

Investigating the Determinants of Using Clothing Subscription Rental Services: A Perspective from Chinese Young Consumers

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Abstract:

Purpose - The purpose of this study is to investigate the impacts of Chinese young consumers' traits (fashion leadership, quality consciousness, price consciousness, environmental consciousness and social media usage) as the external factors on their behavioral intention toward using clothing subscription rental services.

Design/methodology/approach - Quantitative research was conducted, and empirical data were collected from 255 Chinese college students. Structural equation modeling was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

Findings - The study offered convincing evidence that fashion leadership, price consciousness and social media usage are the three main drivers of Chinese young consumers' favorable attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services, which together with social norms further lead to their intention to use clothing subscription rental services. Contrary to expectations, the study showed that consumers' quality consciousness and environmental consciousness have no significant impact on consumer attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services. Moreover, the findings of the study demonstrated the impact of attitude and subjective norms on Chinese young consumers' intention to use clothing subscription rental services.

Originality/value - This study contributes to the literature by integrating additional factors (fashion leadership, quality consciousness, price consciousness, consumer environmental knowledge, social media usage) into the traditional theory of reasoned action model to investigate how Chinese young consumers' characteristics impact their attitudes and how their attitudes and subjective norms impact their intention toward using clothing subscription rental services.

Keywords: Fashion subscription retailing | Fashion renting | Young consumers | China | Fashion leadership | Quality consciousness | Price consciousness | Environmental consciousness | Social media

Article:

Introduction

The global apparel industry's negative environmental impacts have been growing because of the ever-increasing consumer demand for apparel products (Lang et al., 2019). The World Resources Institute reports that about 20% of water pollution comes from clothing manufacturers (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Furthermore, multi-million tons of apparel waste are landfilled every year. Therefore, to reduce these negative impacts, more and more consumers have considered sustainable solutions such as renting clothing items (Park and Armstrong, 2017) rather than buying new ones. It is undeniable that renting goods has become a dramatic growth in this modern society. Statista, the database company, reported that the revenue of the rental apparel market worldwide was forecasted to steadily increase since 2021 and was expected to increase to approximately US\$7.5bn by 2026 (Smith, 2022b).

Renting offers more incredible environmental benefits (Park and Armstrong, 2017) because it provides an opportunity to reuse fashion items multiple times (Lang et al., 2020), thus reducing carbon emissions, protecting the environment and helping develop sustainable consumer behavior (Lee and Chow, 2020; Zheng et al., 2019). Particularly, renting clothes gives various advantages to consumers compared to buying apparel products— such as saving money, closet space and time for shopping, having different trends and styles, being fashionable, surviving the twinning moment (it means you do not see similar designs of your styles in your surrounding) and protecting the environment at the same time (Munir, 2020). Also, renting apparel products satisfies a consumer's need for luxury fashion brands at affordable prices.

Even though wearing someone else's used clothes was never popular in China (Xu et al., 2014), recently, Chinese consumers especially young people have begun accepting it by adopting fashion subscription rental services because of the emerging retail business models such as the collaborative consumption and the membership service (Tao and Xu, 2018). According to the report of Ouyang (2018) in the China Daily, renting clothes from a subscription rental service is essential for wearing expensive garments and expanding women's wardrobes without investing a lot of money. Clothing subscription rental service has become a trendy business model in China's clothing industry (Liang and Xu, 2018; Ouyang, 2018). The revenue of the rental apparel market in China was around \$633m in 2021 and was expected to increase to more than \$1bn in 2026 (Smith, 2022a).

Despite the popularity of clothing subscription rental service in China and its opportunity to grow among Chinese young consumers, scholarly research on Chinese young consumers' clothing consumption behavior via subscription rental services is scarce. Lee and Huang's (2021) study identified that both Chinese and US consumers' attitudes and subjective norms positively influenced their intention to online clothing rental through the two external factors— perceived ecological importance and perceived compatibility. Tao and Xu (2018) identified young

consumers' perceptions of relative advantages of fashion subscription retailing through a qualitative study approach. However, the critical question remains What are the traits of Chinese young consumers that predict their use of clothing subscription rental service? The present study aims to answer this question and address the literature gap by a quantitative research approach. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impacts of Chinese young consumers' traits (fashion leadership, quality consciousness, price consciousness, consumer environmental consciousness and social media usage) as the external factors on consumer behavior toward using apparel subscription rental services. This study developed an integrated conceptual model by applying the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and adding these five unique external factors that have yet been examined in the subscription rental service context to the TRA framework. Data collected from young Chinese consumers provides practical implications to marketers to better understand which consumers' traits are more likely to lead to young Chinese consumers' acceptance of clothing subscription rental services.

Literature review

Clothing subscription rental services

As one of the online business models, subscription service is defined as “an e-business that provides periodic delivery of a customized box of merchandise directly to the consumer's home for a weekly/monthly subscription fee” (Woo and Ramkumar, 2018). It is not a new business model. Since the last century, the subscription service for delivering magazines, newspapers, fashion catalogs and foods has existed (Woo and Ramkumar, 2018).

However, clothing subscription retailing service has disrupted traditional apparel retailing as it is the membership-based service and represents a drastic change in the way apparel consumers purchase apparel products and services (Tao and Xu, 2018). Recently, the subscription service has become a popular online business model in the apparel retail industry. It is also known as the “Box model” (Ramkumar and Woo, 2018), in which the subscription service delivers a box, including consumers' preference items, to the door of consumers weekly, monthly and annually. As customers are waiting for the box with unexpected things, it can give them a big surprise (Ramkumar and Woo, 2018; Tao and Xu, 2018).

