

Exploring Criteria Consumers Use in Evaluating Their Online Formal Wear Rental Experience: A Content Analysis of Online Reviews

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Abstract

To develop an understanding of consumers' evaluations of their Rent the Runway (RTR) experiences, their online reviews were systematically sampled and saved as screen shots. Content analysis was conducted in two stages: (a) analysis of 201 reviews to develop the coding scheme and (b) data collection and analysis from an additional 600 reviews. Insights into RTR's strategies for overcoming the challenges associated with online apparel sales were yielded. These may provide direction for other apparel companies. When planning their product offerings, online apparel rental companies should consider the most important apparel evaluative criteria found for RTR reviewers: (a) fit, (b) garment style and design elements, (c) social feedback, and (d) appropriateness. Companies may (a) adopt RTR's unique e-service, shipping two sizes of the same dress; and (b) encourage reviewers to include more self-descriptive and dress-descriptive information in their reviews, both of which seemed to alleviate online shopping fit concerns.

Keywords

apparel evaluative criteria, e-service evaluative criteria, online reviews, fit, renting, Rent the Runway, information search, dress, consumer behavior, comments

Consumers are increasingly interested in nonownership consumption approaches such as renting, sharing, and collaborative consumption. This trend is called the *sharing economy* (Elks, 2014; Miller, 2014; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015). According to Schor and Fitzmaurice (2015), valuing the size of the sharing economy is difficult. A press release from PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated global revenues for the sharing economy at US\$15 billion in 2014 (Carson, 2014). Included in the sharing economy by academic, media, and industry professionals is Rent the Runway (RTR), an

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online renter of designer formal wear (Elks, 2014; Miller, 2014; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015). RTR is highly regarded as a leader in the U.S. market of online formal wear rental for its innovative business model (Bertoni, 2014). RTR has been financially successful, increasing revenues from US\$220,000 in 2009 to over US\$57 million in 2014 (PrivCo Private Company Financial Intelligence, n.d.). The emergence of apparel rental websites has created a new type of apparel-related consumer behavior, which has yet to be studied.

Considering that formal wear typically has fitted silhouettes, which characteristically require alterations or at least trying on to achieve correct fit, it is hard to build a successful business of formal wear rented online. Fit is a major concern of online apparel shoppers due to inability to try on apparel (H. Kim & Damhorst, 2013). RTR has attained success in the fit-intensive product category of formal wear despite its online setting. Understanding how consumers evaluate their RTR experiences may yield insights into RTR's success in overcoming the fit challenges associated with online apparel sales. Thousands of RTR renters write online reviews and post photos of themselves after their dress rentals. Online reviews are a good source of information, from a consumer's perspective, of a company's successes and failures (Gutierrez, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of consumers' evaluations of their personal experiences of renting and wearing garments from RTR as presented in their online reviews and to propose a new theoretical framework relevant to online rental behavior. This knowledge will benefit online rental businesses by providing an understanding of how consumers evaluate apparel products rented in an online setting. Differences may be found in evaluation criteria used or expectations for rented apparel products, as opposed to purchased apparel products. Online businesses may also benefit from the knowledge of RTR's e-service strategies, which are important to consumers' satisfaction with their online formal wear rentals.

Literature Review

Consumer Apparel Rental Behavior

Very limited research is available on consumer apparel rental behavior. In 1995, Durgee and O'Connor conducted exploratory research into what was considered at the time "a quickly growing new type of consumption behavior, renting" (p. 89). Their work considered how the "person-object relationship is altered when the object is rented rather than owned" (p. 90) as well as consumers' motivation for renting an item as opposed to buying it. The research covered a wide range of items, such as formal wear, cars, limousines, vacation homes, sporting goods, and rug cleaners. Durgee and O'Connor's (1995) findings that may relate to the behavior of online formal wear renters are highlighted. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said they would never rent an evening gown, while 41% said they might rent one short term. Because rentals are often associated with an important event (e.g., a formal event), they are high-involvement transaction, requiring more information and decision-making time. The authors advised that marketers provide plenty of information to help consumers make their decisions. Cognitive dissonance is lower for rental items, and consumers felt freer to experiment with the design or color of the item. Renting can be used as a tool for self-exploration, trying a variety of styles, and for self-projection, conveying illusory ownership of the item to others (Durgee & O'Connor, 1995). Further research into consumer apparel rental behavior, particularly in online environments, is needed due to the online apparel rental trend.

Online Consumer Reviews (OCRs) and the Consumer Decision Process (CDP)

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) define electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers of a product or company that are available to multiple people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39). OCRs are a

form of eWOM and convey customers' experiences, evaluations, and opinions of products (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). OCRs are also a type of postconsumption evaluation, which is the sixth stage of the CDP model (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2001). The CDP model explains the stages that consumers go through before, during, and after making a purchase decision. Online product recommendations strongly influence consumer product choices and are more influential than recommendations of an online expert (Huang & Chen, 2006). The previous research on apparel-related eWOM content has been limited to nonretail websites such as blogs (Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013), Facebook, and Twitter (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). There have not been any studies analyzing the content of apparel product OCRs, despite the fact that retailers have included them on their websites for a number of years and consider them an important form of consumer communication (Covert, 2006).

