

[Original Article]

## Exploration of Fit Reviews and its Impact on Ratings of Rental Dresses

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### Abstract

The purposes of this study were to explore (1) how fit reviews differ among height groups and (2) how overall numerical ratings differ depending on height groups and different types of fit reviews. Content analysis was used to analyze systematically sampled online consumer reviews (OCRs) of formalwear dresses rented online. In part 1, 201 OCRs were analyzed to develop the coding scheme, which included three aspects of fit (physical, aesthetic, and functional), valence (negative, neutral, positive), and overall numerical rating. In part 2, 600 OCRs were coded and statistically analyzed. Differences in frequency were not found among height groups for any types of mentions (negative, neutral, and positive) in terms of the three aspects of fit in the OCRs. Differences in overall mean ratings were not found among height groups. Interestingly, valence of each aspect of fit reviews affected mean numeric ratings. This study is new in examining relationships among textual information (i.e., fit reviews), numerical information (i.e., numerical rating), and reviewer's characteristic (i.e., height). The results of this study offered practical implications for retailers and marketers that they should pay attention to the three aspects of fit reviews and monitor garments with negative fit evaluations for lower ratings. They may attempt to increase ratings by providing customers recommendations to get a better fit.

*Keywords: fit reviews, overall ratings, consumer online reviews, online rental dresses, content analysis*

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## I. Introduction

With the explosive growth of e-commerce, online consumer reviews (OCRs), a type of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), have become increasingly important. Approximately 70% of Americans read OCRs before making a purchase decision (Ante, 2009). It is important to investigate OCRs because OCRs are more influential on consumers' choices (Huang & Chen, 2006) and more helpful in reducing consumers' perceived uncertainty (Hu, Liu, & Zhang, 2008) than seller-generated information.

Rent the Runway (RTR) is a highly successful online formalwear rental company with more than 3.5 million registered members, over 170 designer relationships

(Smith, 2013) and a revenue value of 100 million (O'Connor, 2016). RTR has been successful in renting formalwear online, despite the challenges (due to its typically more fitted nature) of renting or buying formalwear, without trying on. This success may be because RTR harnesses the power of OCR text and photos, allowing renters "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) as well as, read their comments. RTR's conversion rate for shoppers who clicked on the consumer-generated OCRs was double the rate of shoppers who clicked on model photos with seller-generated information (Clifford, 2012), demonstrating the usefulness of OCRs as information sources for potential renters.

McKinney and Shin (2016) found that text discussing garment fit was a frequent component of RTR OCRs, indicating fit is a key evaluative factor. Considering RTR's success in the fit intensive category of rental dresses, it is important to investigate fit reviews how renters evaluate fit of their rental dresses. Prior research indicates that consumer's height can affect fit satisfaction (Shim & Bickle, 1993). Height is an important criterion to segment the apparel market, which has been used by most apparel manufacturers (Shim & Bickle, 1993). However, no studies to date have considered the relationship between fit-related OCR text and consumer's height groups. It is also not known how fit-related OCR text influences numerical ratings of overall satisfaction with a garment. Understanding how consumers' height affects written fit reviews and overall numerical rating may be useful for e-tailers and marketers in their product development and buying/sourcing decisions. Thus, the purposes of the current study were to explore in RTR OCRs (1) the relationship between height group and fit reviews mentioned and (2) the impact of fit reviews and height group on overall numerical ratings.

## II. Literature Review

### 1. Components of Online Consumer Reviews (OCRs)

OCRs usually have two components, which are a rating and textual content (Park & Kim, 2008). The rating is often represented by a number of stars. Review content is narrative text describing and evaluating the product.

#### 1.1. Numerical ratings in OCRs

Reviewers assign a product an overall rating, with five-star being the highest level. These ratings are often prominently displayed (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & Ridder, 2011). Ratings are an important component of OCRs because there is a positive relationship between overall rating and product sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008).

#### 1.2. Textual content in OCRs

Textual content primarily consists of subjective product evaluations from the user's perspective in usage situations (Park, 2012). Reviewers tend to post various types of information, ranging from a simple review of attributes to details of their experience from purchase to post-consumption (Park, 2012). Reviewers assess the qualities of a product as positive or negative (Willemsen et al., 2011). Reviewers may also mention product attributes in a neutral way, as information for other shoppers (Park, 2012). The direction of product evaluation is *valence*.

