Exploring the Spectrum of Fashion Rental

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Abstract

Purpose:
Currently, fashion rental is suggested as being a way to bring about sustainability in the fashion industry. Although there has been some success for brands in this space, as of yet fashion rental remains a niche form of consumption. This study aims to uncover consumer perspectives of fashion rental to identify opportunities for developing a fashion rental business that meets the needs of today's consumers.

Design/methodology/approach:
This is a qualitative study utilising semi-structured interviews combined with brainstorming and drawing exercises. Interviews were conducted with 17 women and 3 men.

Findings:
Findings indicate that considerations around fashion rentals are utilitarian in nature focussing on functional benefits rather than more hedonistic ones. A spectrum of products that people would be most interested in renting is given.

Research limitations/implications:
Although the study invited male and female participants, the sample is more female heavy, which may reflect the fact that women tend to be more open to alternative modes of consumption.

Practical implications:
An important implication is that asking consumers to rent clothing requires a significant change in mindset. Brands need to ensure that their services 'make sense' for the consumer to consider it as a viable alternative to purchasing new clothing.

Originality/value:
This paper proposes a spectrum of fashion items that consumers may be interested in renting, this aims to help brands develop services that meet consumer needs.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion; Ethical Fashion; Fashion Rental; Sustainable Business Models

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as a megatrend and is one of "the big issues facing fashion in 2019" (Suhrawardi, 2019). Increased negative media attention highlights that "fast fashion is eating up the planet" (Hinsliff, 2019), which has resulted in consumers boycotting brands that are seen to be behind in their environmental and ethical commitments. Thus, fashion businesses are faced with a conundrum of responding to an increased fashion appetite and making sustainability efforts a key priority (UN, 2018; Henninger *et al.,* 2019).

As a result, the fashion landscape has seen dramatic changes, with fashion businesses increasingly offering sustainable lines, stocking sustainable brands, and even changing the way they operate by implementing varying levels of product-service systems (PSS), or systems that add services to products, with varying levels of success (Battle *et al.,* 2018; Pal and Gander, 2018). Examples of PSS include, but are not limited to swap shops, where consumers can exchange garments without paying an access fee, fashion libraries, which operate similarly to normal libraries in that consumers can take out garments for a period of time and exchange them, and/or rental services, which give access to garments for a certain amount of time and for a fixed price (Battle *et al.,* 2018; Henninger *et al.,* 2019). 'Rent the Runway' and 'Girl Meets Dress' are two successful rental services that managed to establish themselves in the market, thereby offering their clientele unlimited rentals for a monthly subscription fee of £127 and £99 (Little, 2019). Despite this progress sustainable fashion remains a niche market (Cherny-Scanlon, 2016), as innovative sustainable business models lack social acceptance and have limited potential for scalability (Pal and Gander, 2018; Henninger *et al.,* 2019). An explanation could be a general lack of awareness of sustainability, limited access to more sustainable brands, negative connotations towards sustainable fashion (e.g. aesthetics, fashionability), and the stigma that comes from 'being green' (Shen *et al*., 2012; Goworek *et al*., 2012; Henninger *et al.,* 2016; Hu *et al.,* 2018). Antikainen (2015) posits that consumers are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption practices if barriers are perceived as being low and the relative effort of searching for these products is minimal. A key question that emerges is how this can be achieved – to eliminate perceived barriers

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and encourage sustainable fashion practices, specifically fashion rental, which is addressed in this research (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016, Corvellec and Stål, 2017). Fashion rental is part of the wider circular economy paradigm (e.g. Armstrong *et al.,* 2016; Park and Armstrong, 2017), which moves away from the "current take-make-dispose extractive industrial model" (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2017) and towards designing for 'circularity', implying that materials that were previously thought of as waste are re-looped and re-integrated into the supply chain (Battle *et al.,* 2018; Henninger *et al.,* 2019). Whilst in some instances these innovations may be seen as inferior compared to traditional products/services (e.g. quality, cleanliness, range of additional services), their attractive pricing and provision of access to products/services that may otherwise be unaffordable are often seen as more important to the user.