Online shopping, sharing and renting clothes have been experiencing as much rapid growth in China as in other countries such as the USA. Because of the popularity of various social medial platforms and communication technologies, the concept of collaborative consumption such as renting clothing has gained attention among Chinese consumers. “Through renting, consumers can gain access to new fashion products right after they are launched to the market and can wear these items earlier than others without the burden of ownership” (Lang and Armstrong, 2018). Clothing subscription rental services integrate the benefits of the membership-based service economy and the sharing service economy. Renting clothes via subscription service is convenient, economically smart and environmentally friendly, and it enables consumers stay trendy with the new looks and get a personalized delivery to the front door (Douglas, 2019). Ms Paris, YCloset, Meilizu and Le Tote have become well-known clothing subscription rental service companies in China. Consumers can rent unlimited clothing and accessories via monthly subscription. Table 1 provides detailed information on some popular subscription rental service companies in China.

Chinese young consumers

According to the age distribution of China's population, in 2018, approximately 70% of the population were between 15 and 64 years of age (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). Noticeably, the population in the age group of 15–39 constituted about 33% of China's total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). They are more willing to improve their lifestyles by spending on unique things (e.g. buying higher quality products and environmentally friendly products) (Su et al., 2019). They prefer fashion brands that show their personality and uniqueness but that are also well known enough to be recognized (Kim et al., 2020). Traditionally, Chinese people are usually unwilling to buy or rent other people's used clothes because of various reasons (ownership, safety reason, hygiene problem) (Liang and Xu, 2018; Xu et al., 2014). Nowadays, compared to the older generations, Chinese young consumers are highly educated; interested in fashion, technologies and new retail experiences; and at the same time are more concerned about environmental protection. For Chinese young consumers, especially Gen Zers, they want to be seen as environmentally conscious consumers in their fashion consumption; but because of their financial constraints, they often are not able to pay for the high prices for those well-known fashion brands or sustainable fashion products. Thus, renting clothing from fashion subscription retailing services provides them an alternative way to not only enable them to wear high-end and latest fashion products and get customized and convenient services at affordable membership prices but also satisfy their environmental consciousness.

Chinese younger generations are so-called “digital natives,” and are more familiar with various technologies for education, entertaining and social connections. A total of 29% of Gen Zers in China spend more than 6 hours a day on their mobile phones, voraciously consuming video content (Zipser et al., 2021). They are spearheading digital adoption, innovative retailing models and sustainable lifestyles, and are driving global fashion consumption (Su et al., 2019); thus, they are leading the new consumer behavior trends, such as adoption of clothing subscription rental services.

Table 1
Information about Subscription Rental Service Companies in China

<i>Company name</i>	<i>Time established</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Monthly price</i>	<i>Brand name</i>	<i>Product</i>	<i>Business</i>	<i>Expected delivery time</i>
MsParis	2014	Shanghai	338 RMB/Mo, 3 clothes and 1 beach time/ 588 RMB/Mo, 3 clothes and 1 luxury bag each time/ 338 RMB/Mo, 4 new clothes each month/ 788 RMB/Mo, 4 new clothes each month	GUCCI/PRADA/DKNY/MichaelKors/Kate Spade/COACH/MISSS SIXTY/ZARA/UGO/ 3 COLOR	Clothing/ Jewelry/ Handbag/ Household	Rental/ Second hand sale	1–2 days
YCloset	2015	Beijing	499 RMB/Mo, 3–5 clothes each time	PINKO/MichaelKors/COS/CARVEN/McQ/Chloe/PRADA/MiuMiu/Pom&Co.	Clothing/ Jewelry/ Handbag	Rental/ Second hand Sale	1–2 days
E-cool	2017	Beijing	299 RMB/Mo,3clotheseachtime	Comeon/CEBTRA/HSTYLE/DDCT/DAZZLE	Clothing/ Jewelry/ Handbag	Rental	1–2 days
LeTote	2012	San Francisco (USA)	599 RMB/Mo, 6 cloths and 4 accessories each time	BCBGeneration/MarcJacobs/Juicy Couture/Guess/Snidel/AugustIEight/ Summer & Sage/Hayes...UrbanRevivo/Mo&Co/Ochirly/Lily/EvaOuxiu/Dotacoko/Ella Jade/Lnns	Clothing/ Jewelry/ Handbag	Rental	1–2 days

