



## An Ethnographic Study of Collaborative Consumption: Examining Clothing Swapping

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**Background.** To address the apparel industry's negative environmental impact, new types of consumption have been emerging—from renting and secondary retail to grassroots swapping. These practices, known as collaborative consumption (CC), result in a reduced acquisition of new products and facilitate garment reuse and extension of its useful life (Armstrong et al., 2016). Yet, many consumers are not ready to embrace CC (Lang & Armstrong, 2018). The shift from the ownership-based consumption paradigm to shared- or no-ownership consumption appears to be a major obstacle rooted in the dominant social and cultural materialistic values (Belk, 2014). To ease the transition to CC, *temporary* clothing swapping between two consumers might be a viable strategy to introduce more people to the sharing economy concept.

To date, scholars examined swapping from the perspective of an organizational model, when a third party facilitates swap meets (e.g., Albinsson & Perera, 2012) or swap shops (e.g., Henninger et al., 2019) as well as informal swapping parties among a group of friends (e.g., Albinsson & Perera, 2009; Matthews & Hodges, 2016). We are beginning to understand consumer motivations and barriers to participate in clothing swaps (Castellani et al., 2015; Farrant et al., 2010; Grimson & Jordan, 2015; Lang & Zhang, 2019), yet the “lack of research is acute” (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018, p. 190). In previous studies, swapping was associated with *permanent* product ownership transfer. However, *temporary* clothing swapping (temp swap) between swap partners has not been studied.

Based on extant research, we defined temp swap as clothing exchange between two consumers that does *not* involve transfer of product ownership and monetary compensation. In line with CC theory (Belk, 2014a, 2014b; Grimson & Jordan, 2015), temp swap is a partner-based sharing that focuses on product usage to facilitate redistribution of underused or unwanted garments. Understanding and promoting temp swap is important given the amount of unused apparel in the millions of US women's wardrobes. The **purpose of this study** was to explore everyday experiences of female consumers participating in temp swap. We aimed to understand benefits, challenges, and meanings constructed by women in the process of swapping parts of their wardrobes with a partner.

**Method.** We used ethnography to explore consumer experiences with temporary clothes swapping. Ethnography's hallmark is the role of the researcher as a participant to allow full immersion in experiencing the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013). In this study, four scholars from four US universities were researchers-participants. Each researcher-participant recruited a swapping partner, a female acquaintance of similar size to facilitate proper fit of exchanged garments. As a result, eight women participated in the study (four pairs consisting of researchers-participants and their partners). This

allowed the four researchers-participants to gain an invaluable insider's view and combine the emic and etic perspectives throughout the data collection and analysis (Goulding, 2005) for a holistic exploration of temp swap, a form of CC.

Following the ethnographic tradition, we conducted our research in participants' natural settings—their own homes over a prolonged period of time. To capture participants' true voices, we selected a non-invasive, semi-structured data collection method based on self-reflection and self-observation of experiences related to the exchange of garments as well as creating and wearing outfits using swapped clothes. As part of the study, each of eight women swapped seven-nine garments with their research partner for a five-month period. All participants followed instructions to document their experiences by keeping a diary; they were given a set of questions to guide their reflection on the experiences before, during, and after the swapping. Participants' photos of swapped garments and the outfits they created became a part of personal journals detailing their daily practices related to swapped garments.

The data, including participant individual reflections and images documenting their swap experiences, was first analyzed by two researchers-participants using content analysis, which is a common technique for making sense of ethnographic texts (Goulding, 2005). First, the two researchers worked independently to open code the data. After discussion of initial codes, they agreed on final codes and categories and re-coded the data. Next, the narrative fragments representing distinct categories were grouped under thematic labels. Finally, the researchers examined interrelationships between the categories to unravel patterns and hidden meanings of participant swapping experiences (Morse, 1994). Following Belk et al. (1988), we used triangulation of interpretation among team members where two other researchers-participants reviewed and commented on emerging themes. In addition, a member-check was completed with two participants.

**Results.** The paper presents a detailed description of research participants and swapped garments and then focuses on a "thick" description of temp swap experiences. We developed four topical areas, each with several themes, that delineate the meanings constructed by swap participants. The first topical area describes perceived swap barriers, including: clothing contamination risk, risk of damaging swapped garments, and psychological risk. The second topical area explores challenges and considerations for choosing the 'right' swapping partner, including: size, compatibility in aesthetics and clothing style, and socio-economic background and lifestyle. The third topical area examines how to select the 'right' clothes for swapping to facilitate the full benefits of the experience for both partners. The final topical area highlights the many benefits of the temp swap. The results indicate that emotional and social benefits were as important, if not more important, as economic benefits. Yet, not all women were able to experience all the benefits to the same extent. Participants who had a close relationship with the swap partner prior to the garment exchange reported much more pronounced social benefits. Further, participants who appeared to be more interested in clothing and/or appearance indicated greater enjoyment and excitement during the entire experience.

**Conclusions and implications.** This study was the first to examine a clothing swap between two consumers that does not involve the transfer of ownership. Using an ethnographic approach, we disentangled the layered meanings constructed by women before, during, and after temp swap. In the paper, we contextualized the research findings within the existing literature, highlighting our study's unique contributions for understanding consumer views of and experiences with temp swap, a type of CC.

To transform the unsustainable material-focused consumption habits, temporary clothing swap might serve as a bridge when moving away from the ownership-based consumption model to CC with shared ownership or no-ownership. Making peer-to-peer temp swap easy to practice (i.e., finding the 'right' swap partner; identifying 'the right' set of swapping garments) presents a business opportunity for developing technological applications as well as an entrepreneurial prospect focusing on building social connections, redistributing resources, and reducing the fashion industry environmental impact. The results of this study might be helpful for organizations and individuals to promote temp swap as an emerging shared consumption model.

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