To create maximum sustainable benefits, fashion rentals need to be designed with sustainability in mind and adopted on a system-wide scale (Hamari *et al*., 2016; Park and Armstrong, 2017). To normalise fashion rental with consumers, these models must meet consumer needs. Although Armstrong *et al*. (2015, 2016) and Hu *et al.* (2018) have demonstrated that renting is increasingly gaining consumer interest, they leave various key questions unanswered: 1) what are the perceived barriers to engage in fashion rentals; 2) does the rental spectrum satisfy all consumer needs; and 3) what spectrum (price range, garment categories) are consumers willing to rent. In addressing these questions, this article builds on extant research and contributes to knowledge by using practice theory as a lens to understand the consumer perspective of the fashion rental process and its implications on the supply chain. The study further explores the spectrum of fashion goods that consumers are interested in renting and investigates consumer perceptions on the possibilities of fashion rental, thereby contributing to an on-going debate in the current literature.

Literature Review

Consumer Perceptions of Fashion Rental

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017) has indicated that the circular economy, including access-based services, has fostered €28bn worth of transactions Europe wide in 2015, thereby showing exponential growth rates across five key sectors (staffing, finance, car sharing, travel,

music and video streaming). A reason of why the circular economy and sharing transactions may have dramatically increased could be that consumers are increasingly aware of environmental and social implications their purchases have on the (natural) environment (Hamari *et al.,* 2016). Although renting is not a new phenomenon *per se*, within the fashion industry it remains a novel and understudied field. A key barrier as to why fashion rentals are not mainstream is the fact that it is strongly linked to the practice of fashion consumption. A change in how consumers procure clothing also changes the meaning, needs, values, and actions that go along with it (Simon, 1973). Renting garments requires consumers to evaluate how they care for, use, and dispose of clothing, which means consumers must develop new skills, patterns of consumption, and forms of meaning to adopt the practice (Mylan, 2015). Although the literature suggests a variety of reasons why consumers have hesitated to adopt rental and wider access-based consumption models, Rexfelt and Ornäs (2009) found that perceived benefits and barriers are highly context specific (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 around here]

Our see-now-buy-now society means that consumers can not only shop 24/7, but also quite literally everywhere, which has implications for the rental market, as renting garments requires a different type of consumption. Consumers may have to plan their 'purchases'/orders or even have to wait for their turn to wear a garment, which is an inconvenience unfamiliar to the current fashion system (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009; Armstrong *et al.,* 2016). Thus, a lack of availability and waiting times are significant barriers, as these require a change in current consumer shopping behaviour (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009; Hamari *et al.,* 2016). Moreover, renting fosters taking ownership of their actions, in that consumers need to ensure that garments remain in good condition and are returned on time (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009), making clothing 'ownership' a collective rather than individual experience.

(Non-)ownership of fashion products has been raised as a common consumer concern (Piscicelli et al., 2015; Armstrong *et al.,* 2016; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017), thus, renting may not provide the same gratification as actually owning the product and/or being able to afford it (Mont, 2004; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017). Materialistic consumers attach value to ownership; thus, non-ownership may be unattractive and not an option (Johnson *et al.,* 2016; Lang and Armstrong,

2018). Rexfelt and Ornäs (2009) insist that ownership attachment is context dependent and rentals are suitable for occasions where needs can change relatively quickly (e.g. maternity or ski wear). Besides functional barriers, renting garments is not necessarily a replacement for the pleasurable, fun, and other hedonistic shopping aspects (Armstrong *et al.,* 2016). As such, fashion rentals take away from the hedonistic aspects of shopping (or retail therapy). Although neither online nor offline rental services can replicate the hedonistic aspect of shopping both forms create a novel experience for the user (Cook and Hodges, 2015). Further barriers identified in the literature are garment maintenance, hygiene, and quality issues (Armstrong *et al.,* 2015). These aspects are linked to trust in the rental brand (Armstrong *et al.,* 2015), which is consistent with social capital theory. Social capital theory sees behavioural intention influenced by institutional trust (Tsai, 2014). Authors (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009; Armstrong *et al.,* 2015) further insist that pricing can hinder consumers, as the idea of continuously paying for a service without receiving ownership is seen as risky and in some cases negative as it turns fashion consumption into a financial obligation.

