

Socio-Economic Factors Impacting the Adoption of Rental Apparel Platforms: A Cross-Cultural Study

Mohammed Salem*

University of Kassel, Germany

E-mail: mzsalem@ucas.edu.ps

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Fashion consumption is undergoing a shift as more consumers embrace rental over ownership. This cross-cultural study examines the socio-economic determinants of rental apparel platform adoption across different cultural settings, recognizing that this concept is perceived differently based on cultural backgrounds. The study focuses on identifying the transition toward sustainable and shared consumption models and its impact on consumer behavior. This shift is further supported by the increasing role of digital platforms in enhancing consumer accessibility and streamlining rental transactions. A mixed-methods research design was employed to gain a holistic understanding of consumer perceptions of rental clothing service apps. Various socio-economic variables, such as income level and education level, were examined to measure cultural differences. By considering economic access, the research provides a detailed understanding of adoption dynamics. A geographically dispersed sample of 350 respondents was used in this research. Different demographic profiles, adoption rates, and regression modeling were applied to analyze predictors of adoption. The research findings contribute valuable insights for society, marketers, and policymakers regarding the adoption dynamics of the rental apparel market, providing perspectives at the crossroads of fashion, sustainability, and consumer culture. Additionally, this study highlights the increasing role of online rental platforms in facilitating access to rental apparel, particularly as digital marketplaces provide a convenient and cost-effective alternative to traditional fashion consumption.

Keywords: Rental Apparel, Fashion Flexibility, Environment Concern, Digital Transformation.

Type: Research paper



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1. Introduction

The face of consumer consumption in the fashion sector is witnessing a profound shift, prompted by increasing awareness of ecological sustainability and a shared aspiration to counter the negative effects of the dominant buy-use-throw-away culture (Caniato et al., 2012). In response to these issues, apparel rental services have emerged as a rapidly growing business model, providing an alternative to consumer ownership and promoting collaborative consumption in the interest of sustainability (Pedersen and Netter, 2015a, b).

Over the past few decades, the culture of constant disposal and excessive stockpiling of products has contributed significantly to environmental pollution, most notably in America. The fast fashion industry, with its rapid trend changes and short product lifecycles, places substantial pressure on the environment (Gwozdz et al., 2017). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports that approximately 14 million tons of textiles and apparel end up in the waste stream annually (Chavan, 2014), further exacerbating the environmental impact of the textile and apparel industry.

Rising environmental concerns (McCoy, 2022), combined with increased consumer awareness, have encouraged a shift toward more sustainable practices. Sharing consumption, or the organization of acquiring and distributing goods for a fee, has become an essential strategy to mitigate the environmental impacts of the fashion sector (Benny et al., 2023). In this context, fashion rental services have gained prominence, allowing consumers to temporarily borrow and use fashion items, thereby promoting a more sustainable consumption model (Lee, 2020).

1.1. Industry Growth and Market Dynamics

The rental market for apparel, valued at USD 5.87 billion in 2022, is expected to grow to USD 7.45 billion by 2026, outpacing the overall growth of the apparel market (Chi et al., 2023a). This growth indicates a shift in consumer behavior toward a circular and sustainable approach to fashion consumption. Notably, major players in the industry, such as Rent the Runway, have been at the forefront of collaborative consumption models (Joyner Armstrong, 2017), providing consumers with access to a wide variety of high-quality fashion goods for rent via online platforms (Perlacia et al., 2017).

The expansion of the rental clothing market is driven by shifting consumer preferences, increasing awareness of environmental sustainability, and advancements in digital technology. Market studies indicate a sharp increase in the demand for rental clothing services, with forecasts predicting continued growth in the coming years. Notably, this trend is not confined to a specific region but has a global presence across various cultures.

The growth of rental apparel services has been fueled not only by changing consumer attitudes but also by the accessibility of online platforms, which streamline the rental process and expand market reach.

1.2. Trends Driving the Ascendancy of Rental Apparel Platforms

Several key trends contribute to the rapid growth of the rental clothing industry. First, there is sustainability Orientation. The increasing emphasis on sustainability and environmentally friendly consumption has been a primary driver of rental apparel's popularity. Consumers are consciously seeking alternatives to throwaway fashion and are turning toward rental platforms as a sustainable option (Shrivastava, 2021). Second, there is a shift in Consumer Attitudes. Consumers have exhibited a noticeable shift in attitudes toward ownership. Younger generations, in particular, place greater value on experiences rather than possessions (Ng et al., 2010). Rental clothing aligns with this mindset, offering access to an ever-changing wardrobe without the long-term commitment of ownership (Sczyka, 2020). Third, the digital transformation of the fashion industry has enabled the development of rental platforms (Colombi, 2023).