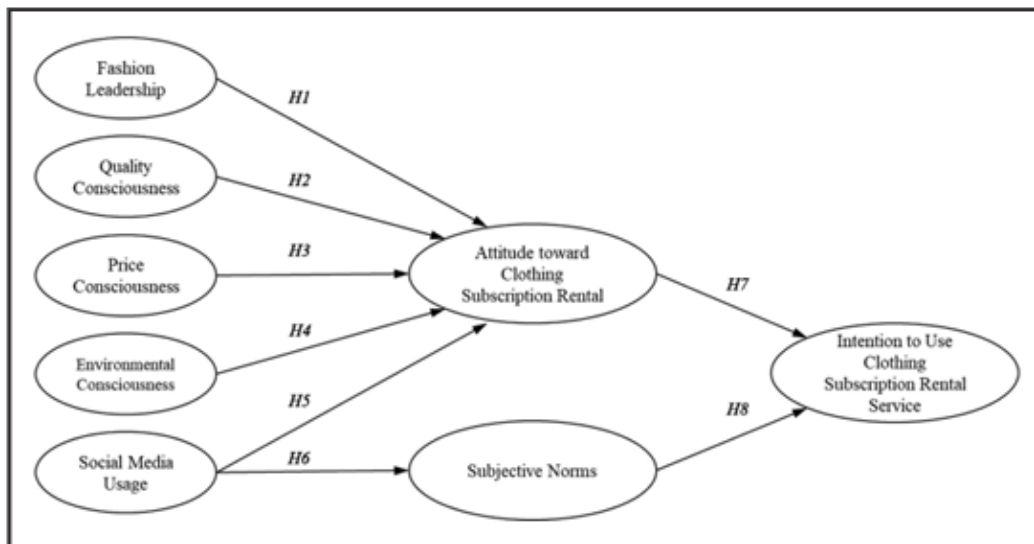
Notes: RMB: Renminbi; Mo: month; the information in the table was compiled by the authors

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Theory of reasoned action. The TRA, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), has been used in different academic disciplines such as health, information technology, marketing and consumer behavior to predict individuals' behavioral intention. According to TRA, the two key components determining the behavioral intention are attitudes toward behavior and subjective norms. Behavioral intention is considered as a strong predictor of the actual behavior. Attitude refers to “the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question” and subjective norm refers to “the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior” (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norm is a social factor, while attitude is a personal factor (Ajzen, 1991). Many previous studies have applied TRA as a theoretical framework to investigate the influence of consumers' attitudes and subjective norms on their behavioral intentions in various contexts, such as online fashion renting (Lee and Chow, 2020), consumers' adoption of apparel mobile commerce (Sun and Chi, 2018) and consumers' sustainable consumption behavior (Liu et al., 2012). In the present study, we used the TRA as a theoretical grounding and developed an integrated conceptual framework by adding five external variables (fashion consciousness, price consciousness, quality consciousness, consumer environmental knowledge and social media usage) to the original TRA to predict Chinese young consumers' attitudes and intention to use clothing subscription rental services. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework and the eight hypotheses.

Fashion leadership. Fashion leadership refers to the earlier adoption of fashion-related items (Shephard et al., 2014). Fashion leaders are more interested in fashion than other people and are more confident about their style (Polegato and Wall, 1980). They are the first people willing to buy and wear brand new fashion products earlier than non-fashion leaders and encourage other people to try new styles and consume new products (Cho and Workman, 2014). During the past 10 years, fashion subscription retailing (Tao and Xu, 2018) and online fashion renting (Lang et al., 2019) have been rapidly adopted by Chinese consumers. Clothing subscription rental services offer unique and latest fashion products that consumers can rent at affordable costs while staying in their homes (Douglas, 2019);

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework



Ramkumar and Woo, 2018). Therefore, consumers who consider themselves fashion leaders are more likely to be interested in clothing subscription rental services and adopt this new business platform to access the latest fashion. In addition, Cho and Workman (2014) have identified that consumers with a high level of fashion leadership are positively associated with their attitudes toward sustainable behaviors. Recent studies have found that fashion leadership positively relates to consumers' attitudes to adopt collaborative consumption through clothing renting or swapping (Lang and Armstrong, 2016, 2018), which is a popular sustainable consumer behavior among young people. Based on the above rationale, consumers with the high level of fashion leadership are more likely to have favorable attitude toward clothing subscription rental services. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Fashion leadership has a positive relationship with consumer attitude towards clothing subscription rental services.

Quality consciousness and price consciousness. Quality consciousness refers to a person's perception of the quality of a product (Lang et al., 2013). It concerns the high degree of quality of product/service. Price consciousness refers to an individual's price sensitivity when purchasing products (Lang and Armstrong, 2016). It also indicates that consumers tend to be unwilling to pay a higher price and focus on paying a lower price (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Generally, quality and price are two major factors that significantly influence the consumers' purchase decision-making processes (Dhar et al., 2001; Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Previous studies found that quality consciousness is positively related to consumer attitudes toward clothing disposal (Lang et al., 2013) and price consciousness is positively associated with attitudes toward collaborative consumption (Lindblom et al., 2018).

As a subscription rental service is a simple online business model, it provides various benefits such as exposing high-quality new and branded fashion items at a lower price (Ramkumar and Woo, 2018; Tao and Xu, 2018). Ramkumar and Woo (2018) indicated that price is essential in the subscription service context and subscription service companies provide their consumers a cost-saving benefit as the subscription fee offers the consumers a discounted price for a box compared with buying the items individually. Lee et al. (2020) argued that subscription service companies provide their consumers with the highest quality products in a monthly box. Clothing subscription rental services are a type of rapidly emerging collaborative consumption model with the membership-based fashion service, and they are personalized boxes that consumers select for themselves with some guidance from fee-based stylists; therefore, it could attract both quality- and price-conscious consumers. Therefore, consumers who have a higher level of quality and price consciousness are more likely to have a favorable attitude toward clothing subscription rental service. Hence, the following hypotheses are developed:

H2. Quality consciousness has a positive relationship with consumer attitude toward clothing subscription rental services.

H3. Price consciousness has a positive relationship with consumer attitude toward clothing subscription rental services.