Despite this bleak backdrop consumers can see the benefit of participating in fashion rentals. Renting a wardrobe allows consumers to constantly change their look, try new things, and stay on trend (Lang and Armstrong, 2015; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017). It allows consumers to meet their needs for newness in a cost-effective manner; rental services allow indulging in the fast fashion trend with limited consequences (Armstrong *et al.,* 2015; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017), as they can be rented at a fraction of the cost of the retail price and thus, making even luxury products affordable (Cook and Hodges, 2015).

Practice Theory

A practice is a habit, custom, or certain way of, in this case, consuming garments (Moares *et al.*, 2015). As such, practices are shaped by material and procedural elements, and meanings (Shove *et al.,* 2012; Kurz *et al.*, 2014). Material elements are enabling the facilitation of practices, such as infrastructure and technology, which could relate to logistical set-up of the rental business and online platforms. Procedural elements can be both personal and/or relational, an example here could be fashionability and being on trend. Lastly, meanings construct the outcome of a practice as desirable, such as being more environmentally friendly. Practice theory emphasises that "it is through these engagements with practices that individuals come to understand the world around them and to develop a more or less coherent sense of self" (Hargreaves, 2011: 83). With

sustainability taking global centre stage, which has generally fostered changes in the fashion industry, it is vital to also focus on consumers and potential avenues of influencing and/or shifting their consumption patterns or practices. Practice theory considers how and why people engage in certain behaviours, with the aim to identify opportunities for influencing and changing these behaviours, here, to become more sustainable (Rettie *et al.*, 2012). Practice theory has previously been applied within management and marketing research (e.g. Johannisson, 2011; Murphy and Patterson 2011; Weiskopf and Willmott 2013), with key papers focusing on consumption and more specifically investigating the change towards more sustainable behaviour (e.g. Evans *et al.,* 2012; Rettie *et al*., 2012; Arsel and Bean, 2013; Warde, 2014). Although the fashion industry is a key economic driver contributing £32bn to the UK economy alone (Sleigh, 2018), the fashion context remains under-researched in terms of practice theory.

Practice theory takes into consideration cultural norms and habits that influence daily behaviours over and beyond the motivations of the individual (Moares *et al*., 2015). As such, it can be utilised to identify barriers to behaviour change - here - the implementation of fashion rentals as a 'sustainable' fashion consumption model (Rettie *et al.*, 2012). Armstrong *et al.* (2016) argue that practice theory is a valuable lens to take for research, as it enables businesses to revolutionise current consumption practices by understanding how and why consumers do certain things; consequently, giving brands the tools to change the practice of consumption. Making sustainable fashion mainstream requires identification of different mechanisms needed for behaviour change (e.g. Henninger, 2015; Ryding *et al.*, 2018). Practice theory is an appropriate theory to understand fashion consumption, and to gain an insight as to what incentivises (or hinders) consumer to adopt fashion rentals and more sustainable consumption practices. Here, practice theory is seen to provide a holistic view of how individuals consume fashion (Rettie *et al.*, 2012), which allows for opportunities to be identified that could encourage the adoption of fashion rentals and thus, enhance more sustainable consumption practices.

