### Fit models' understanding of garment fit: Can we trust their feedback?

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**Introduction**: Well-fitted garments look better and are perceived to be more comfortable, whereas the opposite will not be worn or selected in the market (Gill, 2011). Fit testing and analysis in product development stages are crucial stages because they lead directly to providing consumers with well-fitted garments. Fit sessions are where apparel companies meet their fit standards during product development. Although digital technologies such as virtual prototyping have been acceleratingly used in apparel product development, they are still not advanced enough to replace real garment-human interactions.

Fit models are key components of a fit session as they provide human agency for evaluating the comfort of the garment and giving comments to the technical design team (Bougourd, 2007; Lee & Steen, 2014). Fit models usually represent target customers of the clothing brands to check the garment, not only for fit but also for the details such as trims (Clothierdesignsource, 2020). They usually test 8 to 20 garments per visit, and it is usually difficult to evaluate every garment in detail (Campbell et al., 2021). Ilyashov (2018) explains that fit models play an essential role in determining the success of the designs. They help the technical design team approve or reject the initial designs, which eventually reduces the fit-related returns in retail when the garments are released. Those who could communicate with technical jargon were considered professionals in the industry (Ilyashov, 2018). Besides commenting on garments, maintaining correct postures during the process is also necessary for fit models. Despite their importance during fit session decision-making processes, there is a lack of academic research to examine fit models' role in this dynamic process. Therefore, the present study examined fit models' feedback on garments, as well as how they identified fit issues as a part of a technical design team.

**Methods**: The present study took a qualitative research methods approach in two phases. Upon receiving IRB approval, in the first phase, physical fit sessions, where the designers and fit models were running fit analysis and making comments on adjusting patterns, were observed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the second phase, individual interviews were conducted with fit models and technical designers for aggregate analysis (Denzin, 1978). Participants in this study were apparel technical designers, designers, and fit models, who were older than 18 years and could communicate in English effectively. Additional research participants were recruited by snowball sampling, contacting more insiders connected to the previous interview participants after their interviews (Patton, 1987). Purposeful sampling was used to collect data from information-rich companies and participants which enabled in-depth research (Patton, 2002). The fit session observation and individual interviews were voice recorded after signing the consent form. Recordings were processed through the first cycle of Descriptive Coding, and the second cycle of Pattern Coding.

**Results and Discussions**: Two male designers, one female designer, one female technical designer, and two fit models (one man and one woman) participated in the fit session conducted at a business wear company. Fit models tested eight garments during the meeting. In addition, five fit models, four women, and one man were recruited for individual interviews. Four of the models were size medium whereas one of them was a plus-size model. Additionally, four of the fit models had more than 14 years of professional experience while one of them was in the industry for less than three years. The clothing brands they were covering spanned from athletic sports apparel to lingerie, and from luxury dresses to formal business wear.

The themes were organized into two categories and their subcategories (Figure 1). The pattern coding helped reveal two main categories, which were labeled regarding knowledge of fit models. The first category was 'Fit comments.' It had two subcategories, i.e., 'tactile' and 'comfort', under which themes such as 'fabric', 'stitch', and 'trim', 'placement', and 'movement' were identified. 'Tactile' refers to fit models' comments related to tactile experience, for example, "tension is too tight on the stitches and rolling in" (Olivia). Comfort comments were a combination of 'discomfort areas' they were experiencing with the 'amount of ease' they thought they needed to fix the discomfort, for example, "the front saddle of my armhole feels like it's diving into my arm, and I feel like I need about half an inch more front saddle" (Luna). It was found that how accurately the fit models sensed the garment and gave comments was related to their knowledge, skill levels, and years of expertise in the field.
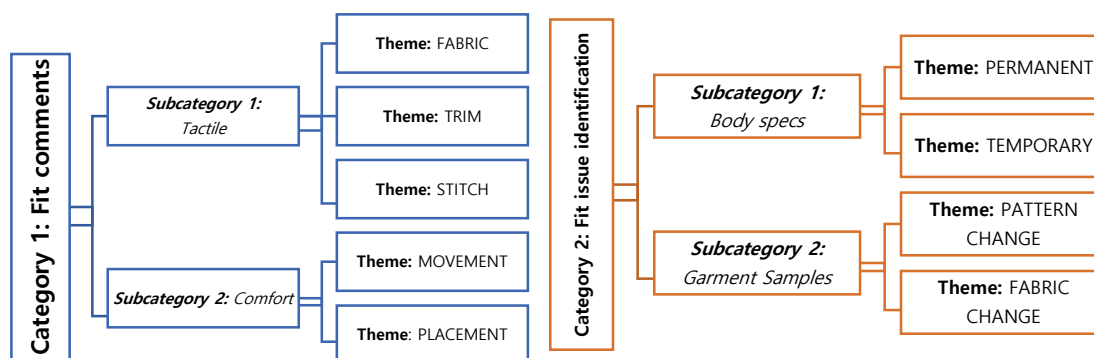


**Figure 1.** The hierarchical tree of themes

The second category was 'Fit issue identification", which had two subcategories, 'Body specs' and 'Garment samples'. The themes identified for 'Body Specs' included 'permanent' and 'temporary', and 'Garment samples' had 'pattern change' and 'fabric change' for the themes. Under the theme 'permanent', answers from the interviews included "naturally one of my calf muscles is smaller" (Ava) or "my belly is a little fuller at the top" (Emma) to emphasize how the fit models made comments based on their original physical features. All the answers identified under 'Body specs' showed how precisely the fit models understood their bodies and it has been their knowledge.

Besides technical comments they usually share in their profession, it was found that full-time fit models with over 14 years of experience gave 'design comments' as well. They were "the first customer of the garment" (Olivia) and shared comments on customers' perspectives. Moreover, given that the full-time fit models had clients of 25 apparel brands on average, they have been seeing and trying greater numbers of clothing than average customers, junior technical designers, and/or designers.

**Conclusions**: Fit models' profession included identifying fit issues, suggesting the following solutions, and keeping track of a massive database of apparel styles from various labels. How they identified and verbalized the fit issue was considered objective and applicable which enabled fit models' knowledge to be utilized in the fit alteration process. Their knowledge overlapped with that of technical designers when they designate how the garment should be fixed. In addition, fit models could participate in fit sessions with fashion designers' knowledge. Although our study included limited observations from a technical design team meeting from one company, the present study helped understand fit models' knowledge related to fit assessment and documented their experiences. The findings could also be useful to reduce the gap between physical fit tests and 3D technologies.

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