Consumer Evaluative Criteria for Apparel Products and E-Service

The product focused on in this study is apparel rented in an online environment. Therefore, previous research on both apparel and e-service consumer evaluative criteria is considered here.

Apparel evaluative criteria. Eckman, Damhorst, and Kadolph (1990) identified four categories of evaluative criteria that consumers use for purchased apparel: (a) aesthetic criteria (color/pattern, styling, fabric, uniqueness, appearance), (b) usefulness criteria (versatility, matching, appropriateness, utility), (c) performance and quality (fit, comfort, care, workmanship), and (d) extrinsic criteria (price, brand, competition). Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995) found four themes of attributes consumers use to evaluate purchased apparel: (a) physical appearance (fabric, color/pattern/texture, construction, styling), (b) physical performance (fabric, color, care, workmanship, garment), (c) expressive (looks good on me, provides scope for individual creativity, appropriateness to lifestyle, comments of others), and (d) extrinsic (brand, price, store/catalog, country of origin, care label, service). It has not been investigated whether consumers use the same criteria to evaluate rented apparel as purchased apparel.

Researchers have further investigated consumers' perceptions and evaluations of apparel fit. A qualitative study by Shin (2013) had three themes of consumer fit perception based on focus group interviews of college students. *Physical fit* is the physically perceived relationship between apparel and body, such as *tightness* and *length*. *Aesthetic fit* is visually perceived when looking at an individual's clothed body and includes overall body appearance and attractiveness. *Functional fit* is perceived when the clothed body is moving and includes restriction or freedom of movement. Shin's (2013) study was on purchased apparel; it is not known if the themes of fit perception occur with the rented apparel.

Fit satisfaction has been associated with height categories. Shim and Bickle (1993) found differences among petite, medium, and tall catalog shoppers aged 55 and older with general fit satisfaction and fit satisfaction in specific areas (e.g., skirt/dress length). Kind and Hathcote (2000) did not find differences in general apparel fit satisfaction among petite, average, and tall college-aged women; however, differences were found for specific fit areas (e.g., sleeve length). The results of these two studies are for purchased apparel and are mixed, but indicate that differences in fit satisfaction among different height groups of renters may exist.

Consumer apparel fit evaluation has been related to social context. Individuals' appearance and discourse can be included as two dimensions of the social transaction (Stone, 1965). Verbal responses toward clothes by the wearer and by others construct identifications of the wearer (Stone, 1965). Consistent with Stone (1965), apparel fit perception, including the three themes of fit (*physical*, *aesthetic*, and *functional*), depends on the social situation (Shin, 2013). Social feedbacks in verbal (e.g., what others said regarding apparel fit) and nonverbal (e.g., imagination of others'

responses) forms are also critical determinants of social comfort (Shin, 2013). Female consumers likely rent formal wear to wear for special social occasions where social interaction is important. Shin's (2013) study on social expressive criteria only contained information on purchased apparel. Therefore, the impact of social interactions on evaluations of rented apparel needs to be investigated.

E-service evaluative criteria. In a content analysis of online customer reviews of securities brokerage services, Yang and Fang (2004) found that consumers' e-service evaluative dimensions include traditional service quality (e.g., responsiveness, service reliability, and competence) and Internet-specific information and systems quality (e.g., ease of use and systems reliability). Santos (2003) proposed a conceptual model of e-service quality dimensions that included ease of use, appearance, linkage, structure and layout, content, reliability, efficiency, support, communication, security, and incentive. Santos' work was based on consumers' perceptions of all types of retail websites and is often cited as foundational scholarship in e-service evaluation. S. Kim and Stoel (2004) looked specifically at online apparel retailers. For online apparel consumers, the perception of website quality was related to web appearance, entertainment, informational fit-to-task, transaction capability, response time, and trust. There has not been research related to consumer perception of e-service quality for apparel rental.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of consumers' evaluations of their personal experiences of renting and wearing garments from RTR as presented in their online reviews and to propose a new theoretical framework relevant to online rental behavior. OCRs are a form of postconsumption evaluation, which is the sixth stage of the CDP model (Blackwell et al., 2001). Therefore, the concept of postconsumption evaluation guided the exploration of the RTR reviews. The content of apparel product OCRs has not been analyzed in previous research, and thus there is no preexisting framework to indicate what postconsumption evaluative content might be found in the RTR reviews. Given that the product focused on in this study is apparel rented in an online environment, it is logical that both apparel and e-service consumer evaluative criteria content may be found. Evaluative criteria for purchased apparel products identified in previous studies (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; Shin, 2013; Stone, 1965) may be used to evaluate rented apparel products. Evaluative dimensions for securities brokerage e-service identified in previous studies—(a) traditional service quality dimensions and (b) Internet-specific information and systems quality dimensions (Yang & Fang, 2004)—may also be used to evaluate rental apparel e-service. The previously identified apparel evaluative criteria and e-service evaluative dimensions were the frameworks used to develop a research question in this study to explore the RTR-OCR content. In addition, other content may be mentioned in the online reviews. The research question was proposed: What apparel evaluative, e-service evaluative, and other content do renters write in online reviews of formal wear rented online?