Methodology

This study explores potential barriers to engaging in fashion rentals, as well as consumers' perceptions of renting garments, with the aim to create a rental spectrum. This interpretivist research explores practices of fashion consumption, which are ingrained in culture, norms and

values, thus, the research itself focuses on a subjective approach, which seeks to understand a phenomenon in terms of context and cultural significance rather than establish causality (Holden and Lynch, 2004). With globalisation, it may not be surprising that practices continuously change and evolve, therefore, establishing causality is futile, as causes change (Holden and Lynch, 2004). Similarly, fashion consumption, including the way people shop, the frequency that people consume, and the style of clothing they wear, is continuously changing. Investigating how the practice of renting would work in the current dominant social paradigm is necessary to understand how the needs that traditional shopping models meet can be reconstructed within fashion rentals.

Data for this research was collected through twenty semi-structured interviews with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Table 2) to get a better understanding of barriers to engaging in fashion rentals and to explore a rental spectrum. Due to the nature of this research semi-structured interviews were combined with projective techniques (brainstorming and drawing exercises), which allowed participants to explore items they would (not) rent and rank these on a scale of 1 to 10. Projective techniques are used to explore perceptions towards or associations with (Pich and Dean, 2015), in this case fashion rentals, thereby enabling "the participant to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs" (Hofstede *et al*., 2007: 301) onto, in this case a Likert-like scale, in order to stimulate discussions and encourage participants to reflect on their own practices and whether and how they might change these. As such, the ranking scales are utilised as visualisation tools that provide a better indication as to what may be part of the renting spectrum (Pich and Dean, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate as they allowed interviewees to freely share their thoughts with some direction from the researcher and thus, are flexible in nature (Denscombe, 2014). Participants were recruited combining convenience and snowball sampling methods. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Skype and lasted on average 40 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was gained prior to conducting the research. Research participation was on a voluntary basis only, with all interviewees having been guaranteed anonymity, as such abbreviations are used in this research (see Table 2).

The sample shows an unequal split between male (3) and female (17) participants with the majority of them being ages 18-24. Although this could be seen as a limitation, reports (Mintel,

2017; Dover, 2018) indicate that this age group forms the core of people willing to engage in fashion rentals, with females being more likely to take up renting than males. As such, the sample is justified.

[Insert Table 2 around here]

Data was carefully coded using Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2015)'s seven-step guide of familiarisation, reflection, cataloguing concepts, conceptualisation, re-coding, linking, and re-evaluation. Coding cycles were first performed individually, before being discussed and any discrepancies carefully looked at and recoded. Performing multiple coding cycles allowed for themes and patterns to emerge naturally. The majority of the coding was performed by the first author after themes and patterns were discussed in order to ensure an overall consistent approach.

Findings and Discussion

Prior to starting the interviews, interviewees were asked about fashion rentals and what type of fashion they would most likely (or not) rent. This was done using Pich and Dean's (2015) projective techniques, as it allowed to gain an insight into individual's believes and perceptions as well as better understand their reasoning behind their decisions. Figure 1 provides an overview of the results, showing that occasion wear is the most common choice for fashion rentals followed by more formal attire. Unsurprisingly activewear, underwear, and swimwear all consistently ranked the lowest on the spectrum. The primary reason being that it is "*gross*", for hygiene reasons.

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

Utilising the projective technique at the beginning of the interview process allowed for initial discussions about the interviewees insights and follow up probing questions, which are presented in the following.

I.   DRIVERS OF FASHION RENTING

Data indicate that the key drivers for engaging in fashion rentals are: sustainability, efficient use of personal resources, and experimentation (in terms of styles and garments). These themes are discussed further in the next sections.

A.   *Sustainability*

Contrary to Armstrong *et al.* (2015) we found that sustainability is especially important for the consumers in this study, which indicates that there is some change in consumer behaviour and an

increased aptitude to engage in more sustainable practices. Participants (14FSENUK, 8FDNAE, 9FSNUK) highlight that they associate renting with aspects of sustainability, as it implies using fewer resources, whilst still being able to engage with current fashion trends. Interviewees insist that items could be shared and used more often, thereby reducing clothing waste.