Consumer environmental consciousness. Environmental consciousness refers to individuals' understanding of environmental issues and possible solutions to deal with these issues (Zsoka et al., 2013). Consumer's increased environmental consciousness indicates their greater environmental concern (Bamberg and Mooser, 2007). Previous literature has indicated that consumer environmental consciousness is an important antecedent that influences their green consumption behavior (Bamberg and Mooser, 2007; Choi and Johnson, 2019; Dhir et al., 2021). Fashion renting business model is environmentally conscious, so this feature is attractive for consumers with greater environmental concerns (Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010). Renting rather than buying new fashion products is an innovative way to increase the clothing life cycle and decrease the material manufacturing process and energy consumption. Lee and Huang (2021) found that consumers' higher environmental awareness positively influences their attitudes toward online fashion renting. Consumers with high environmental consciousness are more likely to prefer clothing subscription rental service. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Consumers' environmental consciousness has a positive relationship with the attitude toward clothing subscription rental services.

Social media usage. Social media, created as the means of many-to-many internet communication interactions, can share information and ideas, distribute user-generated content and influence others (Jensen and Helles, 2017). Social media has changed people's lifestyles, communication and socialization (Teng et al., 2015). Social media usage has rapidly increased knowledge sharing and marketing communications among individuals and organizations. Social media users would consume other people's content posted on social media. The more they are involved in social media platforms, the more they are influenced by others' ideas and thoughts shared on social media, and the more they receive company's advertisements about their products and services promoted through social media. Kamal et al. (2013) maintained that consumers' social media usage is positively associated with their attitudes toward social media advertising for fashion products. Previous literature found that peer posts, reviews and opinions shared on social media are positively associated with consumer behavior toward green fashion products (Pop et al., 2020). As such, with the emerging trend of subscription rental services among young consumers, young consumers who have a higher level of social media engagement are more likely to notice clothing subscription rental services from other people's posts or companies' advertisements and have positive feelings about using clothing subscription rental services. Moreover, young consumers who are more engaged with social media are more likely to have social pressure. According to previous studies, social media provides a collective connection and friendvertising to like, share and comment on brand posts or advertisements, thus impacting subjective norms (Sanne and Wiese, 2018). Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5. Social media usage has a positive relationship with the attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services.

H6. Social media usage has a positive relationship with subjective norms.

Attitudes, subjective norms and intention. The TRA explains that individuals' attitudes and subjective norms predict their intention, leading to their actual behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen,

1975). Previous studies have found a positive relationship between attitudes, subjective norms and intentions in the contexts of fashion subscription consumption and collaborative consumption, respectively. For example, consumers' attitudes and subjective norms impact their intentions toward fashion/beauty subscription box services (Ramkumar and Woo, 2018) and fashion clothing renting or swapping (Lang and Armstrong, 2018; Lee and Chow, 2020; Tu and Hu, 2018). Hence, in the present study context, clothing subscription rental services, we propose the following hypotheses:

H7. Attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services have a positive relationship with the intention to use a clothing subscription rental service.

H8. Subjective norms have a positive relationship with the intention to use a clothing subscription rental service.

Research methodology

The survey-based research method was used to address the specific aim of this study and test the eight hypotheses developed. A total of 28 items which measure the eight constructs in the model were adapted from previous studies (Alford and Biswas, 2002; Chi, 2018; Kim and Hong, 2011; Ko and Jin, 2017; Lang and Armstrong, 2018; Lee and Chow, 2020; Rappet al.,2013) with slight modification to fit the context of the current study (see Table 2). All research constructs were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Demographic questions were also included to study the characteristics of the sample such as gender, age, their year of study, major background and income. The survey questionnaire was translated from English to Chinese following the forward–backward translation of the questionnaire and the collaborative and iterative translation process (Douglas and Craig, 2007). The three researchers in the research team who are bilingual in English and Chinese participated in the survey translation process. Before the actual data collection, the pre-test of the study by ten Chinese college students was conducted to refine the survey questionnaire.

The data were collected from a convenience sample of college students at a large public university in Southeastern China. Respondents were undergraduate and graduate students aged mainly 18–25. The online survey questionnaire for data collection was developed using the Qualtrics software. Upon the institutional review board approval of this study, the survey invitations with the online survey link were distributed among the university students through WeChat, a powerful and popular social media platform in China.

To minimize the common method bias, the following steps were taken in the study:

- The researchers strove to get the measures of the independent and dependent variables from different sources.
- Attention was paid to not to place the measurement of the independent variables close to the measurement of the dependent variables in the questionnaire design (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 2
 Profile of the survey respondents

<i>Demographic information</i>	<i>(%)</i>
• Gender	
• Male	22.3
• Female	77.2
• Prefer not to answer	0.4
<i>Age</i>	
• 18	29.6
• 19	20.6
• 20	18.8
• 21	12.6
• 22	11.2
• 23	3.1
• 24 and older	3.8
<i>Education status</i>	
• Freshmen	43.8
• Sophomore	20.1
• Junior	25.4
• Senior	4.5
• GraduateSchool	4.0
• Other	4.0
<i>Monthly disposable income</i>	
• Less than 500 RMB	8.5
• 500–999 RMB	14.3
• 1,000–1,499 RMB	17.9
• 1,500–1,999 RMB	16.5
• 2,000–3,000 RMB	34.4
• 2,000–3,000 RMB	8.4

- The survey respondents were assured anonymity. Moreover, an ex post evaluation was conducted.

Harman’s single-factor test was performed based on principal component analysis and the results showed that not a relevant amount of variance can be explained by single factor; thus, the result suggests no evidence of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Results

Profile of the survey respondents

A total of 315 responses were collected and 255 are valid after data screening. About 22% respondents were male and 77% were females. A total of 69% of the respondents were 18–20 years old, and 27% were 21–23 years old. Table 2 shows the demographic information of the survey respondents.

