bachelor of Science in 2009 with departmental honors in History from the University of Tennessee and a Master of Business Administration in 2017 at Lincoln Memorial University. Sarah has worked in retail and small businesses as an assistant manager, manager, district manager and owner since before graduating from Lincoln Memorial University in 2017 and has been a resident of Knoxville since 1993. During her doctorate program she and her partner graciously received their baby, Fox. *The best decision ever.* By the time of completion of her doctorate, Sarah had completed over 25 professional and industry presentations locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. She had eight peer reviewed articles published at the time of completion with two under revision. She was involved in leadership as a representative for her department and university, undergraduate and high school student mentor, and actively volunteering within both the Jewish and LGBTQ+ communities. Her primary research interests surround alternative consumer behavior, subcultures, and leisure studies. This dissertation was written in pursuit of a Doctor of Philosophy in Retail, Hospitality, and Tourism Management with a cognate in Educational Psychology in 2023.