> *Renting…combats consumerist culture, people are encouraged to recycle and be more aware of the impacts of excessive shopping habits. It reduces wastage and would force incumbents and big businesses/brands to rethink about how they're marketing/pushing the idea of buy, buy, buy. - 9FSNUK*

9FSNUK voices a strong opinion, highlighting that a shift is needed thereby moving away from hyper-consumption towards a business model that fosters a more sustainable approach and encourages thinking about post-consumer waste.

In addition to environmental concerns, participants felt that our society exerts (peer) pressure to spend more and more on garments and accessories. As such, individuals feel pressured to keep up with trends and engage in continuous consumption. To reiterate this further, 5FSNUK explains:

> *Sometimes you feel you don't have a choice. Some life situations make you feel like you have no choice but to buy something new...like for a job interview - you might feel like you need to buy a new suit or an outing - you need a new outfit, renting it could be cheaper, if you didn't get the job you didn't waste your money. - 5FSNUK*

Data clearly indicate that there are environmental and economic sustainability aspects that may influence a shifting pattern in consumer behaviour to act more sustainably. As people face pressure to constantly consume for different life events, such as dressing 'smart' for job interviews, renting could offer both hedonic and utilitarian benefits for consumption-weary consumers. Moreover, consumers increased awareness of the impact that current consumption practices have on the natural environment could foster a desire to explore alternatives.

B.   *Efficient use of personal resources*

Saving money, from not having to pay full price for an item, and value for money is the thread linking all of these interviews together. Efficient use of personal resources touches on that aspect, but also on the aspect of space, and making the most of it.

Data highlight that participants predominantly focused on functional benefits of renting garments, such as being able to follow trends without acquiring ownership, rather than hedonic

aspects. Although participants thought that fashion rental is a "*cool*" idea, this coolness is tied to utilitarian (task driven) benefits. *"If I could've rented my wedding dress I probably would have. If it's a big investment and you won't wear it again then it is good to rent it… no need to spend money on something you will never use again"* (21FENUK). The idea of renting a wedding dress is interesting as a wedding is typically a sentimental moment and yet participants did not attach that sentiment to the wedding dress and were open to only having it for a moment (6FESNUK, 21FENUK). Contrary to Cooks and Hodge's (2015) research, participants in this study used utilitarian driven language, relating to logic, sense-making, and practicality of using these services, as opposed to the novelty of the service, such as engaging with fast changing fashion trends, without committing to a particular one. With limited space in wardrobes, renting clothes allows users to save space whilst still having variety in their wardrobes. *"You can always get more clothes but what are you going to do with them; where will they go"* (5FSNUK). For 5FSNUK, conserving closet space transcends finances, as the need to conserve space is constant. In the literature, this benefit is underrepresented, but is seen as a primary benefit to consumers: "*If I rent it I don't have to think about where to put it for the next 365 days knowing I am not actually going to wear it again"* (12FDNUSA). These quotes illustrate that as house sizes and personal space are decreasing, closet space is becoming a more important factor that consumers consider.

In light of saving money and space, participants were open to renting special activity outerwear, such as ski jackets and hiking boots, because they are not activities or items that one would need access to every day. Coats were seen as feasible to rent because they are seasonal, however, they are also *"easily available not really something worth renting"* (3FSNUK). Consistent with Armstrong *et al.*'s (2015) findings, participants in this study were uncomfortable renting everyday clothing. Yet, they insisted that they would rent from high street favourites such as New Look, Nike, and Zara. A justification provided is that renting clothing that is worn regularly is perceived as illogical, because the cost of renting might outweigh the cost of buying. However, what was considered everyday wear was influenced by the lifestyle of the participant. Smart casual and business wear fell in the middle of the spectrum, but most participants thought it was best to own these product types, because they would be used quite frequently. Whilst these participants were not very interested in renting their everyday or business casual clothing, they were interested in renting weekend, or casual wear because these items are not needed as often. The frequency of wear is a theme that also emerged in the research undertaken by Rexfelt and Ornäs (2009). This