Table 3
Survey respondents’ behavior toward clothing subscription rental services

Behavior Toward Clothing Subscription Rental Services	(%)
<i>If you use or plan to use clothing subscription rental services, what would be your primary motivation?</i>	
Economic reasons (cost)	42.2
Environmental reasons	9.4
Desire to follow the trend	8.2
Desire to join a like-minded sharing community	4.5
Access to a variety of product choices	21.3
Fun/enjoyment	9.0
Other	5.4
<i>When thinking about clothing subscription rental services, what worries you the most?</i>	
Concern for hygiene	63.5
Fear of unauthentic products	5.7
Unfamiliar/complicated process	9.0
Service quality	12.3
Limited product choices	7.4
Other	2.1

When thinking about clothing subscription rental services, what type(s) of clothing would you like to rent using clothing subscription rental service?

Jackets/coats	6.6
Blouses and shirts	0.0
Work clothing	7.0
Ceremonial dress (wedding clothing, folk costumes, etc.)	38.1
Performance clothing (dance clothes, dance costumes, sportswear, etc.)	36.9
Shoes	4.5
Handbags	4.9
Other	2.0

Do you have any experience of using subscription rental services for renting clothes?

Yes	31.1
No	68.9

If you have used clothing subscription rental services, what is the frequency that you use subscription rental service for renting clothes?

Every week or more often	2.9
Every two weeks	1.5
Every month	2.9
Every two months	2.9
Every quarter	5.9
Every half year	2.9
Infrequently	79.5
Other	1.5

Table 3 shows the survey respondents' behaviors toward clothing subscription rental services. A total of 64% of the respondents indicated that the biggest concern for them to use clothing subscription rental services is hygiene. The biggest factor that drives the respondents' adoption intention toward clothing subscription rental services is saving money (42%). The most popular categories of clothing to rent are ceremonial dress (38%) (e.g. wedding clothing, folk costumes, academic dress, etc.) and performance clothing (37%) (e.g. dance clothes, dance costumes and sportswear). A total of 31% of the respondents reported that they have experienced the clothing subscription rental services; however, the majority of them used the services infrequently. This indicates that clothing subscription rental services represent a new technology for most of the survey respondents. Thus, the present study is appropriate to examine who the potential

customers of this new service are and what the determinants of using clothing subscription rental services are. Specifically, the study investigates what consumer traits (fashion leadership, quality consciousness, price consciousness, environmental consciousness and social media usage) lead to consumers' positive attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services, which further result in their intention to use it.

Measurement model and psychometric properties

The two-step approach of structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the proposed hypotheses. SEM with maximum likelihood estimation was used for data analysis using Mplus version 8.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017). SEM procedure of confirmatory factor analysis was used to evaluate the measurement model. The measurement model fit indices were acceptable: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.071, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.904, Tucker Lewis index (TLI) = 0.913 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.083 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). For the psychometric properties of the measurement model, reliability and validity were assessed. Table 2 shows the results of the evaluation of the measurement model, including standardized factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted. Cronbach's α for all constructs was greater than 0.90, indicating high level of internal reliability of the measurement scales. The AVE values ranged from 0.573 to 0.889 and CR values ranged from 0.801 to 0.960, indicating the satisfactory convergence validity of the measurement model. Discriminant validity of the measurement model was achieved as the AVE value of each construct is greater than the squared correlation coefficients between that construct and other latent factors in the measurement model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Thus, the measurement model was satisfactory for testing the structural relationships in the model (Table 4).

Structural model and hypothesis testing

The SEM analysis of the structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.38$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.901, TLI = 0.903, SRMR = 0.081. The SEM analysis results of the hypothesis testing supported six out of the eight hypothesized relationships. The structural model results are summarized in Figure 2.

This study tested the effects of fashion leadership ($H1$), quality consciousness ($H2$), price consciousness ($H3$) and consumer environmental consciousness ($H4$) on attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services. The results illustrated that fashion leadership ($H1$: $\gamma = 0.182$, $t = 2.882$, $p < 0.01$) and price consciousness ($H3$: $\gamma = 0.132$, $t = 2.106$, $p < 0.05$) have a significant influence on attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services. Thus, $H1$ and $H3$ were supported. In contrast, quality consciousness ($H2$: $\gamma = 0.076$, $t = 1.005$, $p > 0.05$) and consumer environmental consciousness ($H4$: $\gamma = 0.088$, $t = 0.157$, $p > 0.05$) do not have a significant influence on attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services. Thus, $H2$ and $H4$ were not supported.

Regarding $H5$ and $H6$, whether social media usage significantly influences consumers' attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services and subjective norms, the results show that social media usage significantly impacts both consumers attitudes ($H5$: $\gamma = 0.440$, $t = 5.407$, $p < 0.001$) and subjective norms ($H6$: $\gamma = 0.289$, $t = 4.230$, $p < 0.001$), hence, $H5$ and $H6$ were supported.

This study also tested *H7* and *H8*, the impact of Chinese young consumers' attitude and subjective norms on their intention to use toward using clothing subscription rental services. The results showed that attitudes and subjective norms significantly impact their intention to use clothing subscription rental services ($\beta = 0.170$, $t = 2.740$, $p < 0.01$) and ($\beta = 0.576$, $t = 11.095$, $p < 0.001$). Both *H7* and *H8* were supported.