RTR OCRs include negative, positive and neutral textual content on (a) evaluation of rented formalwear, (b) evaluation of e-service received and (c) other contents (e.g., strategies to improve fit and appearance) (McKinney & Shin, 2016). Among those contents, fit information is most frequently mentioned, followed by garment style and

design elements, social feedback, and appropriateness. Thus, in the current study, fit information in RTR OCRs is the specific focus. The term, *fit reviews* is used to indicate information in OCRs focusing on how and whether the apparel fits a reviewer's body.

## 2. Consumer Evaluation of Apparel Fit

Apparel fit has been conceptually defined as the relationship of apparel to the body, combining the visual analysis of fit and comfort with performance of the garment due to the fit (Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; Frost, 1988). From the consumer's perspective, apparel fit has three different aspects: (1) physical fit, (2) aesthetic fit, and (3) functional fit (Shin, 2013). McKinney and Shin (2016) found that RTR OCRs included all three fit aspects, consistent with Shin (2013). The evaluative statements contained review valence, such as negative, neutral, and positive statements.

### 2.1. Physical fit—length and tightness

Physical fit refers to “features of fit that are physically perceived...in terms of the relationship between clothing and body, such as tightness and length” (Shin, 2013, p. 44). Consumers tend to define appropriate apparel length differently depending on the apparel type and specific body parts (torso, arms, and legs). Height is the major body characteristic influencing apparel length evaluation. The tightness of a garment may be viewed in either a positive or negative way when determining apparel fit, with various levels possible (too tight, somewhat tight, not too tight, not too tight or too loose, not loose, somewhat loose, not too loose, loose, too loose). Valence of fit evaluation is influenced by fit preference, defined as consumers' subjectively preferred fit in terms of the degree of difference between garment and body (Alexander, Connell, & Presley, 2005; Anderson et al., 2000). Consumer fit preference levels differ depending on the body part involved as well as the type of apparel (Shin, 2013).

### 2.2. Aesthetic fit

Shin (2013) asserted that investigating only physical fit restricts understanding of consumers' fit perception. It is because such perceptions are affected by many factors, including personal style preference, current fashion trends, and body image (Alexander et al., 2005). Aesthetic fit is “features of fit that are visually perceived and assessed when looking at an individual's dressed body, such as overall appearance related to the body and attractiveness” (Shin, 2013, p. 44). Consumer evaluations of aesthetic aspects of fit include whether the apparel looks attractive on them, showed their body in a positive way, or hid their body flaws. Newcomb and Istook (2011) also noted that aesthetic fit relates to “the appearance of the garment in relation to the body” (p. 391).

### 2.3. Functional fit

Functional fit refers to “features of fit that are perceived when the dressed body is moving for activities, related to restriction or lack of restriction of movement” (Shin, 2013, p. 44). Apparel with good functional fit will feel comfortable on the moving body and will not restrict consumers' movement. Depending on the activity and personal preference, different levels of functional fit may be preferred. Newcomb and Istook (2011) noted that functional fit is related to “the comfort and performance of the garment due to the fit” (p. 391).

### 3. Apparel Fit Satisfaction Related to Height Group

Previous studies have considered the relationship between apparel fit satisfaction and height groups. Shim and Bickle (1993) studied fit satisfaction of petite, medium, and tall catalog shoppers aged 55 and over. Across all four different types of ready-to-wear apparel (blouses/sweaters, pants, skirts/dresses, and jackets) evaluated, the petite group showed the lowest fit satisfaction, while the medium group showed the highest level of fit satisfaction. For skirts and dresses, the petite group had lower fit satisfaction with length of skirt/dress, volume/fullness in skirt, and pocket and button placement than the medium and tall groups. Unlike Shim and Bickle's (1993) results, Kind and Hathcote (2000) found no difference in general satisfaction with fit among petite, medium, and tall sized college-age women.

### 4. Research Questions

Fit reviews are a frequent component of RTR OCRs, including negative, positive, and neutral evaluations of apparel fit (McKinney & Shin, 2016) in three aspects, which are physical, aesthetic, and functional fit (Shin, 2013). Apparel fit satisfaction has been related to height group (i.e., petite, medium, and tall) (Shim & Bickle, 1993). However, researchers have not investigated the relationship between the valence of fit review and reviewer's height. Further, valence of review content, and in particular fit review content (due to its importance), could logically influence overall numerical ratings. Yet, the relationships of height group to numerical rating and valence of fit review content to numerical rating have not been studied. Two research questions (RQs) were developed to address these gaps.