Features such as seamless online experiences, digital try-ons, and personalized recommendations enhance the convenience and accessibility of rental services, particularly for tech-savvy consumers. Finally, there is fashion flexibility. Many consumers appreciate the flexibility rental apparel provides, allowing them to experiment with different styles without the financial burden of repeated purchases. Rental platforms offer regularly updated collections, giving users the freedom to explore trends (Da Silva Ferreira Gonçalves, 2023).

1.3. Acceptance Over Time

The popularity of rental apparel has evolved, reflecting shifts in cultural values and economic conditions (Nagadeepa, 2015). Initially perceived as a novel concept, rental platforms have gained mainstream acceptance (Sundararajan, 2017). However, this acceptance varies across regions and demographics due to factors such as income levels, cultural attitudes toward ownership, and sensitivity to sustainability concerns.

During the initial phase, resistance and skepticism were common, often rooted in traditional beliefs about ownership and concerns regarding hygiene. However, as the industry addressed these issues through clear cleaning practices and consumer education, confidence in rental services increased (Rodríguez-Nomura et al., 2023). Today, rental clothing services are widely accepted by a diverse customer base spanning various age groups, income levels, and social categories.

1.4. The Positive Side of Rental Apparel

Rental apparel offers numerous benefits, making it increasingly popular among consumers. These advantages include economic, environmental, and lifestyle factors. The first effect is sustainability. Rental clothing promotes sustainability by extending the lifespan of garments. Through shared use, the fashion industry can reduce its environmental footprint associated with production and disposal. The second impact is cost-effectiveness. Renting provides access to a wide range of clothing without the upfront costs of purchasing. This is particularly appealing to individuals seeking trendy or designer items without long-term financial commitments. Third is fashion flexibility. Rental platforms typically offer a rotating selection of the latest styles, allowing consumers to experiment with different looks while maintaining a fresh and updated wardrobe. Reduced closet clutter is the fourth impact. Renting minimizes the need for extensive wardrobe space and reduces the hassle of managing a large clothing collection. This is especially beneficial for individuals living in urban areas with limited storage. Fifth, rental services cater to consumers who require attire for specific events, such as weddings, parties, or formal gatherings, without the expense of purchasing an outfit that may only be worn once. Sixth, many rental platforms offer high-end and designer garments, making luxury fashion more accessible. Seventh, there is convenience. Most rental platforms provide doorstep delivery and return services, eliminating the need for in-store shopping and garment maintenance. The last impact is reduced fashion waste. Rental services help mitigate the impact of fast fashion by decreasing overconsumption and excessive textile waste.

1.5. Dissenting Voices on Rental Apparel

Despite its growing popularity, rental apparel services have faced criticism and concerns from certain consumers (Demailly, 2014). The primary concerns include:

- **Hygiene and Cleanliness:** Some individuals express reservations about the sanitation of rented clothing, particularly for intimate apparel and accessories.
- **Limited Ownership Satisfaction:** Traditionalists argue that owning clothing provides a sense of personal attachment that renting cannot replicate.
- **Fit and Sizing Issues:** Online rental services may pose challenges in terms of fit and sizing, leading to dissatisfaction.
- **Limited Style Options:** Some consumers feel that rental platforms do not fully accommodate diverse fashion preferences or cultural styles.
- **Quality Concerns:** There is apprehension about receiving worn-out or damaged rental items.
- **Return Hassles:** Returning rented clothing on time and in good condition can be inconvenient for some users.
- **Environmental Impact of Shipping:** The carbon footprint associated with shipping rented clothing back and forth could offset the sustainability benefits.
- **Subscription Fatigue:** The prevalence of subscription-based rental models may overwhelm some consumers and lead to financial strain.
- **Perceived High Costs:** Some users believe that the cumulative cost of renting over time may exceed the cost of purchasing similar items.
- **Geographic Limitations:** Rental services may not be equally accessible in all regions due to logistical constraints.
- **Risk of Damage Fees:** Consumers worry about additional charges for accidentally damaging rented garments.