Method

Content analysis, a technique used for gathering and analyzing the context of text (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003), was used to answer the research question. RTR reviews were selected as the text for analysis because RTR is a leader in online formal wear rental in the U.S. market (Bertoni, 2014), and online reviews are a rich source of customer experiences, evaluations, and opinions (Park et al., 2007). The reviews were saved as screen shots. The two stages of the study were (a) coding scheme development through a qualitative content analysis and (b) data collection through a quantitative content analysis. Details of and rationale for each stage are explained.

Coding Scheme Development

An analysis of 201 RTR reviews was conducted to develop the coding scheme. A qualitative content analysis method was selected, because it allows for emergent analysis of categories and consideration of the meaning of a text as it was intended by its authors, not solely for the meaning of the words themselves (Gall et al., 2003). To begin to develop a list of codes, the two researchers read, discussed, and analyzed a sample set of 10 reviews, separate from the 201, to identify coding categories for each content type (apparel evaluative criteria, e-service evaluative criteria, and other). Specific code development procedures varied for each content type depending on previous research findings and are described below.

For apparel evaluative criteria, the following a priori coding categories were developed based on Shin (2013) and Stone's (1965) works: (a) overall fit, (b) physical fit, (c) aesthetic fit, (d) functional fit, (e) social verbal feedback, (f) social imagined feedback, and (g) social situation appropriateness. Additional apparel evaluative coding categories that emerged from the data were (a) color/pattern, (b) fabric, (c) apparel style and design elements, (d) physical comfort, (e) appearance, and (f) season appropriateness. Most of these additional apparel evaluative coding categories were related to combinations of existing categories of criteria from Eckman et al. (1990) and Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995).

For e-service, a priori coding categories were developed by placing RTR's services and available website information within Yang and Fang's (2004) two-part conceptual framework of e-service evaluative dimensions. A unique service that RTR offers is to include a *second size* of the rented dress in the shipment for no additional charge. Additionally, RTR fit stylists are available by phone, e-mail, or online chat to assist renters with dress selection. Under traditional service quality were (a) ordering a second size as a backup, (b) getting advice from a fit stylist, and (c) delivery. Under Internet-specific information and systems were (a) information about the dress found in other renters' reviews, (b) detailed fit information provided by RTR in the online garment description, and (c) photograph of the dress on a model.

Additionally, researchers were open to new categories that might emerge from the data. Major themes that emerged were (a) strategies renters used to improve their satisfaction with the rented dress, (b) information renters provided about themselves as context for their reviews, (c) recommendations, and (d) future patronage intentions. These categories were not related to any previously identified studies.

The developed coding categories were used by the two researchers to read through and independently code all 201 RTR reviews. Given that there were approximately 10,000 reviews on RTR's website in March 2013, when the reviews were collected, a systematic sampling procedure of every 50th review was selected to get a good representation of all available RTR reviews. Each reviewer's name was substituted for a number. Coded information from each review was recorded in a spreadsheet. For apparel evaluative criteria and e-service criteria, it was recorded if comments were negative, neutral, or positive. For other content, a number was recorded indicating the specific type of content within each subcategory. For example, in the subcategory of wearing specific shoes, a mention of "heels" was coded as 2. Throughout the coding process, researchers discussed unclear points and clarified operational definitions with quotations from the reviews. The intercoder reliability for the 201 coded reviews was 95.4%.

Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the research question, a quantitative content analysis of a new set of RTR reviews was completed, using the coding scheme developed in the first stage. Previous researchers (Kind & Hathcote, 2000; Shim & Bickle, 1993) have found differences in fit satisfaction among height

groups. The results of these studies are mixed but indicate that differences in fit satisfaction among different height groups of renters may exist. If differences in fit satisfaction exist among RTR renters, their review content may also differ. Therefore, researchers selected an equal number of reviews from each height group. Given that there were approximately 19,000 reviews on RTR's website in July 2013, when the new reviews were collected, a systematic sampling procedure of every 25th review from the petite group (shorter than 5' 4", $n \approx 5,000$), every 50th review from the medium group (5' 4"–5' 7", $n \approx 10,000$), and every 20th review from the tall group (taller than 5' 7", $n \approx 4,000$) was selected to obtain 200 reviews from each height group and a good representation of all available RTR reviews. The 201 reviews initially used were not eliminated for the actual data collection. There is a chance that some of them were also included in the 600 reviews for the final analysis.

Two students who were apparel majors (one undergraduate and one graduate) assisted in coding the 600 reviews by height category. One of the authors trained both coders. The coders then independently coded a sample of 10 reviews. The author checked their coding, and retrained as needed, until satisfied the coders understood correctly all coding category definitions. The two coders each independently read and coded the 600 reviews. Reliability was calculated using percentage agreement for each section of coding. Inter-coder reliability ranged from 93.4% to 96.3%. When data were not coded the same between the two coders, codes were decided by one of the authors reviewing the individual statement from the review that was coded, discussing the rationale for the coding with the student coders, and selecting the code for that statement that was most related to the established coding category definitions.