Table 4
Measurement model results

<i>Constructs and items</i>	<i>Standardized factor loading</i>	<i>Composite reliability</i>	<i>AVE</i>
<i>Fashion leadership (FL) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94)</i>		0.815	0.596
FL1: My friends turn to me for advice on fashion and clothing styles	0.739		
FL2: I influence the type of clothing my friends buy	0.729		
FL3: Many of my friends regard me as a good source of advice on clothing and fashions	0.843		
<i>Price consciousness (PC) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91)</i>		0.899	0.641
PC1: I am willing to go to extra effort to find lower prices	0.761		
PC2: I will shop at more than one store to take advantage of low prices	0.764		
PC3: I would always shop at more than one store to find low prices	0.796		
PC4: The money saved by finding lower prices is usually worth the time and effort	0.852		
PC5: The time it takes to find lower prices is usually worth the effort	0.827		
<i>Quality consciousness (QC) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.96)</i>		0.884	0.718
QC1: Getting very good quality product is very important to me	0.773		
QC2: In general, I usually try to rent the best quality product	0.929		
QC3: I make a special effort to choose the best quality products	0.833		
<i>Consumer environmental knowledge (EK) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91)</i>		0.885	0.566
EK1: I know that I buy products and packages that are environmentally safe	0.807		
EK2: I know more about recycling than the average person	0.881		
EK3: I know how to select products and packages that reduce the amount of waste ending up in the landfills	0.862		

(table continued on next page)

<i>Social media usage (SMU) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91)</i>	0.801	0.573
SMU1: I use social media to find and spread information	0.715	
SMU2: Social media is primarily for information	0.785	
SMU3: I use social media to keep abreast of current events	0.770	
<i>Attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services (ATT) (Cronbach's alpha = .096)</i>	0.933	0.737
ATT1: Renting clothes through subscription services is beneficial	0.852	
ATT2: Renting clothes through subscription services is pleasant	0.831	
ATT3: Renting clothes through subscription services is good	0.894	
ATT4: Renting clothes through subscription services is valuable	0.83	
ATT5: Renting clothes through subscription services is enjoyable	0.884	
<i>Subjective norm (SN) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94)</i>	0.960	0.889
SN1: Most people who are important to me think that I should rent clothing items through subscription services	0.872	
SN2: Most people who are important to me rent clothing items through subscription services	0.974	
SN3: The people in my life whose opinion I value rent clothing items through subscription services	0.978	
<i>Intention to use clothing subscription rental services (IN) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92)</i>	0.921	0.796
IN1: I intend to use subscription service to rent clothes in the next six months	0.895	
IN2: It is likely that I will use subscription service to rent clothes in the next six months	0.939	
IN3: I will not use subscription service to rent clothes in the next 6 months	0.839	

Notes: AVE: average variance extracted; valid $N = 255$; all standardized factor loadings are significant ($p < 0.001$)

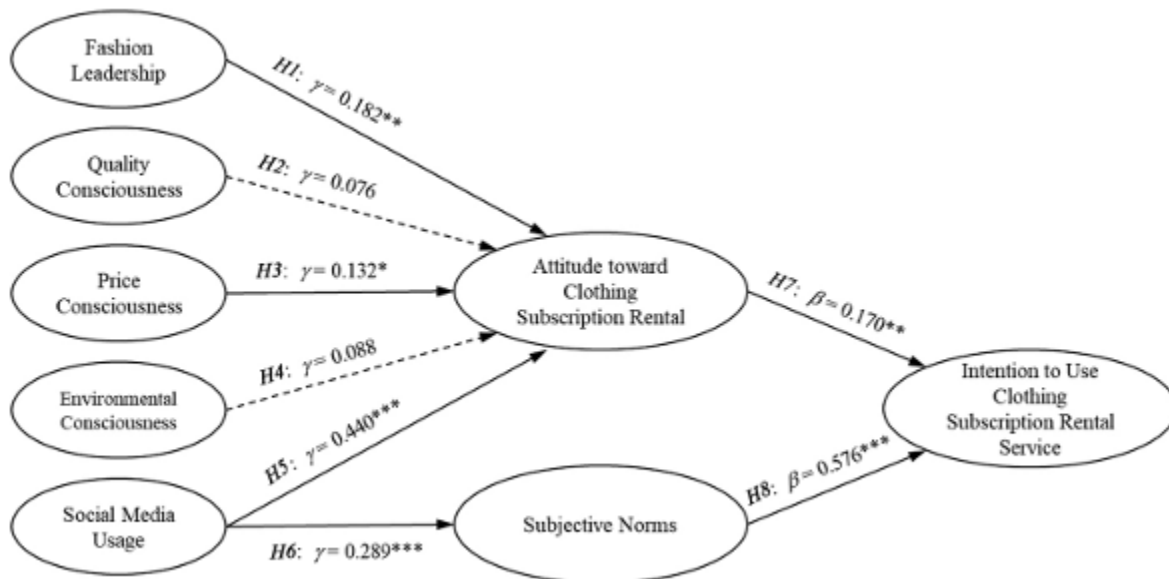
Discussion and implications

Discussion

This study showed that fashion leadership and price consciousness were positively related to consumers' attitude toward using clothing subscription rental services ($H1$ and $H3$ were supported). The findings are consistent with previous studies on the impact of fashion leadership and price consciousness on consumers' attitudes toward collaborative consumption (Lang and Armstrong, 2016; Lindblom *et al.*, 2018). Compared to other consumers, fashion leaders are more interested in fashion than other consumers, and more confident in their own style; they are the first to purchase new styles and influence others to adopt the latest fashion trends and buy new fashion products. Furthermore, they are more concerned about their physical appearance than other consumers (Lee and Workman, 2014). In addition, fashion leaders are people who constantly create new ideas and are more willing to try new things (Workman and Studak, 2006).