1.6. Structure of the study

The chapter progresses with an introduction that leads the reader through the development and dynamics of the rental clothing market, highlighting trends influencing its trajectory and analyzing its acceptance over time. The favorable aspects of rental apparel, such as sustainability and adaptability, are discussed alongside opposing opinions that criticize this revolutionary movement. In light of this contextual framework, the literature review section critically examines existing scholarly research to align with specific objectives. Progressing to the methodology section, the research strategy is explained, describing the measures undertaken to explore variables affecting the use of rental apparel platforms. Later, the data analysis section breaks down observations, presenting conclusions based on gathered information. The chapter ends by highlighting key findings, reflecting on their implications, and potentially proposing future lines of research or practical applications within the rental clothing industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies

The increase in the use of rental clothing platforms has been supported by a growing emphasis on environmental sustainability (Gyde, 2021) and consumer behavior shifting toward more conscious and circular fashion consumption. Chi et al. (2023) examined the determinants influencing U.S. consumers' behavioral intention to use apparel rental services using the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework. Their results highlighted the important role of attitude, subjective norms, environmental knowledge, and previous environmental behavior in influencing consumers' intention to adopt rental fashion, revealing the psychological determinants of adoption.

In research by Park and Joyner Armstrong (2017), the authors explored the landscape of collaborative consumption in the apparel sector, examining short-term renting, subscription-based renting, swapping, and consigning. Their study presented an integrated picture of business models within the collaborative consumption domain, highlighting the potential to minimize the environmental footprint through extended product use.

The study by Chi et al. (2023b) aligns with the overall trend observed in the apparel rental industry. Based on industry analysis, the market size is projected to grow to USD 7.45 billion by 2026, following a significant growth trajectory. Rent the Runway, one of the leading companies in the fashion rental industry, has been at the forefront of this trend, providing a wide variety of fashion products for rent. This development indicates an overall shift in consumer behavior toward more sustainable and dynamic fashion consumption habits.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (2017) environmental impact report on the apparel and textile industry highlighted the urgent need for sustainable alternatives. With approximately 15 million tons of clothing discarded each year, collaborative consumption models, such as rental platforms, offer promising solutions to mitigate the environmental burden caused by fast fashion.

The scholarly investigation into rental clothing websites has gained significant attention in recent years as the apparel industry transitions toward more eco-friendly and cyclical consumption practices. Adesanya et al. (2023) developed a comprehensive understanding of American consumers' shared consumption habits in the context of sustainability. Their research, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, identified several key determinants—attitude, subjective norms, perceived consumer effectiveness, environmental knowledge, perceived personal relevance, and previous environmental behavior—that play an important role in U.S. consumers' intention to adopt apparel rental services.

To address the slow adoption of collaborative consumption (CC) in apparel, Pedersen and Netter (2015) examined the barriers and drivers in the context of CC. Their findings pointed to factors such as trust, perceived usefulness, and lack of awareness as potential barriers, highlighting the complex dynamics underlying consumer choices in the collaborative consumption of clothing (Mohan, 2023).

The study by Park and Joyner Armstrong (2017) extends beyond theoretical frameworks to provide empirical insights into the different modes of collaborative consumption in the apparel sector. Short-term rentals, subscription-based renting, swapping, and consigning were identified as central

models catering to various consumer demands and preferences. Understanding these models is essential for the successful development of rental apparel platforms.

Evidence of the expanding market value for rental fashion lies in the industry's projected growth to USD 7.45 billion by 2026, according to industry estimates. This rapid expansion, compared to the overall apparel market, marks a turning point in consumer behavior, favoring access over traditional ownership models. These patterns reflect the broader disruption caused by rental platforms in the fashion ecosystem.

Additionally, the criticism of the prevailing "buy-use-throw-away" culture in the United States (Chi et al., 2023a) and the environmental concerns highlighted by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) emphasize the importance of sustainable alternatives in fashion. The apparel rental market, with its potential to extend product longevity and reduce waste, presents a viable solution to address the environmental challenges posed by rapidly changing fashion trends.

2.2. Objectives and Hypotheses

The primary aim of this cross-cultural research is to examine the socio-economic determinants influencing the adoption of rental clothing platforms in different cultural settings. The study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors driving consumers toward rental clothing services while considering the complexities of various societies. Specifically, the research aims to: (1) Identify Socio-Economic Factors: Analyze and determine the most significant socio-economic factors influencing individuals' decisions to adopt or reject rental clothing platforms; (2) Understand Cultural Variances: Investigate the cultural differences that affect the adoption of clothing rental services, taking into account variations in values, attitudes, and perceptions of fashion and ownership in different societies; and (3) Evaluate Economic Accessibility: Examine the economic factors influencing the affordability and accessibility of rental clothing services, particularly concerning income, employment patterns, and economic inequalities among study respondents.

Based on the objectives the following hypotheses were developed:

- **H1:** Employment has a positive impact on rental apparel platform adoption.
- **H2:** Education levels have a positive impact on rental apparel platform adoption.
- **H3:** Social contacts and networks have a significant impact on rental apparel platform adoption.
- **H4:** Technology access has a positive impact on rental apparel platform adoption.
- **H5:** Income levels have a significant impact on rental apparel platform adoption.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is intended to thoroughly examine the socio-economic determinants of rental clothing platform adoption from a cross-cultural perspective.

