

Mad[e] to Measure? Examining Customer Reviews of Mass-customized Menswear by Using Expectation-confirmation Theory

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Background and Purpose: The concept of mass customization (MC; Davis, 1987) or made-to-measure has been introduced in fashion industry since the 90's but failed to gain popularity as it was initially expected. For example, fashion retailers who specialized in different categories of products (e.g., formal wear, denim, swimwear etc.) tested this business model but it was not successful. Levi Strauss attempted MC programs both in-store and online but failed in both channels (Piller et al., 2004; TreehouseLogic, 2010). The initial testing of the MC business model was limited in menswear, partly due to a lower understanding of men's fashion needs or expectations of the MC experience. Compared to womenswear, menswear has fewer challenges on offering various styles and assortments (because of body shape, body size) which could have made MC operations less complex and more approachable to fashion retailers.

In recent years, the market has seen an influx in men's fashion needs. Fashion weeks devoted to menswear has been well received. However, research has not fully examined this growing market. Moreover, previous research also indicates that young male consumers are more involved in fashion consumption and are willing to purchase mass-customized dress shirts at a premium price (Chen-Yu & Yang, 2020). To this end, it is critical to further explore how mass-customized menswear can be developed as a sustainable business model for retailers to create a new revenue source and gain and retain young consumers.

Expectation-confirmation theory (Bhattacharjee, 2001) has been widely applied in studying consumer satisfaction, repeat purchase (or loyalty) intention, and their acceptance of fashion technologies. The starting point for learning consumers' expectations and needs is learning about their real shopping experience. As indicated by previous research, consumers who have the experience of using apparel MC are more likely to shop mass-customized menswear again (Chen-Yu & Yang, 2020). Thus, this study intends to examine consumers' MC experiences using expectation-confirmation theory applied as a theoretical lens.

Method: A web-content analysis approach is employed to fulfill the research purpose. Based on a comprehensive Google search, eight retailers who specialize in mass-customized menswear were identified, including Tailor Store, iTailor, mTailor, Indochino, Hockerty, Woodies Clothing, Paper Cloth, and Apposta. Each company offers an online channel where consumers can upload measurements, select fabrics, and design elements to customize a garment. Indochino was the only company that also offered an in-store option in a few physical locations. The data was collected from Trustpilot.com, an online review website that allows consumers to submit unsolicited reviews about retailers that they have shopped from. Reviews which were posted from November 2019-November 2021 with a rating score (1 = unsatisfied

and 5 = completely satisfied) were collected. The sample included a total of 1565 review comments. We identified a sub-set of negative reviews (rated 1 or 2) ($n_1=1207$) and another set of positive reviews (rated 4 or 5) ($n_2=304$). Reviews with a rating score of 3 were removed.

Thematic Analysis and Findings: Thematic analysis using NVivo was conducted. Several themes emerged from the data. Avoiding traditional approaches to examine expected issues with custom garments (i.e., fit, fabric, technology etc.) we looked at it with a more holistic approach and our analysis was guided by the consumer's experience with the MC services.

Theme 1: Fashion Involvement. It is well recognized that higher levels of fashion involvement increase an individual's fashionability, knowledge of fashion products and terminology. In addition, the findings elucidated that largely consumers who had higher levels of fashion involvement had higher ratings. In addition, as these consumers had a deeper understanding of menswear, fabric quality, and/or had a previous experience shopping for men's clothing, they were more knowledgeable of the complexities of ordering a customized garment. For example, one comment indicated that: *"My third set of four long-sleeve French-cuff shirts. Certified Giza-45 and pure silk. Just amazing material, craftsmanship, service, and timely delivery..."*

Theme 2: Expectation/Confirmation of MC Products. Another theme that emerged from the data involved an expectation of the MC products that the consumers customized. Across both negative and positive ratings, consumers had a preconceived expectation of the product that they were customizing on the MC platform. While some negative reviews suggested that the customized garments met or exceeded their expectations, they were instantly met with regret when any issues arose in the process. In particular, the consumers with a negative review expected a garment to be customized to their own specifications. Interestingly, consumers whose expectations were not met were buying a garment for a special event (e.g., wedding, travel, etc.). With this extra pressure for a garment for an event, their regret was amplified as their special event was inconvenienced by a poorly fitting garment. For instance, one unsatisfied customer indicated that: *"Ordered a suit for a wedding coming up. I knew I would be taking a risk in ordering a suit online, but I followed their video tutorials to ensure all measurements were accurately submitted. Received the suit a few days ago and instantly regretted it."* Also, consumers with a positive experience still had the sentimental reasons for ordering a garment, however, their expectations were confirmed with the quality, fit, and ease of ordering mass-customized garments. One positive comment stated: *"I was a little suspicious at first but when I received my coat I was more than pleased it was a perfect fit and the quality of make is exceptional"* and another comment also confirmed the consumer's expectation of quality and fit: *"I was skeptical at first but was elated by the fit and finish...received my shirt yesterday and Wow. The materials and craftsmanship are great. Everything is exactly as I ordered it."*

Theme 3: Overcoming Barriers to MC System Limitations. The third theme emerged as potential barriers to mass-customized clothing from both positive and negative reviews. While some consumers had no issues with the measurement algorithms and technology on the platforms to take accurate measurements, others found that the measurements were extremely off. Although some consumers with limited knowledge were measured by a tailor or in store by a

knowledgeable sales associate, many consumers found that the online systems were not as accurate as they would have liked. For example, one consumer complained that: “*We each followed the videos and input our measurements, even double-checking those measurements with a tailor. Each of us received a suit that COULD NOT HAVE FIT US WORSE.*”

Implications. Managerially, fashion retailers who would like to extend their business in mass-customized menswear should think about catering to consumers with fashion knowledge. The MC process requires the consumer’s patience, willingness to have their garments re-fit or tailored locally. Also, fashion retailers could develop resources to educate their potential customers (e.g., providing a video demonstration). In addition, it is also strategic to provide training to sales associates and consistently improve websites and retail apps. Theoretically, this study extended expectation–confirmation theory into a more complex consumption context which demands higher individual involvement and has more business-to-customers touchpoints.

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