For reviewers' characteristics and rental dress characteristics, descriptive statistics were calculated using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 22.0 Program. A percentage of reviewers did not provide a response for the following characteristics: 7.8% for bra size, 22.8% for weight, and 1.2% for size worn. Statistics in these categories may not accurately reflect the profile of reviewers. For all other characteristics, 100% of reviews contained a response. On an average, reviewers were 28.7 years old (*range* = 14–66), 5' 6" tall (*range* = 4' 10"–6' 0"), wore a size 34B bra (*range* = 32AA–38D+), weighed 131.8 lb (*range* = 95–190 lb), and usually wore a size 4 (*range* = 0–16). The most common body types were hourglass, athletic, and petite. The occasion most frequently rented for was a formal occasion, followed by weddings and then parties. On an average, the rented dresses had an overall rating of 4.6 (*range* = 2–5), a retail price of US\$637 (*range* = US\$188–US\$2,995), a rental fee of US\$101 (*range* = US\$40–US\$400), 74 online reviews (*range* = 0–518), and was worn in a size 2 (*range* = 0–16). The most common brand names were Badgley Mischka, Nicole Miller, and Herve Leger.

Microsoft Excel was used to tabulate total counts for each coding category and counts by valence (negative, neutral, and positive). For every subcategory or valence of each coding category, multiple quotes from the reviews were compiled in a single document. Each document was analyzed using color-coding techniques to identify common themes among the quotes, in addition to the aspect used as a coding guide. For example, many positive quotes about color used the word "fun." These findings were considered along with preexisting studies of evaluative criteria and the frequency counts to decide upon the final themes.

Results and Discussion

As OCRs are a form of postconsumption evaluation, which is the sixth stage of the CDP model (Blackwell et al., 2001), the exploration of the RTR reviews was guided by the concept of postconsumption evaluation. Three content groups were found in the reviews: (a) apparel evaluative criteria, (b) e-service evaluative criteria, and (c) other content. The first two content groups related to the concept of "evaluation." However, the third content group was more focused on giving

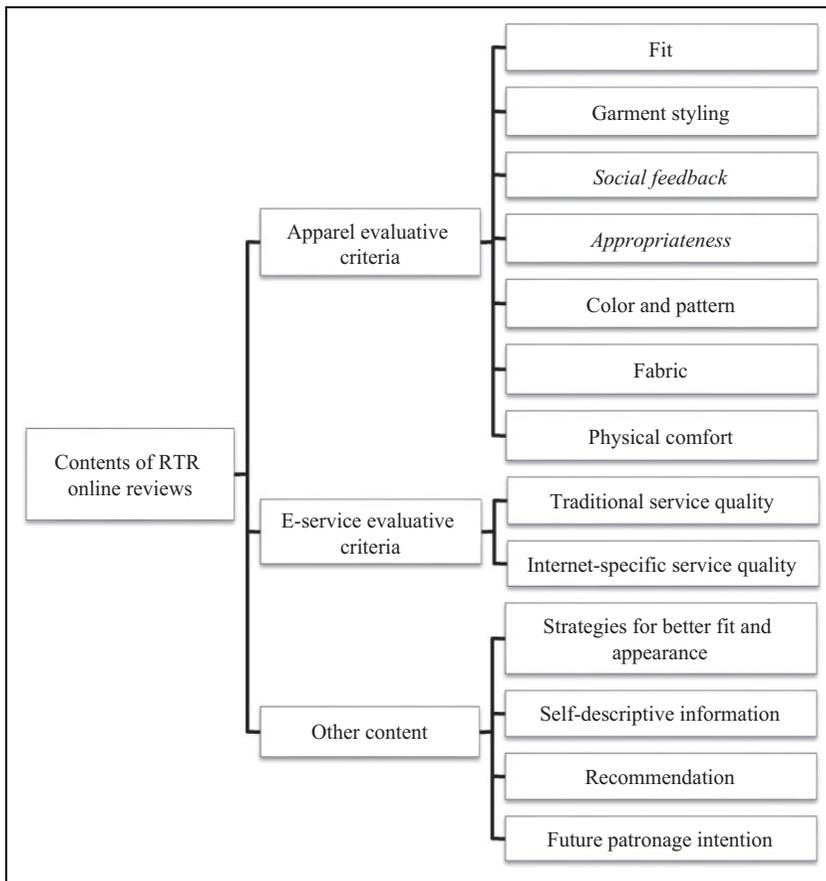


Figure 1. A framework of content of Rent the Runway online reviews. *Italics* indicate apparel evaluative criteria themes that were less important for purchasers, than for renters.

information than on evaluation. Themes within each content group were identified and are discussed in light of the aforementioned studies and Durgee and O'Connor's (1995) research on rental consumption behavior, including how the consumer's relationship with the rented object is different from the owned object. Within each content group, themes are discussed in descending frequency order. Participant codes are indicated for quotes; however, in consideration of space, they are not listed for phrases appearing in multiple reviews. See Figure 1 for a proposed framework of RTR online review content.

Apparel Evaluative Criteria

Seven themes of apparel evaluative criteria were identified: (a) fit ($n = 909$), (b) garment styling ($n = 374$), (c) social feedback ($n = 298$), (d) appropriateness ($n = 239$), (e) color and pattern ($n = 192$), (f) fabric ($n = 189$), and (g) physical comfort ($n = 51$; see Table 1). The identified themes of apparel evaluative criteria were partially consistent with the previous studies of evaluative criteria for purchased apparel; however, previously identified extrinsic, wardrobe-related, or care-related criteria (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990) were not found in the reviews. This makes sense, given that a rented formal gown will be worn once and by itself. For companies that rent other types of apparel, these evaluative criteria may be seen.

