

## **An Ethnographic Study of Collaborative Fashion Consumption: The Case of Temporary Clothing Swapping**

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### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## Article

# An Ethnographic Study of Collaborative Fashion Consumption: The Case of Temporary Clothing Swapping

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## 1. Introduction

The growing environmental footprint of the apparel industry has received much attention from the public, the industry, and scholars [1]. To address the industry's negative environmental impact, new types of consumption have been emerging—from renting and resale to grassroots swapping. These practices, known as collaborative consumption (CC), result in reduced new product acquisitions, increased product reuse, and extended product lifecycle [2] and are viewed as critical for the fashion industry to meet the 1.5-degree pathway to mitigate climate change [3]. Yet, many consumers are not ready to embrace CC [4]. The shift from the ownership-based consumption paradigm to shared- or no-ownership consumption appears to be a major obstacle rooted in dominant social and cultural materialistic values [5]. To promote these sustainable consumption practices, further research is needed to better understand consumer experiences, motivations, and perceived risks.

*Time Magazine* named collaborative consumption (CC) one of the ten ideas that will change the world [6]. This new socio-economic model is a part of the sharing economy

and positioned between sharing and marketplace economies [7]. Where conventional consumption emphasizes acquisition of new goods and their ownership, CC focuses on shared access to products with the goal of increasing the usage of unwanted or underutilized products [8]. Some forms of CC require monetary transactions (e.g., renting); others rely on exchanging products without payment (e.g., swapping). CC incorporates many different business and social models, from B2C to C2C [9]. We adopted Belk's [10] (p. 1597) widely used definition of CC: "people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation".

CC is transforming the contemporary marketplace in terms of people's relationships with the products as well as with the parties engaged in the collaborative process. Alternative apparel consumption is here to stay—the resale apparel market is projected to quintuple over the first half of the 2020s [11], which may help reduce the industry's environmental footprint by extending and increasing the use of existing clothes. It is important to better understand the phenomenon of CC as Netter and Pedersen [9] (p. 39) conclude that there is a "paucity of research when it comes to the sharing of fashion items".

Swapping, one of the most common types of CC, typically involves "lateral cycling of used goods" with the transfer of product ownership [12] (p. 457). Henninger et al. [7] (p. 329) defined swapping as "the peer-to-peer exchange of goods organized either by individuals or facilitated by a company with the purpose of re-distributing ownership from one owner to another without any monetary exchange for the garment and/or accessory." The authors note that organized swapping among strangers is a relatively new phenomenon as a strategy to supply fashion products for acquisition. In previous studies, clothes swapping was associated with *permanent* product ownership transfer [2,8,13–18].

However, *temporary* swapping between swap partners—where the change of ownership is not intended—has not been studied; even though this informal consumption practice between friends and family members has always been around, only anecdotal evidence exists. In our study, we explore temporary swapping, or temporary swap, which we define as clothing exchange between two people that does not require transfer of product ownership nor monetary compensation. In line with CC theory [5,10,16], temporary swap is a partner-based sharing that focuses on product usage to facilitate redistribution of underused or unwanted garments.

To date, scholars examined swapping from the perspective of an organizational model, when a third party facilitates swap meets [13], or swap shops [7], as well as informal swapping among a group of friends [14,18]. Economic benefits, sustainability, product satisfaction, and social interaction were found to be important drivers of clothing CC [2,14,18–21]. People tend to perceive CC, including swapping, positively, but the favorable attitude does not necessarily translate into behavior [20]. Based on a review of literature, Becker-Leifhold and Iran [22] summarized the major CC barriers as used clothes hygiene and quality; lack of trust in the provider; and lack of ownership. We are just beginning to understand consumer motivations and perceived risks to participate in clothing swaps yet the "lack of research is acute" (p. 190) [22]. Scholars agree that clothing swapping is still under-investigated [18,21]. Thus, there is a strong need to further explore the emerging clothes swapping phenomenon.

