

Consumer reviews reveal positive experience in renting formal dresses

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Credit: Pixabay

As an alternative to spending hundreds of dollars on a prom dress for one night, more and more online retailers are offering formal dress rentals as an attractive and often more affordable option.

And judging from online reviews, consumers are embracing the rental experience for prom, charity balls and other formal occasions, said Ellen McKinney, an assistant professor of apparel, merchandising and design at Iowa State University. McKinney and co-author Eonyou Shin, an ISU

Ph.D. graduate, analyzed hundreds of reviews from Rent the Runway, an online clothing rental site, to better understand consumers' motivation to rent. Their work was published in the Clothing and Textiles Research Journal.

McKinney points to the broader sharing economy and movement as one explanation as to why people are open to renting, rather than buying clothing. Historically, clothing has not been a product that is rented, with the exception of tuxedos, she said. Clearly, this is changing, as people see the benefit of renting a [dress](#) for a special occasion, rather than owning and having to care for or maintain it. At the time McKinney collected the data, Rent the Runway was one of the few online clothing rental sites, but that has changed dramatically.

"A lot of the reviews mentioned how easy it was to rent," McKinney said. "The dress comes to you ready to wear and you can literally wad it up in a bag and ship it back. Rent the Runway cleans and repairs the dress. You don't have to worry about it at all, you just get to experience the dress and send it back."

The majority of reviews McKinney analyzed were positive. Negative responses were rare and if consumers did have a complaint, it typically referred to a small aspect of the dress and was part of an overall positive review. McKinney says the focus of their analysis did not look at whether Rent the Runway monitored and removed negative comments.

Attention to detail

What stood out to McKinney was the extensive detail consumers provided in their reviews. Comments included descriptions about the fit and if the dress was true-to-size, color, style, design elements, if the dress was appropriate for specific events and feedback received while wearing the dress. Most all of the reviewers also included a picture of

themselves in the dress.

McKinney says the amount of personal detail included in each [review](#) was surprising. Rent the Runway is a semi-private website, which requires users to create an account and profile to read reviews. However, anyone can sign up for an account.

"I was surprised that they would share their figure flaws or fit problems. For example, one might write that the dress was tight on her hips, but she's more of a pear-shape," McKinney said. "People seemed to be really altruistic in writing the reviews. Many reviewers had a good experience and they shared that so others would have a good experience as well."

Reviewers did not hesitate to share adaptations they made to make the dress work. For example, many reviewers mentioned that they purchased a specialty bra or wore shapewear for a better fit. If the dress was too long, users purchased a pair of high heels or taped up the hem, McKinney said.

"As someone in the design field, I found it interesting how many people were willing to mold their bodies to fit into a dress," McKinney said. "It's an interesting turn, because historically you think about having formal wear fitted to you. For this type of consumer, their mindset is opposite. They're not going to own it, they just need it to work for an event. There's a lot of discussion about what they would do to work with the garment and improve the fit."

Rent the Runway consumers clearly valued the opinions of others in making a decision about a dress. McKinney says several reviewers mentioned that they found the online comments helpful. Few mentioned the online customer service; instead, they relied on what other users had to say about the dress and their experience.

Lessons for other retailers

Most dress rentals are short-term and for a one-time event. To guarantee consumers get the right size, Rent the Runway sends two dresses in different sizes. McKinney says this is an important aspect of the company's success. The online reviews are also consumer-friendly, allowing users to customize and narrow their search, specific to their individual size and body type. This is another feature unique to Rent the Runway that McKinney says other companies would be wise to adapt, rather than making consumers scroll through a long list of reviews to find the most relevant.

"Especially with a garment, it doesn't matter what someone with a different body type than yours thinks about the fit. That's not helpful decision-making information," McKinney said.

The growth in online clothing rental sites is fascinating to McKinney. She found users are more interested in variety and experiencing the clothing, and less concerned with owning or the fact that someone previously wore the dress. Rental prices vary depending on the brand and style, but McKinney says most rental fees are 10 to 20 percent of what it would cost to purchase the dress. In addition to formal dresses, Rent the Runway and other sites are starting to offer more casual clothing.

More information: E. McKinney et al. Exploring Criteria Consumers Use in Evaluating Their Online Formal Wear Rental Experience: A Content Analysis of Online Reviews, *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0887302X16654269](https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X16654269)

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