suggests that there could be a difference between renting for everyday use and occasions, and how easy these items are to access. For example, tuxedos or prom dresses may only be used once or twice and thus, an investment may not pay off, whilst everyday garments may make ownership more economical and require different shopping practices. As such, this research agrees with past studies (Armstrong *et al.,* 2015; Cook and Hodges, 2015) in that saving money is perceived as a key benefit of rentals, yet it is only reflected in special occasion wear. To explain, consumers generally feel that second-hand garments should be considerably cheaper when bought or rented, yet this may not always be the case for more everyday garments or accessories as subscription fees for rental services can be expensive.

C.   Experimentation

Although saving money was the most common benefit, participants highlighted the appeal of not having to commit to one style, but rather have the opportunity to trial multiple styles and/or trends, thus being able to experiment and change at their convenience. *"I think it's quite cool. It's a good way to do that and you're not losing out on anything, are you? No point buying something fresh and new if you can just borrow it"* (3FSNUK). For an individual like 12FDNUSA who attends a lot of award shows and public events, renting would enable her to have a new outfit each time without the financial commitment of a purchase. As such, renting has an economic benefit that further allows keeping social status and enabling people to try something new.

In addition to occasion wear, accessories also fall under the experimentation category. Whilst the clothing in wardrobes is relatively constant, accessories are worn to change and emphasise different elements of an outfit. Thus, some participants insisted: *"I would only borrow accessories and items that go with my outfit rather than clothing items"* (8FDNAE). For individuals not sure about different trends and how long they may love them, renting handbags is a way to try something new without having to incorporate it into their lifestyle. Handbags, rings, necklaces, bracelets, and anklets were all acceptable however earrings were the exception. Earrings go through the earlobe and thus were deemed too personal.

Interestingly various people mentioned footwear as a rental option, yet ranked it consistently low for hygiene reasons: *"I don't know how many people have put their feet in there"* (2FSPUK)*.* Although trainers can be washed, participants insist that the thought of other people's sweat in the shoe would hinder them to engage in footwear rental. However, "*really expensive shoes that I*

would never order myself" (5FSNUK) were seen as ideal pieces to rent. Therefore, renting could be a means to fulfil a fantasy or *just* being able to *try it just once,* which on some level further democratises fashion by enabling wearers to have a high fashion experience at a lower price point. Overall, according to participants, heels, boots, and very expensive shoes are more acceptable to rent.

II.   CONCERNS ABOUT RENTING

Within this data set, the main concerns are the practicalities of service and the aftercare of the items. This section uses the consumer decision to make sense of consumer's concerns of fashion rental.

1.   Consideration?

A key theme that emerged are considerations, in terms of knowing who they (participants) are renting from and whether or not these individuals and/or companies can be trusted:

> *The whole set up and how it would be managed, I want to know who I'm renting from and how they came to own that item, whether it's a business (for the person renting their clothes) or if it is a side hustle. I'd be more open to renting from a business than a side hustle only because… a business would take better care of the garments. - 15FSNSA*

It also became apparent that participants felt more at ease renting from an actual company rather than a peer, as renting from a business is perceived to be safer than from a stranger. Participants highlighted that they trust companies to enforce hygiene standards and take measures of looking after the garments. Yet, the opinion remains split, as some have indicated that getting to know the person renting the garments provides security: *"because brands don't need my money whereas to a person that could make a difference...can also get a better deal"* (22MSNUKE).

It was also pointed out that renting is not always the best option, with 6FESNUK stating, if *"you're using your money to rent something why not save up to buy it, if it's a thing you're going to wear all the time just buy it"*. Participants further insisted that there is a danger to overpay for everyday items, which might make some people feel frustrated and less inclined to partake in rentals (e.g. Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009).