To ease the gradual transition from the dominant clothing acquisition practices to sustainable CC, temporary clothing swapping between two consumers might be a viable strategy. Exploring temporary swapping is important as it might encourage reluctant consumers to adopt alternative CC practices, as our research indicates. Given that most US women use less than half of their wardrobes [1], adoption of temporary swapping will have an enormous economic and sustainable impact on individual and societal levels. The purpose of our study was to explore everyday experiences of women participating in temporary clothing swapping to understand benefits, risks, and meanings constructed in the process of exchanging parts of wardrobes with a swap partner. Our research findings contribute to the existing literature on CC and sustainable fashion consumption by providing an in-depth understanding of temporary swapping benefits and risks, some of which have been discussed for the first time. We also explained why some people might

experience greater swapping benefits and, therefore, will be more inclined to participate in collaborative consumption.

## 2. Materials and Methods

We used ethnography to explore consumer experiences with temporary clothes swapping. Ethnography's hallmark is the role of the researcher as a participant in experiencing the phenomenon of interest to allow full immersion and deep understanding [23]. In our study, four scholars from four US universities were researchers–participants. Each researchers–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 [24] for a holistic exploration of temporary clothing swapping, a form of CC.

### 2.1. Data Collection

Following ethnographic tradition, we conducted our research in participants' natural settings, their own homes, and over a prolonged period (six months). To capture women's true voices, we chose a non-invasive, semi-structured data collection method based on self-observation and reflection on the experiences related to the exchange of garments followed by creating and wearing outfits using swapped clothes. Each woman exchanged between seven and nine garments with their swap partner. All participants carefully followed a research protocol to document their experiences by keeping a diary; they were given a set of questions to guide their reflection on the process, actions, and feelings experienced before, during, and after the swapping (Appendix A). Participants' photos of swapped garments and the outfits they created became a part of personal journals detailing their daily practices related to swapped garments. As a result, we collected rich textual and visual data, with no to minimal invasion, allowing women to openly express their thoughts and feelings. One of the researchers assigned pseudonyms to all participants and anonymized the data to maintain the women's confidentiality and to comply with the human subject research approval protocol obtained from the four universities. To indicate swap pairs, swap partners were assigned pseudonyms that start with the same letter.

### 2.2. Participant Description

None of the research participants had prior experience with clothes swapping. Out of the eight participants, five were in their 40s, two in their late 30s, and one in her early 50s. All women had a graduate degree and were working professionals. Two participants' household income was in the range of \$75 K–\$100 K; three—in the range of \$100 K–\$125 K; and another three—more than \$150 K. Half of the women lived in the Midwest, and another half resided in the South of the US. One swap pair lived in the same city, and three other pairs did not. For the latter, two pairs shipped garments for swapping and back after six months, and one pair drove two hours to swap garments.

Eight participants swapped a total of 65 garments. Prior to the swap, they did not discuss what items they would offer to their partner for the exchange. At the end of the study, participants swapped the garments back; however, upon mutual agreement all participants kept in their permanent possessions between one and five swapped items they fell in love with.

### 2.3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data, including participant individual reflections and images documenting their swap experiences, were first analyzed by two researchers–participants using content analysis, which is a common technique for making sense of ethnographic texts [24]. First, the two researchers worked independently to open code the data and discover the benefits, perceived risks, and meanings constructed by women throughout the experience. Next, all

four researchers reviewed and discussed the initial codes together with the goal to check the interpretation against the data and their personal experiences. Another goal of this review was to agree on a systematic strategy to organize and present the emerging results.