Table 1. Apparel Evaluative Criteria Themes.

Coding Category	n				Relationship to Existing Studies
	1	2	3	Σ	Category: Theme or Criteria
Fit					
Overall fit	51	1	228	280	PP: Garment*
Aesthetic fit	17	0	244	261	AC: Appearance; E: Looks good on me
Physical fit	101	15	103	219	PQ: Fit
Functional fit	27	2	120	149	PP: Garment*
Total	196	18	695	909	
Garment styling					
Appearance	0	0	228	228	PA: Styling*
Apparel style and design elements	33	11	102	146	AC and PA: Styling*; PA: Construction*; PQ and PP: Workmanship; PP: Garment*
Total	33	11	330	374	
Social feedback					
Social verbal feedback	1	0	251	252	E: Comments of others*
Social imagined feedback	0	0	46	46	E: Appropriateness to lifestyle*
Total	1	0	297	298	
Appropriateness					
Social situation appropriateness	5	10	168	183	UC: Appropriateness; E: Appropriateness to lifestyle*
Season appropriateness	2	2	52	56	Not in previous frameworks
Total	7	12	220	239	
Color and pattern					
Color/Pattern	7	14	171	192	AC: Color/Pattern; PA: Color/Pattern/Texture; PP: Color; E: Provides scope for individual creativity; AC: Uniqueness; UC: Matching
Fabric					
Fabric	22	19	148	189	AC, PA, and PP: Fabric
Physical comfort					
Physical comfort	18	0	33	51	PQ: Comfort; PP: Garment*; PP: Fabric*

Note. The following category abbreviations are used: for Eckman et al. (1990), AC = aesthetic criteria, PQ = performance and quality, UC = usefulness criteria; for Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995), PP = physical performance, E = expressive, PA = physical appearance. For coding frequency, 1 = negative, 2 = neutral, 3 = positive.
 *= some, but not all attribute components related.

Fit. All four a priori fit-related coding categories based on Shin’s (2013) work were strongly represented in the review comments. These reviews also related to apparel evaluative criteria identified by Eckman et al. (1990) and Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995; see specific categories and themes in Table 1). For *overall fit* ($n = 280$), reviews focused on perceived accuracy of fit. The phrases “perfect fit” and “true to size” or similar phrases were seen often. Comments about *aesthetic fit* ($n = 261$) focused on figure flattery, hiding flaws, or accentuating body parts, and often mentioned specific body areas: “Showed off all my curves perfectly plus created amazing cleavage” (P89); and “I’m a bit shy about my belly and this totally camouflaged it” (M35). Physical fit ($n = 219$) included *length* and *tightness*. *Length* was especially important to reviewers. Positive comments about dress *length* indicated length was as desired: “The length was also really nice at just above the knee adding a touch of class to the dress” (T128). For long dresses, the goal seemed to be for the dress just to skim the floor. For short dresses, the main cause of negative reviews was dresses that were too short to sit or bend over in. Regarding *tightness*, a close-to-the-body fit seemed to be desirable. The comment “fits like a glove” was seen numerous times and always associated with positive evaluations, which challenges traditional conceptions of a certain amount of ease being a requirement of good fit. Some

positive comments mentioned specific body areas: “I love that it’s very fitted through the waist and top of the hips” (P108). A snug and supportive fit in the bust area, such that a bra was not needed, was considered a positive aspect in the fit of a dress, as in this example: “[The dress] supported my chest without a bra!” (M29). Most negative comments about *physical fit* circumference were about the dress being too tight. *Functional fit* comments ($n = 149$) were related to the tasks undertaken in a formal dress, such as dancing or sitting. Most functional fit comments focused on comfort and the ability to move as in this comment: “[The dress] was extremely comfortable to sit, dance, and stand” (T141). Other comments related to the dress staying where it was supposed to, as in the comment: “I wasn’t pulling the dress up all night unlike some other strapless dresses I’ve worn” (T76).

Garment styling. The *appearance* coding category included reviewer comments ($n = 228$) regarding overall evaluation of the appearance of the rented dress; for example, “The dress is gorgeous” (M199). The *apparel style and design elements* coding category included comments ($n = 146$) about apparel style (e.g., neckline shape, sleeve length) and specific design elements (e.g., closures, pleats). It was found during analysis of the quotes that these comments related to construction, performance, and workmanship themes (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990). The zipper was the design element with the most negative comments: “The zipper got caught at one point where the fabric changed” (M53). These two coding categories with their shared relationship to preexisting *styling* themes (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990) were combined into a *garment styling* theme.

Social feedback. Two a priori social-related coding categories—social verbal feedback and social imagined feedback (Shin, 2013; Stone, 1965)—were combined into the social feedback theme, because both related to others’ perceptions. This theme related to aspects of expressive apparel evaluative criteria identified by Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995). Verbal feedback comments ($n = 252$) included compliments from significant others, friends, and strangers: “Having my boyfriend (and friends) tell me how gorgeous I looked over and over again” (M154); “As soon as I walked into the event I got compliments on the dress from both men and women!” (P94). Examples of social imagined feedback comments ($n = 46$) include “This dress was definitely a show stopper” (M82), and “It’s a total head turner!” (T118).

