

Investigating Online Reviews of Formalwear Rented Online:
Information Generated by Female Consumers in Rent the Runway Sites

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With the explosive growth of e-commerce, consumer online reviews as a type of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) have become increasingly important. Because online reviews come from the consumer perspective, they are perceived to be more influential on consumers' choices and more helpful in reducing consumers' perceived uncertainty than seller-generated information. Despite this, no research to date has investigated consumer-generated information in online reviews of formalwear rented online. This study is the first attempt to understand consumer-generated information in online reviews of formalwear rented online.

Rent the Runway (RTR), a members-only website that rents high-end designer clothing and accessories, is a highly successful venture garnering more than 3.5 million registered members and over 170 designer partnerships in less than four years (Smith, 2013, May 20). Because RTR has been successful in dealing with fit issues of formalwear (a challenging garment category due to its typically more fitted nature), we decided to evaluate what fit information consumers include in the RTR online reviews. Online consumer evaluations of multi-dimensional fit have received little academic attention, whereas physical aspects of fit have received substantial academic attention. Despite the many studies on physical fit that considered demographic and body characteristics, no research to date has examined differences in consumer-generated fit information posted in online reviews among different size, age, and body shape groups. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine (1) what aspects of fit information are mentioned among different size, age, and body shape groups, (2) how review valence of fit information affects ratings, and (3) what clothing attributes and social context are used to evaluate clothing. Three hypotheses and two research questions were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The percentage of fit information will not differ among petite, medium, and tall sized female consumers, specifically with respect to (a) physical fit, (b) aesthetic fit, and (c) functional fit of formalwear rented online.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between ratings and fit information will not differ among petite, medium, and tall sized female consumers, specifically with respect to (a) physical fit, (b) aesthetic fit, and (c) functional fit of formalwear rented online.

Hypothesis 3: The percentage of fit information will not differ among groups with different ages and body shapes, specifically with respect to (a) physical fit, (b) aesthetic fit, and (c) functional fit of formalwear rented online.

Research Question 1: What other clothing attributes are female consumers likely to mention in their online reviews of formalwear rented online?

Research Question 2: What social context are female consumers likely to mention in their online reviews of formalwear rented online?

A two-stage content analysis was used. In Part 1, a coding scheme was established (95.4% inter-coder reliability) to identify themes in the textual content of the 201 online reviews chosen using systematic sampling of every 50th of the 10,000 most recent reviews of RTR formalwear using *a priori* coding adopted from previous studies (Abraham-Murali & Littrel, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990; Shin, 2013). We found three aspects of fit information (physical fit (length and tightness), aesthetic fit, and functional fit) were presented along with eight other clothing attributes (appearance, color, comfort, design elements, fabric, pattern, season, and style), and social context (social appropriateness, social verbal feedback, and social imagined judgments).

In Part 2, the developed coding scheme was used to code 600 systematically sampled online reviews by petite, medium, and tall consumers (93.4% to 96.3% intercoder reliability). Frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, Chi-square goodness-of-fit test and univariate one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for hypotheses, and frequency distributions and cross-tabulations for research questions using SPSS statistics 21.0 were completed. Results indicated that the three aspects of fit information were equally mentioned in online reviews by all size, age, and body shape groups (H₁ & H₃). Results further showed that review valence of fit information in all three aspects had a significantly positive influence on ratings (H₂). The finding suggests that the presence of the three aspects of fit information in negatively or positively valenced statements may be important criteria for other consumers when deciding to rent clothing online without being able to try it on. Other clothing attributes and social context were also found to be critical attributes in online reviews (RQ₁ & RQ₂); this is partially consistent with previous studies of Abraham-Murali and Littrel (1995) and Eckman et al. (1990) (other clothing attributes) and with Shin (2013) (social context).

This study contributes theoretically by identifying a new area of evaluative attributes in online reviews from female consumers and practically by demonstrating the importance of information generated by female consumers for e-tailers and marketers. The results of this study can be applied to the development of new marketing strategies including creating numerical ratings for each attribute, meta-tags to classify the most frequently mentioned attributes, and clustering of information by attributes depending on consumers' needs or motivation.

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