2.   Evaluation

Although interviewees were inclined to rent and some also having renting experiences, participants overall remained sceptical and slightly reserved about issues concerning hygiene of garments and accessories that could be rented. Participants compared renting with purchasing garments first-hand and returns policies, stating that *"they [retailers] don't even let us return stuff after you've worn it so I'd be concerned about hygiene"* (22MSNUKE). This suggests that the aftercare service of rental organisations may not be clearly communicated and might need to be further advertised to attract more people to engage in the rental process. Interestingly, when further probing the conversation on how this impacts their actual shopping behaviour (purchasing only first-hand versus second-hand), participants did not make a connection between thrift store shopping and hygiene. This implies that if the rental concept is linked to services/products consumers are already familiar with, perceived risks can be reduced. Yet, those participants that had no prior experience renting need to be further convinced: *"I would be more willing (to try it) if I was certain it would definitely be clean…it depends on what it is"* (18FENUK). For some participants just the idea of wearing second-hand clothes was seen to be 'repulsive', indicating they would feel uneasy wearing something on their skin that others have worn previously. *"When you think about it would you wear the dress of the woman down the block that you don't even know? You wouldn't... grosses me out"* (19FENUSAE). Data suggest that hygiene is an issue especially for the rental market, yet not necessarily associated with any other second-hand shopping opportunity. Results were inconclusive as to why there is a difference. Our findings, however, do concur with Armstrong et al. (2016), who noted that hygiene is an issue especially with garments that come in contact with the skin. As such, it is vital that rental service providers are clearly communicating how garments are looked after once they have been returned from the consumer, as this seems to be a key issue hindering participants to actively engage in rentals. This finding highlights that creating a bond between the rental company and the rentee is vital, which needs to be based on trust and transparent communication in terms of how items are cleaned.

3.   Availability

The second most prominent barrier mention by participants is logistics of actually engaging in the rental process, as participants seemed to be unclear of how renting works on a day-to-day basis, especially in terms of availability and planning.

Various participants highlighted that for them, renting is similar to online shopping, in that it raises similar concerns:

> *I would want to get it and be able to put it on…what if the label says one thing and because of washing the fit is too small or too large. Timing, how soon in advance do I have to order, how much in advance do I have to plan…same as if I buy something online though anyway isn't it. So I guess you have to let people know that the same concerns you have here are the same concerns you should have when shopping online anyway.* - 12FDNUSA

This suggests that a barrier for consumers to engage in renting is time management and planning, which may also be a reason as to why rental services have not yet emerged as a mainstream phenomenon within the fashion industry. Long-term planning is a key issue, which was previously highlighted by Armstrong *et al*. (2016), with participants highlighting that the inability to spontaneously decide what they want to wear is almost a deal breaker.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a user will get what they want: someone else could be renting it at the same time. 5FSNUK noted that this could encourage people to be creative about what they wear but it could also be "annoying" that their options are limited (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009; Armstrong *et al*., 2016).

4.   *Use*

Participants also felt that they were unable to fully relax in rented garments, as they would be afraid to either damage the item or accidentally ruin it by permanently staining the garment/accessory. 8FDNAE insists that you *"have to be careful when you wear it because you have to return it…wouldn't want to wear it to the beach [or] somewhere where the dress could get really dirty".* This finding concurs with Armstrong *et al*. (2015) and links to what items are actually being rented, in terms of colour and style. For example, this participant was more inclined to rent something dark because it would show less signs of wear. Data further indicate that participants were conscious of the repercussions 'damaged items' might have for them, whether this was related to receiving goods in a stretched/damaged condition, or sending back items that may have been accidentally marked.

7FDNNRUK was further concerned about potential harassment, in terms of when they need to send items back to the company/peer. To reiterate this further, participants highlighted that when renting from a peer, the lender may request their outfit back or constantly check in on the status of

the outfit, consequently making the borrower uncomfortable (Rexfelt and Ornäs, 2009). As such, there may be a need to clearly highlight the terms and conditions of the renting process and the consequences of use (e.g. wear and tear) and sending it back later than anticipated.