## III. Method

This study extends McKinney and Shin's (2016) study by exploring previously un-researched relationships among OCR content (i.e., fit reviews), overall numeric rating, and a reviewers' characteristic (i.e., height) found in the data set of 600 RTR OCRs. For readers' convenience, the coding scheme development and examination of the OCRs to develop the data set (McKinney & Shin, 2016) are briefly summarized, focusing on aspects relevant to the current. Then, data analysis is discussed.

### 1. Part 1: Development of Coding Scheme

Systematic sampling was used to select a total of 201 OCRs by choosing every 50th of the 10,000 most recent reviews on RTR's site. The sampled reviews were saved as digital files and analyzed to develop a coding scheme, which included the major content types of apparel evaluative criteria, e-service evaluative criteria, and other. Codes related to the current study were in the apparel evaluative criteria content type and were defined *a priori* based on previous literature. These included the three aspects of apparel fit evaluation (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; Shin, 2013). Additional codes (not related to the current study) were developed from additional review as well as constant comparison of the textual content of reviews to compare data and themes until sufficient themes were developed to cover the entire dataset (Esterberg, 2002). All 201 OCRs were independently coded using the extensive coding scheme. Inter-coder reliability for analysis of the 201 reviews, calculated using percentage agreement (dividing agreement by total items), was 95.4%, indicating an acceptable rate

(.90 or greater) according to Neuendorf (2002). Based on the coding scheme developed from the 201 OCRs, a coding sheet was developed for use in Part 2.

## 2. Part 2: Examining the OCRs

### 2.1. Sample

A total of 600 OCRs, selected based on height group, was collected. Following to the previous studies on sizing and fit (Kind & Hathcote, 2000; Shim & Bickle, 1993), height groups were defined as: petite (shorter than 5'4"), regular (5'4"-5'7"), and tall (taller than 5'7"). Two hundred reviews for each group were selected using systematic sampling and saved. Every 25<sup>th</sup> review was chosen from the petite group, every 50<sup>th</sup> review from the regular group, and every 20<sup>th</sup> review from the tall group. For the total sample, height ranged from 56 to 72 inches with a mean of 65.55 inch.

### 2.2. Instrument development

Fit information mentioned in reviews were coded as follows: "1" for negative evaluation (NE), "2" for neutral evaluation (NTE), and "3" for positive evaluation (PE). In the case of physical fit, statements about length and tightness (size) were coded (e.g., "1" for NE--too long, too short, too tight, too loose; "3" for PE--not too long, not too short, not too tight, not too loose); For aesthetic fit, statements about fit related to overall appearance of body and attractiveness were coded (e.g., "1" for NE--look big, look bad, etc.; "3" for PE--hide body's flaws, flattering to body, look sexy). For functional fit, statements regarding tangibly perceived fit when the dressed body was moving were coded (e.g., "1" for NE--uncomfortable to move; "3" for PE--move comfortably in dress, dress does not fall down).

There are two sections of coding: In the first section, the coders recorded the three aspects of apparel fit. Three *a priori* categories for coding as developed by Shin (2013) were used: three aspects of apparel fit. The second section was used to record rating, reviewer characteristics (age, body shape, height, usual clothing size), rented dress size, and social situation in which the dress was worn. The information was self-rated by each reviewer.

### 2.3. Procedure

After ensuring consistent understanding of the categories among the authors and two student coders through an iterative training process, the 600 OCR dataset was analyzed using the developed coding sheet. Reliability was calculated using percentage agreement for each section of coding ranged from 93.4% to 96.3%.

## 3. Data Analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 22.0 software was used for data analysis. For RQ1, frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and a chi-square goodness-of-fit test were used to examine whether there was a significant difference in the percentage of fit information among petite, medium, and tall groups of female consumers, specifically with respect to (a) physical fit, (b) aesthetic fit, and (c) functional fit of formalwear rented online (RQ1). For RQ2, univariate one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the three groups' mean differences in the mean numerical ratings in relation to each aspect of fit for each valence, as well as in relationship to fit group.

