

Addressing the Contamination Issue in Fashion Sharing:
Does Ownership Type of Shared Goods Matter?

Naeun Lauren Kim, University of Minnesota
ByoungHo Ellie Jin, North Carolina State University

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Background and Objectives

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing trend in the sharing of commodities by renting or purchasing secondhand goods through online platforms—a phenomenon known as collaborative consumption (CC). Given the global popularity of CC, a large number of companies that provide online platforms to connect users have also emerged (e.g., Uber, Airbnb, and Rent the Runway). These companies are constantly seeking ways to attract more users to actively engage in CC through their platforms. Nevertheless, current academic research has yet to uncover the specific factors that can be leveraged by companies to increase consumer purchases of or rental intentions toward shareable goods. One of the major concerns among CC users is the issue of contamination (i.e., feeling ‘grossed out’ when sharing items with anonymous others) (Edbring, Lehner, & Mont, 2016). Still, very little is known about how CC companies can handle this issue. The purpose of this research is to examine the issue of contamination through exploring the effect on consumers’ CC intentions by ownership type of the shared goods.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

In the marketing and retailing literature, the issue of contamination has been theorized as the consumer contamination effect, which describes contamination from consumers’ touching that often results in *negative* implications for the touched product. That is, consumers evaluate products that they view as having been contaminated by other shoppers (even just the idea of it) less favorably because they feel disgusted, which in turn generates negative emotions toward the product (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006). One of the key deterrents against CC participation is the contamination issue (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Edbring et al., 2016). When sharing fashion items, consumers may perceive them to be less fresh or clean, thus devaluing the shared objects and discouraging current and prospective consumers from purchasing them.

Fashion CC business models can be classified into two categories according to the type of ownership and management of “shared goods”: *corporate-owned* versus *consumer-owned*. *Corporate ownership* means that the shared goods are purchased, managed, and merchandised by the CC service provider, and consumers interact with the company that owns and manages the items (e.g., Rent the Runway, Stitch Fix, and ThredUp). On the other hand, *consumer ownership* indicates that the shared goods are owned, managed, and merchandised by consumers, who merely borrow the service providers’ platforms and interact directly with one another to shop or rent from each other’s closets (e.g., Poshmark, eBay, and Style Lend). Compared to *consumer-owned* fashion goods, *corporate-owned* fashion goods are often perceived to be more neutral

since there is no direct contact with the previous owner. Under *consumer-ownership*, there is a greater association between the fashion goods and the owner, and consumers may be more concerned about how the owner has maintained the item (e.g., cleaning). For this reason, it is postulated that the negative contamination effect will be more pronounced in *consumer-owned* fashion goods than in *corporate-owned* items, resulting in less rental or purchase intentions for the former. Therefore, *a consumer's rental (H1) and secondhand purchase (H2) intentions for corporate-owned fashion items (i.e., lower levels of perceived contamination) is higher than for consumer-owned fashion items (i.e., higher levels of perceived contamination).*

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. Thus, it can be said that the level of contact with the shared fashion goods may moderate the contamination effect. Hence, *the influence of type of ownership on consumer purchase intentions is moderated by the level of contact with the fashion items, such that the consumer's preference for corporate-owned fashion items is greater for items requiring a greater degree of contact (H3).*

Method

A total of 182 American female consumers aged 18 years or older were recruited using MTurk and were randomly assigned to one of the six CC scenarios (e.g., shirt rental, shirt secondhand purchase, handbag secondhand purchase, in either a corporate or consumer ownership setting). Two fictitious CC companies were created for each ownership type. To represent the consumer ownership format, a seller's profile photo was shown next to the fashion item. For the moderation effect, a shirt was chosen as the high-contact item, and a handbag was chosen as the low-contact item as the result of a pretest. Rental/purchase intentions of each cell were measured and analyzed via ANCOVA and moderated regression analysis. Age, income, and education level were controlled. A manipulation check ensured that the degree of perceived contamination was higher for the consumer ownership format than for the corporate ownership format.

Table 1. Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Shared Item	Context	Ownership		F-value
			Corporate (n=92)	Consumer (n=90)	
H1 Supported	Shirt	Rental	2.66	1.37	9.58***
H2 Supported	Shirt	Secondhand Purchase	3.04	1.62	6.922**
H3 Supported	Shirt vs. Handbag	Secondhand Purchase	Moderation	F change	Sig. F change
			Model 1 (main)	5.991	.003
			Model 2 (interaction)	5.674	.019**

Dependent variable: Rental/Purchase intention; ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Discussion and Implications

In both rental (H1) and secondhand purchase (H2) contexts, consumers preferred corporate-owned shared fashion items to consumer-owned shared items. That is, when there is a greater association with the shared item and the current owner (i.e., consumer ownership), it results in a negative contamination effect and lowers consumers' purchase intentions. Such inclinations were more prevalent in the case of the shared shirt than with the handbag (H3), suggesting that consumers feel more grossed out when there is greater physical contact with the item.

Theoretically, this study advances the understanding of CC research by confirming the presence of the negative consumer contamination effect in CC. The findings suggest a possible solution to reduce the negative contamination effect (e.g., corporate-ownership), and the discovery of the degree of contact as a moderator provides new insight into this theory. The findings of this study also provide practitioners with insights into how to handle negative contamination effects. One possible suggestion is to eliminate information about the previous owner.

References

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