3.1. Research Design

A mixed-methods strategy was utilized, incorporating quantitative survey responses and qualitative information. The quantitative component entailed the administration of an online questionnaire to a diverse group of participants, gathering information on variables such as income, education level, occupation, social network effect, and access to technology.

3.2. Sample Size and Sampling Method

The survey sought to measure 350 participants' adoption behaviors and sentiments toward rental clothing services. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with a portion of the participants to elicit rich narratives, providing deeper insights into the cultural factors influencing adoption. The cross-cultural aspect was addressed by ensuring a geographically representative participant pool, covering various regions and cultures.

3.3. Statistical Tools

Statistical analyses, including regression models, were applied to the quantitative data to identify significant predictors, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis for a nuanced exploration of cultural and socio-economic influences. This mixed-methods approach allows for a holistic examination of the adoption dynamics within the rental apparel industry, bridging quantitative trends with qualitative insights for a comprehensive understanding.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The present study's demographic breakdown of 350 respondents showed a significant representative distribution by age, gender, education level, employment status, region, and monthly expenditure. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the demographic information of the research respondents. Furthermore, it displays the adoption trends among study participants. It includes information on gender, age group, educational qualification, spending patterns toward apparel, employment status, and geographic locations. Additionally, it explores participants' household income over the past year, their use of rental clothing services in the previous 12 months, reasons for not using these services, and how they rated the affordability of rental clothing services compared to purchasing traditional clothing. This comprehensive analysis seeks to untangle the complex interaction of demographic determinants underpinning the adoption or avoidance of rental clothing websites.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic profile and responses of the 350 study participants. The gender distribution indicates a majority of female respondents (220), followed by males (120), and a smaller representation of non-binary individuals (10). In terms of age, the sample spans diverse groups, with a concentration in the 25-34 age range (120), highlighting a broad representation across different life stages. Regarding educational attainment, the majority holds a Bachelor's degree (150), showcasing a well-educated participant pool. Employment status reveals that a significant proportion of respondents are employed (250), reflecting a working demographic.

Examining household income, the table illustrates a varied distribution, with a notable number falling within the \$20,000 - \$50,000 range (100). The utilization of rental apparel services in the past 12 months is reported by 150 participants, indicating a considerable engagement with this fashion consumption model. Among those who have not used rental services, the primary reasons include affordability (80), lack of interest (50), and a preference for ownership (60), offering insights into the factors influencing adoption or resistance.

Table 1: Demographic profile and responses of study participants

Category	Response	Number of Respondents
Gender	Male	120
	Female	220
	Non-Binary	10
Age Group	18-24	80
	25-34	120
	35-44	80
	45-54	50
	Above 54	20
Educational Level	High School or Less	40
	Some College	90
	Bachelor's Degree	150
	Postgraduate Degree	70
Employment Status	Employed	250
	Unemployed	30
	Student	40
	Other	30
Region	Urban	180
	Suburban	120
	Rural	50
Annual Household Income	Below \$20,000	50
	\$20,000 - \$50,000	100
	\$50,001 - \$75,000	80
	\$75,001 - \$100,000	60
	Above \$100,000	60
Have you used rental apparel services in the past 12 months?	Yes	150
	No	200
If not, what is the primary reason?	Affordability	80
	Lack of interest	50
	Preference for ownership	60
	Other	10
How affordable are rental apparel services compared to traditional clothing purchases?	Not Affordable at All	20
	Slightly Affordable	40
	Moderately Affordable	80
	Affordable	120
	Very Affordable	90

Source: Primary Data

The participants' ratings of the affordability of rental apparel services compared to traditional clothing purchases present a balanced perspective. A significant portion rates it as moderately affordable (80) or affordable (120), suggesting a favorable perception of the economic feasibility of rental fashion.

Notably, 90 respondents deem it very affordable, emphasizing a positive sentiment toward the cost-effectiveness of rental apparel services.

4.2. Regression Analysis

The fashion industry is undergoing a revolution with the emergence of rental clothing platforms, providing a cost-effective and environmentally friendly alternative to traditional clothing purchases. These platforms enable consumers to use high-quality clothing for a set period, reducing excessive clothing production and minimizing environmental degradation. However, the implementation of such platforms hinges on several socio-economic and technological factors.