Appropriateness. The a priori category *social situation appropriateness* (Shin, 2013; $n = 183$) was found in the reviews and related to *usefulness* (Eckman et al., 1990) and *expressive* (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995) apparel evaluative criteria. Reviewers indicated whether the dress was appropriate for a specific social situation, as in these comments: “Great dress for a black tie wedding” (M97), and “This dress was the perfect choice for my sorority initiation” (T64). A new coding category—*season appropriateness*—included comments ($n = 56$) on how the dress was appropriate for the season: “Perfect color for a fall wedding!” (P109). These two categories focused on occasions, so were combined into the theme *appropriateness*.

Color and pattern. This theme related directly to previously identified color and pattern apparel evaluative themes. Many comments were general such as “The color is beautiful” (P14). In analysis of the quotes, color and pattern were also found to have relationships with creativity, uniqueness, and matching apparel evaluative criteria (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990). The relationships between the evaluative criteria supported Durgee and O’Connor’s (1995) findings that because cognitive dissonance is lower for rental items, consumers feel freer to experiment with the color of the item and that renting can be used as a tool for self-exploration and trying a variety of styles. Uniqueness was related in a positive way to color: “The colors were beyond vibrant and truly unlike any other dress I have seen” (P168). “Fun,” “beautiful,” “great,”

and “unique” were the descriptors most often used about fabric pattern or print and related to the evaluative criteria of uniqueness and fun. Patterns or prints were associated with giving the dress a more lively quality, as in these quotes: “The pattern gives the dress a lot of life and makes it unique” (P179) and “the print really pops” (T169). Matching was important to reviewers and resulted in both negative and positive comments. For example, P66 said, “It’s not a true red as you can see my escort for the dance had on a red shirt.”

Fabric. Reviewers tended to use fabric as evaluative apparel criteria for rented apparel, which is consistent with the previous studies on purchased apparel (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990). When the fabric of the dress was of high quality, in a good condition, or wrinkle-free, reviews were positive: “The fabric is thick and beautiful and can go all night without wrinkling” (P109).

Physical comfort. Comments on physical comfort of the formal wear rented related to previously identified *comfort*, *garment performance*, and *fabric performance* apparel evaluative criteria (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990). Negative evaluations of comfort related to sequins or internal structure of the apparel, such as underwires or corsets. The majority of the evaluations of comfort were general, such as “really comfortable” (P18). Positive evaluations of comfort related to the fabric; for example, “the fabric is stretchy and comfortable” (M19).

E-Service Evaluative Criteria

Two themes of e-service evaluative criteria were identified: (a) traditional service quality ($n = 207$) and (b) Internet-specific service quality ($n = 57$; see Table 2). Most comments were related to how the e-services provided helped renters achieve better fit/size satisfaction while using a virtual marketplace. E-service criteria were supported by Yang and Fang’s (2004) conceptual framework of e-service evaluative dimensions, including traditional service quality dimensions, Internet-specific information, and systems quality dimensions. Previously identified e-service evaluative criteria of ease of use, competence, access, system reliability, security (Yang & Fang, 2004), web appearance, entertainment, transaction capability, and trust (S. Kim & Stoel, 2004) were not found in the reviews.

Traditional service quality. Comments about the second-size service were related to the fit. The majority of *second size*-related comments ($n = 138$) were neutral and associated with the backup size providing an adequate fit in both sizes or a good fit in some, but not all, areas: “I ordered a 4 and a 6. I ended up wearing the 6 because the 4 was super tight across my large bust (32DDD)” (P126). Reviewers mentioned *delivery* ($n = 61$) negatively when they received the wrong item or size, or the dress arrived in a worn or wrinkled condition, but positively when reviewers experienced prompt and correct delivery: “The only bummer was that I was sent the wrong size belt. They sent a size 10 dress with a size 6 belt” (M92). Comments about fit stylists ($n = 8$) related to dress size and style, as in the comment, “I am so glad I emailed the stylist for size recommendations because people mentioned it ran small but she confirmed I would order the 0 and the 2 and the 0 fit me perfectly!” (P1).

Internet-specific service quality. Reviewers’ comments indicated that *information from other renters’ reviews* ($n = 36$) helped them find the right dress to rent. This finding confirmed the influence of eWOM on consumers’ choices (Huang & Chen, 2006) as well as eWOM’s helpfulness in reducing consumers’ uncertainty (Hu, Liu, & Zhang, 2008). Renters need as much information as possible to help them make decisions (Durgee & O’Connor, 1995), and the importance of information fit-to-task in e-service evaluation (S. Kim & Stoel, 2004) was also confirmed. There were comments about

Table 2. E-Service Evaluative Criteria Themes.

