



## Exploring Consumer Motivation for Apparel Renting: Insights from Interviews with Renters

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The global online apparel rental market was valued at \$1 billion in 2017 and is expected to reach \$1.8 billion within the next few years (Iqbal, 2018). Apparel rental platforms like Rent the Runway and Letote provide short-term rental for one-time occasions and long-term renting arrangements through a subscription service. The success of rental retailers has driven established apparel retail brands, such as American Eagle and Ann Taylor, to recently enter the marketplace to supplement their retail revenue by offering potential customers a way to try their products (Chen, 2018). While the growth of apparel rental retail industry is evident, whether main-stream consumers are ready to adopt this new way of apparel consumption is still elusive (Crets, 2018). Uncovering the consumer motivations for renting apparel will provide important insights into this unaddressed question. Several researchers have explored the drivers of apparel renting (e.g., Johnson et al., 2016; Lang & Joyner Armstrong, 2018); however, these researchers did not collect data from actual apparel renters, limiting their theoretical predictions only to the behavioral intention level. To fill this research gap, this study explores the consumer motivations for engaging in online apparel rental through interviews from actual apparel renters and proposes testable hypotheses for a quantitative analysis based on the qualitative findings.

Given the lack of empirical research on apparel renting behavior, grounded theory approach was taken for data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By interviewing apparel renters, their real experiences were explored to build theory about the phenomena of interest. A mass email was sent to a random sample of 5,000 female faculty, staff, and students enrolled in or employed at three campuses of a large Southwestern university in the U.S. Given that the majority of apparel rental platforms cater to female consumers, it was deemed appropriate to focus on female consumers. A \$15 cash incentive was offered for participation. Fifteen apparel renters participated in the phone interviews, each requiring 30 to 60 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to uncover their motivations for renting apparel. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for text analysis. After an iterative analysis of core concepts and themes that describe motivations for apparel renting, the final list of motivations was determined.

The qualitative data revealed nine motivational factors (i.e., saving money, saving shopping time, size assurance, styling, ease of use, special occasion, product trial, never wear same dress twice, fashion leadership), supporting four themes including affordable access, smart

shopping, utility, and no burden of ownership (see Table 1 for the definition of each factor). First, the most frequently cited motivation is the ability to access apparel products one cannot ordinarily afford. Platforms that mainly carry high-end designer labels like Rent the Runway clearly provide this benefit. The second theme is smart shopping derived from the ability to save apparel shopping time, assure right fit, and receive a styling service offered by the rental retailer. Many participants indicate that renting reduces apparel shopping time since the subscription service regularly sends a “box” based on their style preferences, without requiring much further input from customers. Finding better products that cater to their needs including the right fit and personal styling is another major enabler of smart shopping. Third, ease of use for rental websites motivates consumers to engage in apparel renting. Many participants indicate that rental website features, such as presentation of products, search options, and payment procedures are comparable or superior to regular retailer websites. The last theme labeled no burden of ownership highlights the fact that renting involves only access to products, clearly distinguished from the traditional consumption of apparel products. Many renters indicate that it makes financial sense to rent for special occasion garments they need for one-time use. They also comment that renting provides an opportunity for product trial before purchasing, without having to commit to buying. In addition, some consumers simply do not like to purchase and keep apparel products because they prefer to frequently switch out their clothing with new items (“never wear same dress twice”) or to keep up with fashion trends (“fashion leadership”).

Table 1. Motivations for renting apparel

Motivations		Definition
Affordable access	Saving money	Access to high-end products one could not ordinarily afford
Smart shopping	Saving shopping time	Save shopping time by eliminating shopping hassle including store visit and product return
	Size assurance	Access to more variety of sizes (e.g., plus size, petite size)
	Styling	Receive styling service offered by the rental retailer
Utility	Ease of use	The website as well as the service is easy to use
No burden of ownership	Special occasion	Do not have to buy the clothes that will be worn only once for special occasion (e.g., a fancy dress)
	Product trial	Do not have to commit to buy the goods; Able to try products before purchasing
	Never wear same dress twice	Switch out the clothes with a different, new item without repeating the same dress
	Fashion leadership	Try trendy fashion items without having to purchase and keep them for good

Based on the results of a qualitative study, four hypotheses were developed as follows:

**H1:** Consumers who wish to have an access to high-end products they could not ordinarily afford will be more likely to engage in apparel renting; **H2:** Consumers who wish to (a) save apparel shopping time by eliminating shopping hassle, (b) access more variety of sizes, and (c) receive styling service will be more likely to engage in apparel renting; **H3:** Consumers who perceive apparel rental websites easy to use will be more likely to engage in apparel renting; **H4:** Consumers who wish to (a) avoid buying apparel for one-time special occasion, (b) avoid committing to buy apparel before trial, (c) frequently switch out clothing with new items, and (d) keep up with fashion trends will be more likely to engage in apparel renting.

These hypotheses may be further tested so the exploratory, qualitative findings in this study can be further validated. For instance, a research model detailing the effects of a series of motivations on renting behavior could be developed and tested with additional variables in a broader nomological network of consumer behavior. Also, nine motivational factors that emerged in this study may be tested with exploratory factor analysis to see if they can be reduced into a different set of factors other than the four themes proposed in this study. This quantitative analysis will help better understand the motivations that emerged in our data by identifying the structure of the relationships among variables. Notably, an environmental motive that has been frequently theorized as a major driver of renting (e.g., Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018; Lang & Joyner Armstrong, 2018) did not emerge in our data. Instead, this study uncovers several unique motivations specific to renting, such as never wear same dress twice and fashion leadership, which have not been explored in previous research. Thus, findings of this study will help develop a more parsimonious model of apparel renting behavior for future research.

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