This research seeks to investigate the key determinants that affect people's adoption of rental clothing platforms. Specifically, it examines the contributions of occupation, education level, social networks, technology access, and income in shaping consumer behavior. Through regression analysis, this study identifies which of these factors significantly influence the adoption of rental fashion services. Table 2 presents the regression analysis results, exploring the impact of socio-economic factors on the adoption of rental apparel platforms. The table provides insights into the statistical significance and magnitude of the relationships between individual predictors—such as income, education level, occupation, social networks, and technology access—and the dependent variable, adoption of rental apparel platforms.

Table 2: Socio-economic factors and adoption of rental apparel platforms

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.349 ^a	0.122	0.112	0.995

a. Predictors: (Constant), Income, Education Level, Occupation, Social Network, Technology Access

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	50.460	4	12.615	12.731
	Residual	364.648	368	0.991	
	Total	415.108	371		

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	SE	Beta	
1	(Constant)	0.861	.353	
	Occupation	.146	.094	.082
	Education Level	.057	.034	.084
	Social Network	.321	.078	.156
	Technology Access	.171	.080	.136
	Income	.211	.076	.180

a. Dependent Variable: Adoption of Rental Apparel Platforms

b. Predictors: (Constant), Income, Education Level, Occupation, Social Network, Technology Access

The regression analysis explores the relationship between socio-economic factors (Income, Education Level, Occupation, Social Network, and Connection, and Technology Access) and the adoption of rental apparel platforms. The overall model (Model 1) indicates a statistically significant relationship with a p-value of 0.000, suggesting that at least one of the predictors significantly contributes to the prediction of the dependent variable, the adoption of rental apparel platforms.

The model's coefficient of determination (R Square) is 0.122, implying that approximately 12.2% of the variance in the adoption of rental apparel platforms can be explained by the socio-economic factors included in the model. The Adjusted R Square, which considers the number of predictors and adjusts for model complexity, is 0.112.

Analyzing individual predictors, income demonstrates a significant positive relationship (Beta = 0.180, $p = 0.006$), suggesting that higher income levels are associated with a higher likelihood of adopting rental apparel platforms. Education level also shows a positive relationship (Beta = 0.084, $p = 0.048$), indicating that individuals with higher education levels are more inclined to adopt rental platforms.

Occupation, social network and connection, and technology access, on the other hand, do not show statistically significant relationships with the adoption of rental apparel platforms, with p -values of 0.121, 0.32, and 0.034, respectively.

The regression equation for predicting the adoption of rental apparel platforms based on these socio-economic factors is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Adoption} = & 0.861 + 0.146 \times \text{Occupation} + 0.057 \times \text{Education Level} \\ & + 0.321 \times \text{Social Network and Connection} \\ & + 0.171 \times \text{Technology Access} + 0.211 \times \text{Income} \end{aligned}$$

This equation allows for the estimation of the adoption level based on the values of the socio-economic factors. The positive coefficients for income and education level suggest that these variables positively contribute to the adoption of rental apparel platforms, whereas the non-significant coefficients for occupation, social network and connection, and technology access indicate limited influence in this context.

The findings suggest that the convenience of online rental services, combined with economic and cultural factors, contributes to adoption patterns, particularly among younger consumers who are more accustomed to digital transactions.

5. Conclusion

The examination of rental apparel platforms reveals a multifaceted landscape influenced by various factors. Economic considerations emerge as a key determinant, with higher income levels significantly associated with a greater propensity for adopting rental apparel. This suggests that individuals with greater financial means may be more inclined to explore the sustainable and flexible aspects of rental fashion.

Educational influence is another noteworthy aspect, as participants with higher educational attainment exhibit a heightened likelihood of engaging with rental apparel services. This connection underscores the potential link between educational awareness and an appreciation for the environmental and economic benefits offered by rental fashion. While occupation, social networks, and technology access did not attain statistical significance in isolation, their positive coefficients imply potential roles in shaping adoption patterns. The nuanced dynamics of these factors warrant further exploration, suggesting that specific occupational categories and the influence of social connections may play important roles in the adoption of rental apparel platforms.

In summary, this analysis not only identifies income and education as significant predictors but also provides a starting point for delving into the broader contextual factors that shape consumer behavior in the evolving landscape of rental apparel. The regression analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of factors influencing the adoption of rental apparel platforms. While income and education levels emerge as significant predictors, the nuanced roles of occupation, social networks, and technology access call for deeper investigation. This study provides valuable insights into the socio-economic and technological dimensions shaping consumer behavior in the context of the evolving rental apparel industry.

As rental apparel platforms continue to grow, their accessibility through online services will remain a key factor in shaping consumer preferences and expanding sustainable fashion choices across diverse socio-economic groups.

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