Goldsmith *et al.* (1993) indicated that younger consumers are more likely to be fashion leaders. According to Lang *et al.* (2020), online fashion renting (i.e. subscription rental services) has become the fastest growing business and a new trend in the fashion industry. It provides the hottest fashion trend to consumers who want to adopt new fashion products earlier than others and offers high-end fashion products to consumers who cannot afford to buy such fashion products. A rapidly growing number of Chinese young consumers have become more interested in new fashion styles, retail concepts and shopping experiences. Thus, Chinese young consumers with a higher level of fashion leadership tend to have favorable attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services. This study also suggests that to attract more consumers, clothing subscription rental service providers should emphasize fashion-forward brands and the latest fashion products to their consumers and offer these up-to-date fashion products earlier than other marketers.

Figure 2. Structural model and hypothesis testing results



Notes: γ and β are standardized coefficients; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dashed lines represent the paths with non-significant results

Likewise, our findings suggest that Chinese young consumers with a higher price consciousness are more likely to have favorable attitude toward using clothing subscription services to rent fashion products. As a consumer behavioral trait (Shoham and Brenčič, 2004), price consciousness is considered one of the key factors in adopting online apparel rental services (Lee and Chow, 2020). Price-conscious consumers enjoy searching for and buying products at discounted prices in the marketplace (Alford and Biswas, 2002). Engaging in collaborative consumption (e.g. renting clothing) is one of the key reasons for consumers who want to save money (Lindblom *et al.*, 2018). Renting fashion products has recently become a stimulating phenomenon in China (Atwal, 2021). Using clothing subscription rental services is a good idea for consumers who want to wear something luxury at a relatively lower cost and for a shorter period of time (Lang and Armstrong, 2016). Thus, subscription rental service companies should offer consumers to rent designer label brands and high-end fashion products at reasonable prices.

Surprisingly, the study showed that quality consciousness did not significantly impact attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services (*H2* was not supported). Lang *et al.* (2013) indicated that quality consciousness represents consumers' perception of the product quality and encourages consumers to pay more attention to product quality when purchasing apparel. On the one hand, one of the consumers' motivations for fashion renting is to have high-quality products that they cannot afford to buy (Lang *et al.*, 2020; Yuan and Shen, 2019). On the other hand, Lang *et al.* (2020) found that poor product quality is a major roadblock for fashion renting. For example, Lang *et al.* (2020) mentioned that "poor fit, bad quality, wrong sizes and not meeting expectations were the major complaints from consumers" (p. 139). When Chinese young consumers with a higher level of quality consciousness believe that fashion subscription renting cannot provide satisfactory quality products, they may hesitate to try this new model. Their concerns about receiving poor quality products may even lead to negative perceptions of their experiences. To attract quality-conscious consumers' adoption of these services and to prevent consumers' negative perceptions, apparel subscription rental companies should provide consistent high-quality products to their consumers. They should actively provide more information to their target consumers about what unique designs and quality fashion products are offered and how they clean and maintain the original high quality of garments in their subscription rental business model.

Contrary to expectations, the study showed that consumers' environmental consciousness has no impact on consumer attitude toward clothing subscription rental services (*H4* was not supported). Considering that using clothing subscription rental services have sustainability potentials (Lang *et al.*, 2020), this finding is not consistent with previous studies' findings which demonstrate that environmental knowledge has a significant influence on consumer sustainable consumption behavior (Bang *et al.*, 2000; Dhir *et al.*, 2021; Polonsky *et al.*, 2012; Yadav and Pathak, 2016). However, according to Paço and Lavrador (2017), consumers' higher level of environmental knowledge does not necessarily affect their attitudes toward environmentally friendly behavior. Therefore, it is no surprise that our study did not provide support for the relationship between consumer's environmental consciousness and their attitude toward using clothing subscription rental services. This implies that although Chinese young consumers have been more interested in environmental protection, their greater environmental awareness may not be transferred to their favorable attitude toward using clothing subscription services for apparel rental. Moreover, it is possible that they have little knowledge about subscription rental services and lack awareness that renting clothes can benefit the environment and is considered as sustainable consumer behavior. Therefore, we suggest that subscription rental companies should educate their target consumers on how renting clothes is an environment-friendly consumer behavior and contributes environmental sustainability (Lee and Huang, 2021).

As we expected, social media usage was a significant predictor of attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services and subjective norms (*H5* and *H6* were supported). These findings are consistent with previous studies in the context of sustainable consumer behavior (Pop *et al.*, 2020; Zafar *et al.*, 2021). Because of the popularity of various social media platforms in China, Chinese consumers have spent more time on social media, connected with each other and shared their knowledge and product experiences through social media communities (i.e. WeChat) (Chu *et al.*, 2019). Zhang and Dong (2021) stated that Chinese consumers actively seek others'

experiences and product recommendations on social media before purchasing apparel products. Our results suggest that Chinese young consumers with higher social media usage tend to be strongly influenced by their friends, family members and significant others in their social circles and have more favorable attitude toward clothing subscription rental services. In addition, Zhang and Dong (2021) also indicated that the strong influence of social media encourages more and more Chinese consumers to adopt sustainable clothing consumption behavior (i.e. second-hand clothing, renting apparel, reusing old clothes). As more and more environment-friendly behaviors (i.e. renting clothes) have been going viral on social media, Chinese young consumers' higher social media engagement strongly led to their favorable attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services and their perceptions of the social norms.

