

Sharing Styles without Feeling Gross:  
The Influence of Contamination on Consumers' Collaborative Consumption Intentions

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## Introduction

Collaborative consumption (CC)—where consumers share ownership of cars, clothes, lodging, or other commodities—has gained tremendous popularity in recent years through the emergence of platforms like Uber, Airbnb, and Rent the Runway. Nevertheless, studies have yet to uncover the specific factors that can be leveraged by companies to increase consumer secondhand purchase or rental intentions toward shareable goods. One major concern among CC users is the issue of contamination (i.e., feeling ‘grossed out’ when sharing items with anonymous others). Building on the influence of physical attractiveness and racial similarity theory, the purpose of this research is to examine the presence of positive contamination cues in CC through an experimental study. The findings will enhance the academics’ and practitioners’ understanding on how to better engage consumers in CC of apparel.

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

### Physical Attractiveness: “What is Beautiful is Good”

Humans tend to associate high levels of attractiveness with positive attributes, often leading to an increase in ad effectiveness and salesperson’s performance (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Ahearne et al., 1999). Physical attractiveness leads to what is known as the *positive contamination effect*—when consumers see an attractive individual touching the product, their evaluations of the product becomes favorable (Argo et al., 2008). In peer-to-peer CC, the seller’s (i.e., previous owner) profile photo often serves as a cue for consumers to reduce uncertainty and increase buying confidence. Applying the positive contamination effect, the seller’s physical attractiveness shown in the photo may result in a positive evaluation toward the products. Therefore, *a consumer’s rental (H1) and secondhand purchase (H2) intentions are greater for fashion items that have been worn by attractive individuals than unattractive individuals.*

Previous studies have indicated that the degree of contact with the contaminated goods affects the strength of the contamination effect (Angyal, 1941). In other words, people become increasingly “grossed out” as the proximity of the contaminated or disgusting object to their body decreases. In CC context, when the shared items require higher levels of contact with the body, consumers become more sensitive to the identities of the people who previously wore the item in order to minimize perceived contamination. One solution is to purchase items from an attractive seller, enhancing the positive contamination effect. Hence, *the influence of attractiveness on consumer purchase intentions is moderated by the level of contact with the*

*fashion items, such that a consumer's preference for purchasing fashion items from an attractive seller is greater than for items requiring a greater degree of contact (H3).*

### Similarity Attraction Theory

Similarity attraction theory suggests that people are attracted to others who are similar to themselves in regard to traits such as age, gender, or ethnicity (Byrne, 1971; Smith, 1998). During CC, one of the most salient demographic features visible to buyers through the seller's profile picture is the seller's race. Based on the similarity attraction theory, consumers may be more hospitable when a racially similar other has contaminated the object, as opposed to a racially dissimilar other, leading to a positive contamination effect. Thus, *a consumer's rental (H4) and secondhand purchase (H5) intentions are greater for fashion items that have been worn by individuals with a perceived similarity in race.*

Finally, since the positive contamination effect may occur between racially similar buyers and sellers, this effect may be more pronounced for items requiring higher degrees of contact with the body in order to reduce product risk and perceived contamination. As a result, *the influence of racial similarity on consumer purchase intentions is moderated by the level of contact, such that a consumer's preference for purchasing fashion items from a seller perceived to be similar in race are heightened for items requiring higher degrees of contact (H6).*

### Method and Results

A total of 377 American female consumers aged 18 years or older were recruited via MTurk and were randomly assigned to one of the twelve CC scenarios (i.e., 2 attractiveness x 2 racial similarity x 3 shirt renting, shirt secondhand purchasing, and handbag secondhand purchasing). In the mock website, the seller's profile photo was displayed. The images of an attractive/unattractive individual were selected from a pretest. Images of four racial groups (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian) were also displayed, and racial similarity level between the respondents and sellers was determined using the median score of respondents' answers to perceived similarity question. For the moderation effect, a shirt was chosen as the high-contact item, and a handbag was chosen as the low-contact item, also as the result of a pretest. Rental/purchase intentions of each cell were measured and analyzed via ANCOVA and moderated regression analyses. Age, income, and education level were controlled.

The ANCOVA analysis reveals that the mean of participants' rental intentions was not significantly higher when renting from a physically attractive seller ( $M_{\text{attractive}} = 2.33$ ,  $M_{\text{unattractive}} = 1.82$ ,  $F_{(1,59)} = 1.69$ ,  $p = .20$ ), not supporting H1. However, the mean purchase intentions were significantly greater for attractive seller ( $M_{\text{attractive}} = 2.47$ ,  $M_{\text{unattractive}} = 1.44$ ,  $F_{(1,60)} = 6.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting H2. The regression results revealed that there was no significant moderating effect of degree of contact with the fashion items ( $F \text{ change} = .91$ ,  $p = .34$ ), rejecting H3. There was no significant mean difference between respondents' rental intentions for racially similar sellers and dissimilar sellers ( $M_{\text{similar}} = 1.66$ ,  $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 1.43$ ,  $F_{(1,69)} = .01$ ,  $p = .91$ ). Thus, H4 was not supported. On the other hand, there was a significant mean difference in secondhand purchase

intentions when purchasing from a racially similar seller and a racially dissimilar seller ( $M_{\text{similar}} = 2.77$ ,  $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 1.73$ ,  $F_{(1,64)} = 6.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ), supporting H5. Lastly, there was no significant moderating effect based on the degree of contact ( $F_{\text{change}} = .03$ ,  $p = .86$ ), rejecting H6.

## Discussion

The findings showed that while consumers preferred to purchase fashion items from attractive or racially similar sellers in secondhand purchase context (H2 & H5), such was not true when renting (H1 & H4). These results can be explained by the level of psychological ownership (Atasoy & Morewedge, 2017). That is, in renting context where consumers access the ownership only for a short time (i.e., psychological ownership is low), consumers may not be as susceptible toward positive contamination cues, as opposed to purchase context (i.e., psychological ownership is high). In addition, the degree of contact (H3 & H6) did not show any significant moderation effect, which suggests the discovered effects of positive contamination cues (i.e., physical attractiveness and racial similarity) are powerful enough to be applied to all fashion items regardless of their levels of physical contact. Further implications are suggested.

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