## IV. Results

### 1. Research Question 1

The frequency distribution of fit reviews in terms of physical fit (length and tightness), aesthetic fit, and functional fit regardless of review valence (NE, NTE, PE), did not differ among petite, medium, and tall sized reviewers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency distribution of fit reviews of rental dresses among height groups

	<i>f</i> (%) <sup>a</sup>			$\chi^2$ ( <i>df</i> )	<i>p</i>
	Petite	Medium	Tall		
<u>Physical fit- Length</u>					
NE	23 (11.5)	15 (7.5)	21 (10.5)	1.96 (2)	.38
NTE	1 (.5)	5 (2.5)	1 (.5)	-	-
PE	39 (19.5)	32 (16.0)	49 (24.5)	4.56 (2)	.10
<u>Physical fit- Tightness</u>					
NE	31 (15.5)	40 (20.0)	30 (15.0)	2.17 (2)	.34
NTE	4 (2.0)	5 (2.5)	6 (3.0)	.41 (2)	.82
PE	36 (18.0)	23 (11.5)	43 (21.5)	7.30* (2)	.03
<u>Aesthetic fit</u>					
NE	7 (3.5)	2 (1.0)	5 (2.5)	2.78 (2)	.25
NTE	0 (.0)	0 (.0)	0 (.0)	-	-
PE	52 (26.0)	66 (33.0)	73 (36.5)	5.27 (2)	.07
<u>Functional fit</u>					
NE	9 (4.5)	9 (4.5)	10 (5.0)	.08 (2)	.96
NTE	0 (.0)	0 (.0)	2 (1.0)	-	-
PE	40 (20.0)	45 (22.5)	35 (17.5)	1.56 (2)	.46

Note. NE = negative evaluation, NTE = neutral evaluation, PE = positive evaluation.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

a. Percentage is based on a total of 200 online reviews for each sized group.

### 2. Research Question 2

Numeric overall ratings ranged from 2 to 5 with a mean of 4.63. As shown in Table 2, ANOVA revealed no significant differences in mean ratings among height groups (petite, medium, and tall) in general and when reporting any form of fit reviews (NE, NTE, PE) in the textual content of the review (RQ2a). However, there were significant differences in mean ratings between two review valence (NE and PE) of all aspects of fit reviews (physical-length, physical-tightness, aesthetic, and functional) and between NE and NTE of fit reviews regarding tightness (physical) (RQ2b). Numerical ratings for OCRs with NE of physical fit (both length and tightness) were lower than those OCRs with PE (and NTE for only tightness) of physical fit. Numerical rating for OCRs with NE of aesthetic fit and functional fit were significantly lower than ratings for OCRs with PE on aesthetic fit and functional fit. To be more specific, in petite group mean ratings with NE on aesthetic fit was significantly lower than mean ratings with PE. In medium group, for only length of physical fit, there were significant differences in mean ratings between NE and PE and NTE and PE. For tall group, significant differences in mean ratings with NE from PE were shown in the three aspects of fit reviews (physical-tightness, aesthetic, functional). Only for fit reviews on tightness showed significant differences in mean ratings with NE from that with both PE and NTE.

Table 2. Mean ratings by fit reviews of rental dresses among different height groups

Ratings	Mean Rating (Standard Deviation)				F (p) (df= 2)
	Petite	Medium	Tall	Sub-total	
<u>Physical fit- Length</u>					
NE	4.30 (.70)	4.28 <sup>ab</sup> (.67)	3.90 (.77)	4.16 <sup>a</sup> (.73)	2.04 (.14)
NTE	5.00 (.00)	5.00 <sup>a</sup> (.00)	4.00 (.00)	4.75 (.50)	.34 (.71)
PE	4.69 (.52)	4.88 <sup>b</sup> (.34)	4.70 (.54)	4.74 <sup>a</sup> (.49)	1.56 (.21)
F (p) (df= 2)	3.37* (.04)	9.55*** (.00)	12.54*** (.00)	20.82*** (.00)	
<u>Physical fit- Tightness</u>					
NE	4.24 (.83)	4.59 (.56)	4.24 <sup>ab</sup> (.66)	4.38 <sup>ab</sup> (.70)	.53 (.59)
NTE	5.00 (.00)	5.00 (.00)	4.86 <sup>a</sup> (.38)	4.91 <sup>a</sup> (.30)	.24 (.79)
PE	4.72 (.46)	4.73 (.53)	4.81 <sup>b</sup> (.39)	4.76 <sup>b</sup> (.45)	2.62 (.08)
F (p) (df= 2)	4.69* (.01)	1.03 (.36)	11.28*** (.00)	12.47*** (.00)	
<u>Aesthetic fit</u>					
NE	3.33 (1.03)	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.71)	3.69 (.85)	.98 (.41)
NTE	-	-	-	-	-
PE	4.75 (.44)	4.65 (.54)	4.62 (.63)	4.67 (.55)	.86 (.43)
F (p) (df= 2)	40.08*** (.00)	2.87 (.10)	4.44* (.04)	34.80*** (.00)	
<u>Functional fit</u>					
NE	4.44 (.53)	4.50 (.71)	3.90 <sup>a</sup> (.99)	4.28 <sup>a</sup> (.80)	1.81 (.18)
NTE	5.00 (.00)	-	4.50 (.71)	4.67 (.58)	.33 (.67)
PE	4.70 (.65)	4.67 (.56)	4.80 <sup>a</sup> (.41)	4.72 <sup>a</sup> (.55)	.60 (.55)
F (p) (df= 2)	.75 (.48)	.65 (.42)	9.27*** (.00)	6.17** (.00)	
Total	4.61 (.61)	4.69 (.53)	4.61 (.61)	4.63 (.58)	1.26 (.29)