Both *H7* and *H8* were supported, which confirmed previous studies in the contexts of subscription box service (Ramkumar and Woo, 2018), collaborative consumption (Lang and Armstrong, 2018; Lindblom *et al.*, 2018) and online fashion rental (Lee and Chow, 2020). The findings of this study show that Chinese young consumers tend to use clothing subscription rental services when they have a positive perception of using them and when the social influences are high.

Implications

Although clothing subscription rental has recently become an interesting topic and subscription rental services have been rapidly growing in China, research on this phenomenon is still scarce (Lang *et al.*, 2019). This study has taken an essential step toward understanding this phenomenon in the context of Chinese young consumers. The study's findings offer valuable theoretical and managerial implications for researchers and fashion brand marketers. Theoretically, this study investigated the effects of consumer characteristics on attitude and use intention toward clothing subscription rental services, which is an innovative fashion retail business model in China. There is limited research on consumer behavior related to clothing subscription rental services. Previous research on subscription fashion retailing is exploratory in nature by using qualitative method with small sample size (Tao and Xu, 2018). This study contributes to the literature by integrating additional factors (fashion leadership, quality consciousness, price consciousness, consumer environmental knowledge, social media usage) into the traditional TRA model. Based on the integrated conceptual framework, the study empirically examines how these five essential traits of Chinese young consumers impact their attitudes toward using clothing subscription rental services, and how their attitude and social norms impact their intention to use clothing subscription rental services. By surveying a group of Chinese college students, the study advances the understanding of Chinese young consumers' attitude and adoption intention in relation to clothing subscription rental services. The study offers convincing evidence that fashion leadership, price consciousness and social media usage are the three main drivers of Chinese young consumers' favorable attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services, which together with social norms further lead to their intention to use clothing subscription rental services.

Practically, this study provides practical insights about what consumer characteristics motivate Chinese young consumers to use clothing subscription rental services. Understanding the effects of consumer traits helps fashion retail marketers and subscription rental companies know what kind of consumers are more likely to use the clothing subscription rental services, which enables

them to adjust their marketing plans to reach their target consumers and engage more target consumers in embracing clothing subscription rental services. The study findings imply that to increase the adoption intention, clothing subscription rental service providers should focus on promoting their pioneering business model, their unique, personalized and new fashion products and their cost advantages, so young consumers can feel that the use of clothing subscription rental services aligns with their personal traits. When young consumers sense the natural fit between the companies' offerings and their personal characteristics, they have a higher tendency to adopt the services. For example, subscription rental service providers could promote aspirational fashion brands with reasonable price level on social media. For young fashion consumers, using subscription rental services to get aspirational fashion brands is an effective and financially feasible way to demonstrate their fashion leadership.

Fashion marketers and subscription rental service providers should target young consumers. Young consumers are interested in fashion and online almost, but they have limited financial resources. They are more willing to embrace new ideas and demand new retail experiences in apparel consumption. Innovative retail business models and shopping venues have been rapidly used in China's fashion market to satisfy fashion consumers' needs in a more personalized and unique way. Clothing subscription rental service providers should improve their product quality level and develop their marketing messages to inform their customers of their satisfactory product quality. Moreover, with more and more consumers emphasize environmental protection and sustainable consumer behavior, this innovative business model could also highlight fashion sustainability issues and their unique way of contributing to fashion sustainability. These efforts can further increase consumer awareness of the business model and expand their customer base by attracting quality conscious and environmental-conscious consumers to adopt these services.

Finally, another practical implication for clothing subscription rental service firms is that marketers should focus on expanding their service promotion and advertising to both female and male young consumers. Although the majority of the survey respondents in the present study were female, there are still potential opportunities for attracting young male consumers to adopt this innovative business model. As more and more young male consumers (e.g. Gen Z consumers) are interested in fashion and new business models, marketers of clothing subscription rental services have great potential to tap into this emerging consumer group.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed. First, the study surveyed a convenience sample of college students in a public university in Southeastern China. Using this convenience sample of college students may not represent the general population of Chinese young consumers who use subscription rental services. Thus, the results of this study may limit generalizability. Future studies can use a random sample of Chinese college students from various geographical locations or compare and contrast the perspectives and attitudes of college students from metropolitan cities and small cities. Also, future research could investigate the general population of Chinese young consumers to have better generalizability. Second, this study examined Chinese young consumers. Consumers from different cultures and countries may have different perceptions and characteristics of using clothing subscription rental services. Therefore, future research could extend the present study by including samples from other countries. Third, this study focused on the impacts of external variables (fashion leadership,

quality consciousness, price consciousness, consumer environmental consciousness and social media usage) on consumers' attitudes toward clothing subscription rental services. Our future research could revise the proposed conceptual model by adding other variables such as perceived behavior control or self-efficacy. Because the clothing subscription rental service is a relatively new business model, it is necessary to investigate whether consumers' self-efficacy or perceived behavior control impact their attitudes and intention to use the service. In addition, future research could examine the role of the control variables (e.g. demographic variables) in impacting young consumers' subscription rental service adoption.

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