Coding Category	n				Relationship to Existing Studies
	1	2	3	Σ	Attribute(s)
Traditional service quality					
Ordering a second size as a backup	8	118	12	138	Unique service to RTR; not in existing studies
Delivery of dress	18	0	43	61	Responsiveness, service reliability, timeliness (YF) reliability, and efficiency (S)
Getting advice from a fit stylist	0	0	8	8	Communication (S)
Total	26	118	63	207	
Internet-specific service quality					
Information about the dress found in other renter reviews	4	11	21	36	Content (S) Informational fit-to-task (KS)
Photograph of the dress on a model	18	0	2	20	Content (S) Informational fit-to-task (KS)
Detailed fit information provided by RTR	1	0	0	1	Content (S) Informational fit-to-task (KS)
Total	23	11	23	57	

Note. YF = Yang and Fang (2004); S = Santos (2003); KS = Kim and Stoel (2004); RTR = Rent the Runway. For coding frequency, 1 = negative, 2 = neutral, 3 = positive.

the accuracy of others' reviews of the rented dress: "As other reviewers noted the arms/shoulder are a little tight so I went with the 4" (P63). Negative reviews related to having a different experience with the dress than that described by previous reviewers: "All the reviews I read said that the dress was super long, so I got the R. I wish I had gotten the L" (M3). Reviewers' comments about the provided *photographs of the dress on a model* ($n = 20$) related to having a different experience with the dress on their own body: "It hit me right at the knee instead of above as in the model photo" (P44). Interestingly, only one comment was found about the *written fit description* provided on the website and related to accuracy of fit/sizing information: "I knew when I ordered this dress, they didn't have my normal size available but since it said to size down I took a chance and ordered the one size smaller that was available" (T30).

Other Content

Four new themes of review content were identified: (a) strategies for better fit and appearance ($n = 234$), (b) self-descriptive information ($n = 187$), (c) recommendation ($n = 94$), and (d) future patronage intention ($n = 77$). In contrast with the previous two groups of content, which were evaluative in nature, this third group of other content seems to focus on providing information that would be useful to readers of the review.

Strategies for better fit and appearance. This theme included actions reviewers took to improve their satisfaction with fit and appearance of the rental dress, including *wearing specific shoes* ($n = 95$), *wearing a specific type of bra* ($n = 64$), *wearing a control undergarment* ($n = 49$), *wearing a belt* ($n = 11$), and *using a fitting tool* ($n = 15$). Reviewers were willing to change their body's height (through shoes) or circumference (through undergarments) to improve the fit of the rented dress. Shoes were the most commonly mentioned strategy. Comments about wearing heels typically included the height of heel worn: "In three inch heels the 4R was the perfect length and did not drag on the ground" (P69). Comments about flat shoes focused on whether or not the dress length would work with flat shoes. Wearing a specific bra was the second most commonly mentioned strategy. Positive comments related to not needing to wear a bra, or being able to wear a regular bra with straps or a strapless bra. Stick-on and low-back bras were often commented about as a necessity

for dresses with open backs. Comments about undergarments were primarily about control undergarments and specifically about Spanx[®] brand. These comments concerned the dress being tight or formfitting and requiring Spanx to fit properly: “I wore the 4, but it was very tight. After I put on a pair of spanx, it fit great!” (T118). Reviewers were also willing to wear the dress with temporary modifications to correct fit problems, such as a belt to cinch it in or using tape or pins.

Self-descriptive information. This theme included self-descriptive information, including (a) accessories worn with the dress ($n = 78$), (b) size they usually wear and how the dress compares ($n = 71$), and (c) fit problems they usually encounter ($n = 38$). It is surprising that reviewers would publicly reveal such personal information. However, the goal seemed to be to provide context for their comments to help future renters select a dress that would fit them well. Reviewers commented on accessories that coordinated well with the dress and on the versatility of the dress for a variety of accessories: “Looks great with gold accessories” (M140) and “You can dress it up with jewelry and make it look different for any occasion” (M166). Comments about the sizing of the rented dress often addressed specific areas of the dress: “I chose to order a size 6, which is my typical dress size and a 4. The 6 was just a bit more roomy in the waist area and the 4 fit better through the waist” (M83). Comments about fit problems usually encountered were often about bust and hips: “I was nervous about the hips, seeing I’m a true pear shape. I ordered a size 4L and 6L (knowing that I’d most likely need the bigger size for my hips)” (T105).

Recommendation. Recommendations for the dress ($n = 86$) were the majority and enthusiastic: “If you’re considering this dress at all, GET IT!” (P7), “This is a MUST RENT!” (P22), and “I highly highly highly recommend this dress!” (T45). Recommendations for using RTR were wholehearted: “I had a fantastic experience and recommend this website often!!” (M83). Recommendations against a dress ($n = 8$) were rare.

Future patronage intention. Reviewers also commented on intentions to rent the same dress again or to rent from RTR again ($n = 77$), “I’d LOVE to wear this dress again!” (T19) and “First experience with RTR and I will absolutely be renting again!!!” (P36).

Conclusions, Implications, and Contributions

A framework of content found in RTR reviews (Figure 1) is contributed to consumer research regarding eWOM. This is the first proposed framework of content of rented apparel product online reviews. Consumers’ online reviews of their personal experiences of renting and wearing garments from RTR include apparel and e-service evaluation, as well as other content. Future researchers of apparel product review content may use the proposed framework as a foundation. Online apparel rental and retail companies may benefit from the findings of this study by adopting strategies to overcome the fit challenges associated with online apparel shopping.