5.   *Returns*

Similarly, having to give items back was seen as alien: *"I would want it to feel like it's mine. I don't want to give it back, I don't want to wear nice things and people be like oh where'd you get that and then have to give it back. I want it to be mine"* (4MEPUK). This relates to the literature on lack of ownership (Armstrong *et al.,* 2016; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017). Participants further insisted that an option to buy garments is vital, in case they develop an emotional bond and would like to keep the garment, which again links back to aspects of ownership (e.g. Piscicelli *et al.,* 2015; Armstrong *et al.,* 2015; Peterson and Riisberg, 2017). Participants indicate: *"renting could be like a trial period, if you like it and were inclined to do so you could buy it"* (7FDNNRUK). Initially, they were not interested in renting, but this option redeemed the service in their eyes. The participants viewed renting as a means to reduce the risk of shopping online. However, for participant 11FSENUK, the option to buy was not necessarily a benefit because she felt that she would be "double paying" for a product: firstly, as a rental and secondly as a purchase.

Conclusion and Implications

This research was set out to address three key aspects: 1) what barriers might there be to engage in fashion rentals; 2) are all consumer needs are addressed in terms of what rentals are offered, and 3) what spectrum (price range, garment categories) are consumers willing to rent. Previous studies found that whilst consumers are interested in fashion rentals, consumers did not see how renting clothing could fit in their lifestyles and they were sceptical about how a fashion rental service would work in practice (Armstrong *et al.*, 2015, 2016). Whilst the effect of fashion rental services has yet to be seen (Iran and Schrader; 2017), this paper fills a gap in the literature by providing a more nuanced view into what products people would be interested in renting. Although participants in this study were still hesitant, the majority were interested in renting different types of fashion items ranging in price and category. By understanding what products consumers would

be interested in renting, practitioners can develop a consumer-focused model for fashion rental and thus sustainability. The next section explores implications for practitioners.

As discussed above there are a variety of products that consumers may be open to renting. Notice that consumers care very much about the utilitarian aspects of the service such as saving space and being able to have 'less stuff', therefore these benefits need to be clearly highlighted and communicated as services that are practical and 'make sense'. Tied to this, consumers in this study highlighted sustainability as being a driver for them to use fashion rental. This provides marketers with a unique opportunity to tie functional benefits for the individual to wider societal benefit (Visser et al., 2015). Interestingly, our findings show that individuals are most interested in renting occasion wear and luxury items which is mirrored in many of the current services on the market, which focus on designer fashion goods. However, there seems to be a mismatch, consumers see fashion rental as a service that could save them money yet most were not consumers of luxury fashion, therefore, services that cost more than buying a new item outright from the high street may be unattractive to some consumers and reduce the cost-saving benefit. In terms of hedonic benefits, those in our study valued the opportunities to experiment and try new things, especially at times of life transitions such as entering the workforce or weddings. Considering this, fashion rental can be positioned as a valuable service. However, consumers do have concerns that managers need to address. Managers not only need to develop systems to address the practical concerns in terms of hygiene, getting the right sizes, and delivering a timely service whilst also communicating to consumers that this is a safe and reliable service. Communication is vital and needs to be carefully executed as consumers are also concerned about 'paying too much', when for example wanting to keep an item for good (e.g. buy now option). Moreover, whether or not the rental comes from an individual or an organisation both need to represent themselves as neutral entities that are not seen to harass rentees or get a too personal relationship. As such, there is a careful balance to be held between a trustworthy relationship between renter and rentee that remains professional and not personal.

With companies such as *Rent the Runway* and *American eagle*, retailers and start-ups are entering the fashion rental space, illustrating that there is a market for these business models, yet the long-term success of these models remains to be seen. Future research should investigate how fashion rental could meet the needs of consumers at different life stages, what the implications are

if fashion rentals become more mainstream, and in how far rental is seen as being part of the circular economy.

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