

Exploring College Students' Clothing Fit Perception and Overall Fit Satisfaction in General

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Consumers regard clothing fit as the most crucial factor in determining overall satisfaction with garments (Pisut & Connell, 2007). However, individual body variations coupled with the lack of standardization of sizing systems in the apparel industry complicate our understanding of consumer perspectives on fit. Studies over the past 30 years in fashion design and product development have focused primarily on finding ways to improve physical fit by relying on experts' opinions (Ashdown, Loker, Schoenfelder & Lyman-Clarke, 2004; Ashdown & O'Connell, 2006; Frost, 1988; Loker, Ashdown & Schoenfelder, 2005). However, limited research has been conducted on clothing fit from the consumer's perspective (Anderson et al., 2000; Chattaraman & Rudd, 2006; Kim & Damhorst, 2010). Consumer fit satisfaction may be affected by many factors, including fit perception and external factors separate from the relationship of a garment to parts of the body. An accurate picture of the reasons for overall satisfaction with clothing fit across garments in general may be important to understanding the clothing purchase process. However, a reliable and consistent scale of overall clothing fit satisfaction has not been developed to date, so most researchers have relied on post-purchase experience measures of fit satisfaction or a single-item measure of general fit satisfaction.

In this exploratory stage of measurement development, it is advantageous to qualitatively investigate consumers' perceptions of fit and the possible factors that affect fit satisfaction, focusing on consumer experiences with fit when shopping for clothing as well as use-situations in which fit may have different requirements and meanings. Therefore, the purpose of this research is: (1) to explore the factors of fit perception from consumers' perspectives, (2) to develop an understanding of overall fit satisfaction in general, and (3) to investigate additional factors that affect fit satisfaction.

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed methods design consisting of a survey and focus group interviews. The quantitative phase (survey) assessed the level to which participants are satisfied/dissatisfied with fit overall. This measure differs from measures in previous studies of fit satisfaction that focused on specific body areas and particular garments. The qualitative phase (focus group interviews) explored possible dimensions of consumers' perceptions of fit in order to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' experiences and thoughts regarding clothing fit. College students from various majors ($n = 66$) were participants, with approximately equal numbers of male ($n = 34$) and female ($n = 32$) students. Eight focus group sessions were held, four with female students and four with male students, with 5-12 participants in each group.

Quantitative results showed that participants were slightly satisfied with clothing fit in general. No statistical differences in overall fit satisfaction were found based on gender, nationality, or class standing. In the qualitative phase, five themes emerged as components of fit perception: physical fit, aesthetic fit, functional fit, social context, and social comfort due to fit.

Expectations for physical, aesthetic, and functional fit depended on social context. Social comfort was achieved when any of the three aspects of fit – physical, aesthetic, and functional – were satisfied within a relevant social context. Other factors were also revealed that affect fit satisfaction: inconsistent size and price and garment dimensional instability. Participants identified strategies for getting good fit (knowledge of certain brands, buying one size larger, and trying on garments before buying). Although the quantitative measure was not sensitive to contextual and dimensional differences of fit, the qualitative results help to explain why participants were slightly satisfied with fit in spite of difficulties achieving fit. They developed strategies to enhance their overall experience with fit and acquire better fitting garments. The results imply that there are serious gaps between researchers/designers and consumers in how they assess fit.

This study provides theoretical contributions to consumer behavior research by conceptualizing the three dimensions that young consumers consider in evaluating fit and incorporating situational context and feelings of social comfort in a conceptual model of fit satisfaction in social context. The contextual and interrelated dimensional approach to consumer fit perception has useful implications for product developers and designers interested in increasing consumer satisfaction. This research is the first to take an integrated dimensional approach and to explore strategies for achieving good fit from a young consumer's perspective.

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