The proposed theoretical framework for rented formal wear and the concepts of evaluative criteria for purchased clothing are compared. Apparel evaluative criteria for rented formal wear are similar to purchased apparel (e.g., fit, styling, color); however, the relationships among the criteria differ slightly (Table 1). In this study, extrinsic, wardrobe-related, and care-related apparel evaluative criteria that are thought to be important for purchased apparel were not shown to be critical for the study samples. For RTR renters, the most often commented about apparel evaluative criteria were fit, garment styling, social feedback, and appropriateness. The results implied that the most important aspects of RTR customers’ rental experiences seem to be fit and garment style. This is similar to apparel purchasers who believe that styling and fit are the most important for their decision-making (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990).

Specific components of the apparel fit evaluation for formal wear renters are revealed. Online apparel rental companies may benefit from the findings of this study. When selecting dress styles to carry on their websites, they need to consider formal wear consumers' preferences for a close-to-the-body fit and prefer styles that support the breasts without a bra or allow consumers to easily wear a nonspecialty bra. These companies may also benefit by providing information to help consumers find a garment that addresses their personal aesthetic fit concerns (e.g., figure flattery, hiding flaws, accentuating specific body areas). For example, consumers could search for a dress that "creates amazing cleavage" or "camouflages a belly."

The study findings implied that apparel renters seem to place high value on positive social feedback regarding their appearance in the dress and the appropriateness of the dress for the event. This is similar to apparel purchasers who may place value on comments of others (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995) and appropriateness to specific settings (Eckman et al., 1990) or lifestyle (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995). Reading positive comments from others may encourage customers to purchase or rent the same garment. The findings reinforce our understanding of the role of social interactions (Shin, 2013; Stone, 1965) on apparel product evaluations. Renters are interested in the benefits of the dress (e.g., compliments from others about one's appearance and looking beautiful).

E-service evaluative criteria for rented formal wear include both traditional service quality and Internet-specific service quality aspects. Renters value the option to order two sizes of the same dress, as a way to ease their concerns about fit commonly associated with online shopping. Online apparel rental and retail companies may overcome the fit challenges associated with online apparel shopping by allowing consumers to order two sizes of the same garment. Prompt delivery of the correct garment, in good condition, is also important to renters.

Access to the self-descriptive information and dress-descriptive information found in renters' reviews helps potential renters imagine the garment's fit and appearance and feel confident about renting a dress they cannot try on. Online apparel rental and retail companies may benefit by continuing to provide the opportunity for consumers to review their apparel experiences and for potential consumers to read these reviews. Companies should also consider using prompts to guide reviewers to write detailed and specific information about (a) overall fit, (b) aesthetic fit (e.g., figure-flattering aspects of the garment); (c) physical fit (e.g., length and tightness), (d) functional fit (e.g., garment allows for movement), (e) social feedback, (f) social situation appropriateness, (g) strategies for getting better fit and appearance, and (h) self-descriptive information (e.g., accessories that go well with the dress, and size usually worn). Finally, companies should consider allowing shoppers to sort reviews by reviewer characteristics (e.g., height, usual size, and bust size) to find personally relevant information that helps their decision-making.

Previous studies have been limited to purchased apparel evaluation criteria, e-service evaluation criteria, and the content of other types of eWOM. Other review content about rented formal wear is informational and includes (a) strategies renters use to improve their satisfaction with the dress, (b) information about themselves, (c) recommendation, and (d) future patronage intention. This framework has contributed *information* as a new category of postconsumption evaluation content (Blackwell et al., 2001). Such information helps potential renters make decisions.

The body of knowledge surrounding fit of rented formal wear is a key area of contribution. In *apparel evaluative criteria*, the findings showed that fit was an important criteria used. However, in *other content*, renters' use of strategies to improve their satisfaction with the dress implied that certain fit concerns might not be a limiting factor for apparel rented online. Imperfect fit seems to be acceptable for a rented dress if the fit problem(s) can be resolved by consumers making temporary alterations to their body or to the dress to achieve desired fit. Renters are willing to take responsibility for improving the way the garment fits their body using various strategies. Shoe height, bra type, and control undergarments were most common. Online apparel rental and retail companies may support the process of consumer self-modification to improve fit satisfaction by selling items that help consumers self-correct fit problems (e.g., Spanx and fashion tape).

Limitations and Future Research

Caution should be exercised in generalizing our findings, as the sample was limited to RTR and did not include renters who did not post reviews. While unlikely, due to the unique photographs accompanying each review, it cannot be assumed that all reviews were by actual renters and not fabricated by RTR. Replication and extension of this study are encouraged in order to establish the generalizability of the findings; for example, future researchers could analyze review content on other apparel rental sites. This study was limited to qualitative exploration of the themes in reviews of rented formal wear. Consumers' evaluative criteria of rental apparel may be affected by a number of body- and garment-related factors. Quantitative research of review content should be conducted to examine what aspects of fit information are mentioned among different height, size, age, and body shape groups; how negative or positive fit information comments affect ratings; and what apparel criteria are used to evaluate. Rental motivations were not directly researched in this study. Future researchers may explore why consumers are motivated to rent garments from RTR or other apparel rental sites. Researchers may also investigate the links between the reviewer motives, written content, and the subsequent reader action.

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