



Student Perceptions of Apparel Rental Services

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Introduction

Apparel rental services fall under the larger concepts of access-based and collaborative consumption, where consumers share goods and services, but do not actually own them (Bardhi & Eckardt, 2012). This includes transportation rental/sharing (e.g., Uber), luxury fashion goods (e.g., Rent the Runway), and intangible services (e.g., Airbnb) (Lawson et al., 2016). Consumer research anticipates apparel rental as a source of access-based consumption to grow in 2020 and beyond (Chen, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the use of apparel rental services for an everyday professional wardrobe and evaluate student perceptions of textile and apparel faculty wearing rented apparel. Student perceptions of personally using apparel rental services were also explored. The following research questions were addressed: RQ1) will students notice a difference in professors' apparel when it is rented?, and RQ2) what are student perceptions of renting apparel for themselves?

Literature

There is a growing body of literature on access-based consumption including consumer segments for apparel rental services (Lawson et al., 2016) and car sharing (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Specifically for apparel, clothing rental has been explored as collaborative consumption with much of the research centered around consumer motivations for renting apparel (Lee & Chow, 2020), benefits of renting apparel (Armstrong & Lang, 2013) and exploration of the rental business model (Pederson & Netter, 2015). Armstrong and Lang (2013) recognized product service systems (e.g., rental) as a more sustainable alternative to the apparel material supply chain as it can be an alternative to purchasing clothing, specifically fast fashion (Chen, 2020). Companies such as Rent the Runway, Ann Taylor, Vince, Bloomingdales, and Urban Outfitters have rental options (Chen, 2020). Some benefits of apparel rental to consumers are an expanded wardrobe, less consumption/more sustainable, and more variety (Chen, 2020; Lee & Chow, 2020).

The apparel worn by professors can influence the perception that students have of them. Previous research has found that professors who dress more professionally, as opposed to casually, get a more positive reaction from students and are perceived as more credible and approachable (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). From the professor's perspective, more professional dress can help professors distinguish themselves from students, show authority, and present themselves to peers (Abbasi, 2012). Martindale and Lee (2019) is the only known study that evaluated student perceptions of textile and apparel faculty dress by exploring a minimal transformative wardrobe.

Method

Two textile and apparel professors at a Midwestern University wore rented apparel from Rent the Runway Unlimited for the first 10 weeks of the 2020 spring semester. Rented apparel items mixed with their existing wardrobe were worn for class at least three days per week, without telling students where the apparel was from. After the 10-week period, students were given a survey to measure their observations of the professors' apparel and their perceptions of apparel rental services. The purposive and convenience sample of students was chosen instead of coworkers, because they observed the professors in class two or three days per week. The survey was developed to measure student observations of professors' apparel using four yes or no questions and an open-ended response option (Martindale & Lee, 2019). Next, student perceptions of apparel rental services and adoption of apparel rental services were measured using benefits and motivations for adopting rental services from previous literature.

Results

A total of 42 students completed the survey: 32 who had a face-to-face class with professor 1 and 35 who had professor 2. Some students interacted with both professors during the semester. Descriptive statistics of yes and no answers were averaged for the 2 professors. On average, 72.5% of participants noticed higher quality apparel items worn by both professors. Students noticed (92.5%) on-trend or unique apparel items worn more often by the professors. An average of 44% responded that they noticed more bold or risky items worn by both professors, while an average of 67.5% noticed that the professors wore new apparel more often.

Some participants (50%) reported that they would try an apparel rental service, followed by 24% no and 26% unsure. The majority (97%) reported that they would rent apparel for a special occasion, while less (69%) reported that they would rent a professional wardrobe. Open ended responses also indicated that students were more likely to use apparel rental services for special occasions. One participant shared "I would only use rental services for special occasions or nice items I need for an event that I know I won't wear again" (P9). Participant 12 stated, "I would definitely be more likely to rent for a special occasion than everyday items". Students indicated that they would "prefer to buy nice work outfits and keep them" (P22) and "don't think it is practical for everyday wear because I would want to wear them again" (P35).

Regarding the students perceived benefits of renting apparel, 60% perceived that renting apparel would help them save money. While 83% of the participants thought that renting apparel would allow them to wear more trendy items. The majority of participants (88%) thought that renting apparel would help them have a more sustainable wardrobe.

Conclusions

Based on the growing phenomenon of apparel rental services it is important to understand perceptions of potential consumers. Concerning RQ1, students observed on-trend or unique apparel pieces from their professors' wardrobe, followed by higher quality of apparel, more new items, and more bold items. This finding suggests that students did notice the change of their professors' wardrobe during the 10-week period, aligning with previous literature (Martindale &

Lee, 2019). Regarding RQ2, the findings suggest that students are more likely to rent for special occasions than adopt the service for everyday apparel for themselves. The main perceived benefits for students to use apparel rental services were for a more sustainable wardrobe, followed by more trendy items, and lastly to save money.

This study adds to the apparel rental service literature and provides implications for apparel rental service companies and consumers. Companies can advocate that a rented wardrobe could be appropriate for a professional wardrobe, especially for textile and apparel professors. Apparel rental companies could promote the use of apparel rental for special occasions, not a professional wardrobe, to younger consumers. Consumers can benefit from less consumption and an on-trend and varied wardrobe. Recommendations include future research about perceptions of rented apparel by observers in different professional environments and satisfaction level of consumers of apparel rental services.

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