Note. NE = negative evaluation, NTE = neutral evaluation, PE = positive evaluation. The mean scores with the same superscript (a, b) show there is a significant difference between the two groups at the level of  $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

## V. Discussion and Conclusion

This study is the first attempt to understand this phenomenon in the clothing and textile domain by identifying patterns of fit reviews of formalwear rented online generated by female consumers among height groups. The purposes of this study were to explore evaluative fit reviews across different height groups and to identify whether fit reviews and reviewer's characteristic (i.e., height) might play a role in ratings of reviews of formalwear rented online.

From a theoretical point of view, the results of this study are new as no previous study has investigated how fit reviews are typically included in OCRs of formalwear rented online in each height group. Indifferent frequency of negative, neutral, or positive fit reviews among height groups implied the importance of the three aspects of fit information and the similarities in how they are addressed by female consumers regardless of height. The finding, commonly mentioned all three aspects of fit information within RTR OCRs regardless of the reviewer's height groups confirms Shin's (2013) finding that consumers evaluated apparel fit in terms of its physical, aesthetic, and functional aspects. In addition, the researchers investigated the role of different types of fit reviews (i.e., negative,

neutral, and positive) provided by different height groups in influencing numeric ratings in OCRs of formalwear rented online meaning overall customer experience.

Despite evidence presented by Shim and Bickle (1993) that petite groups have lower fit satisfaction, RTR OCR writers in petite, medium, and tall height groups do not differ in frequency of negative, neutral, or positive comments in their OCRs for each aspect of fit (physical length, physical tightness, aesthetic, and functional). This finding may be related to the difference in age groups between the Shim and Bickle (1993) study—age 55 and older and the current study, where reviewers ranged in age from 14 to 65, with a mean of 28.64. This mean age is closer to that in Kind and Hathcote's (2000) study of college-aged women who found not differences in fit satisfaction. Findings may also be related to the information provided in the reviews themselves, helping users to select garments best for their height group. Further research is needed to understand these findings.

Mean numerical rating of the rented dress does not differ by height group (petite, medium, or tall) in all aspects of fit reviews (physical length, physical tightness, aesthetic, and functional) addressed in each type (negative, neutral, positive) of review content. This finding is logical given the outcome of RQ1 that height groups do not differ in frequency of negative, neutral, or positive fit reviews considering that the most frequently mentioned content of OCRs on rental dresses was fit (McKinney & Shin, 2016).

Mean numerical rating of the rented dress differs significantly by types of fit reviews for each aspect of fit (physical-length, physical-tightness, aesthetic, and functional). Dresses with negative fit evaluations had lower ratings than those with positive (sometimes neutral) fit evaluations. This implies that customer experience with fit in each aspect has a significant impact on satisfaction with RTR dresses. Especially, tall group was the most sensitive among three groups in fit evaluations because mean ratings with negative fit reviews were significantly different from mean ratings with positive fit reviews in all three aspects of fit. E-tailers and marketers of formalwear rented online should pay attention to the three aspects of fit reviews and monitor dresses with negative fit evaluations for lower ratings. They may attempt to increase ratings by providing customers with recommendations to get a better fit.

## VI. Limitations and Future Research

The current study concentrated on three aspects of fit reviews in general rather than focusing on certain body parts. Because prior studies have examined fit satisfaction on specific parts of the body, future research may need to investigate whether certain aspects of stated fit information are associated with certain body parts in OCRs and compare its difference between rented and purchased apparel. The scope of this paper is limited with certain textual forms of reviews particularly review valence of apparel attributes; it is often difficult to assign only a single positive or negative code. It would be useful to have more codes for various degrees of positive or negative evaluations of certain attributes. Development of quantitative rating scales for each attribute in OCRs may be needed for future research to measure consumers' exact evaluations.

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