



Female Consumer's Fit Strategies and Fit Perception of Formalwear Rented Online: Content Analysis

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With the advent of Internet technologies, consumers today have extensive opportunities to evaluate products online. Because “consumer reviews, word-of-mouth on the products, could be the most powerful force in the market place” (Silverman, 1997, p. 34), investigating consumer reviews is crucial to understand potential aspects of clothing that consumers may use to evaluate clothing fit. Given that apparel is a highly body-related product, the body-absent online apparel shopping environments is problematic for consumers' fit problems and sizing inconsistency. Indeed, 62% of women could not find clothing that fit well, and 57% of women did not fit into today's standard sizes (NPD Group, 2010).

Rent The Runway (RTR), a members-only online site that rents high-end designer clothing and accessories (Lutz, 2013, March 13), offers a striking solution for women by “allowing visitors to search for women of a certain age, height, weight and even bust size, to see how that dress looks on someone similar” (Clifford, 2012, October 19). Thus, online reviews of rental formalwear in specifically RTR were chosen because: (a) formalwear is one of the more challenging garment types to buy online due to its typically fitted nature, (b) RTR has been growing and leading rental business (Lutz, 2013, March 13), and (c) RTR has been a successful case of dealing with fit issues (Rent the runway, n.d.).

Studies on apparel fit have received great attention because garment fit has been regarded as a crucial factor in meeting consumers' needs, which eventually leads to business success (Plutt, 2011). Only a few studies have explored consumers' perspectives, which were consumers' fit preference (e.g., Alexander, Connell, & Presley, 2005), consumers' concerns with fit and size of garments (Kim & Damhorst, 2010), and consumers' fit perception (Shin, 2013). However, there has been no research to date on factors that consumers use to achieve and evaluate fit in online reviews. Thus, the purpose of this study is to: (a) explore fit strategies that female consumers use to achieve correct fit and (b) investigate fit dimensions that female consumers use to evaluate fit, as reported in online reviews.

To analyze consumer reviews of the dresses they rent, a content analysis was performed on every 50th review of the 10,000 most recent reviews. After saving the sampled reviews as digital files, the constant comparison approach was used to compare data and themes until sufficient themes were developed to cover the entire dataset (Esterberg, 2002). The present study used line-by-line analysis to apply open, axial, and selective coding to the reviews for each coding theme. Operational definitions were established for newly explored themes, and three dimensions of fit perception (i.e., physical, aesthetic, and functional fit) found by Shin (2013) were used as a priori category for coding. Descriptive statistics were examined using SPSS program.

A total of 201 reviews were analyzed with 95.4% of inter-coder reliability. Fit strategies for achieving correct fit of the rental dresses found were: high-heels, pins or fashion tapes, specific bra type, specific undergarments, and belt. About one fourth of reviews indicated that retailer-provided services were used to get correct fit: ordering a second size, reading other customers' reviews, and receiving fit advice from stylists. Furthermore, results showed female consumers' fit perception on the rental dresses in multi-dimensional, which is consistent with Shin (2013). Reviewers mentioned one of these dimension of fit when evaluating their rental dresses: physical fit (72%), aesthetic fit (32%), and functional fit (32%). Interestingly, overlapping fit dimensions were found: physical-aesthetic fit (25%), physical-functional fit (27%), aesthetic-functional fit (13%), and physical-aesthetic-functional fit (9%). Over one third of review (38%) also indicated how overall fit was.

This study contributes to the conceptual and empirical understanding of fit strategies and fit perception in online consumer-opinion platforms. Implications of this study are noteworthy for both e-retailers and researchers: (a) this study outlined consumers' fit strategies, which could be a vital tool for e-retailers to maximize consumers' fit satisfaction by suggesting fit strategies to achieve correct fit, and (b) the findings of multi-dimensional fit perception in reviews could also contribute to the conceptual implications of research area on apparel fit, which consumers consider not only physical fit (i.e., length and tightness), but also aesthetic and functional fit.

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