Existing classifications that capture the benefits of collaborative fashion consumption (hedonic, utilitarian, and biospheric) [22] or the motives for fashion reselling and swapping (self-oriented and critical) [9] were too broad to adequately reflect the nuances and richness of the participant temporary swapping experiences in our study. After considering several frameworks, we selected a well-known motivation theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs [25,26] because of its comprehensive and systematic approach to explain and classify the diversity of human needs (basic, psychological, self-fulfillment) that drive people's actions. The hierarchy of needs has been extensively described [27] and used by scholars from different disciplines, such as psychology, marketing, hospitality, etc., to explain people's behavior in the context of consumption [28–31]. In our study, we applied Maslow's hierarchy of needs to holistically examine the benefits (satisfied needs) and risks (threatened needs) experienced by participants during partner-based temporary clothing swaps. After the research team agreed on final codes and categories, and the data were re-coded, 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 [11,32].

### 3. Results

To organize the presentation of the results, we follow Maslow's hierarchy [26] from the basic to most advanced human needs. Using the same framework, we discuss the risks of temporary swapping, or the needs that participants perceived that might be threatened as a result of the swapping experience. Finally, based on the women's experiences, we present practical considerations for temporary clothes swapping.

#### 3.1. *The Benefits of Temporary Clothes Swapping*

Temporary swapping addressed the six human needs, from the basic to the most advanced: physiological, safety, social, self-esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence (Table 1).

##### 3.1.1. Physiological: Warmth and Comfort

When describing swapped clothing, all participants matter-of-factly mentioned that they liked some garments more because they were warm, soft, and/or comfortable to wear (did not restrict movements). It is expected that clothing satisfies human physiological needs, which may explain why women only briefly touched on these; unlike the more complex needs in the hierarchy that were described in-depth. Likely for the same reason, physiological needs were not discussed in previous studies, such as a comprehensive review on fashion CC by Becker-Leifhold and Iran [22].

##### 3.1.2. Securing Free Resources: More Clothes to Wear

Following physiological, another type of basic needs is associated with securing resources, property, employment, health, etc. [25,26]. All women discussed the "practical" benefit of securing "free" clothes to wear. They agreed that a significant addition to their wardrobes was one of the major swap advantages. Mary expressed a common dilemma—the feeling she has 'nothing to wear' despite an overflowing closet. Women were very enthusiastic about "significant" and "instant" additions to their wardrobes, and they "loved" that it was free. The economic benefits were especially noticeable because most swapped items were from either inactive wardrobes (not used for several years), or brand-new items acquired by women but never worn. Thus, temporary swapping facilitated the extension of a garment's active lifecycle and kept otherwise idle resources in use. As Sara's comment shows (Table 1), this is especially important for expensive special occasion items that are typically underutilized, resulting in "a waste of money." The economic benefits of swapping and other types of CC are often discussed in extant research (see [22] for a

review). For instance, Grimshorn and Jordan [16] reported that patrons of swapping events and clothing libraries enjoyed cost savings. Clothes supplied for swapping tend to be no longer wanted or underutilized items [3,18].

**Table 1.** Benefits of temporary clothes swapping.

Maslow's Needs	Swapping Benefits	Participant Expressions
<i>Physiological needs</i>	Warmth and comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The fabric is comfortable; and it feels nice to wear the dress: it does not restrict your movements (Alice)</li> <li>I like this shirt because it is flannel (I like the touch of flannel because it is soft and warm) (Mary)</li> </ul>
<i>Securing (free) resources</i>	More clothes to wear at no cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exchanging garments is a huge advantage. It cuts our expenses on individual clothing items, such as an elegant evening gown which, if I had bought it, would certainly cost a lot, however I would wear it only on special occasions, thus it would be a waste of money (Sara)</li> <li>I wanted to have more options in my wardrobe. I like clothes, and I always feel that I need to buy more clothes, I don't have enough to look good. But at the same time, I feel that I have too many clothes that I do not wear (Mary)</li> <li>I will be able to have something new but don't need to spend money. Economic value is one of major reasons I chose swapping (Tina)</li> </ul>
<i>Social needs (e.g., love and belonging)</i>	Deepening friendships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I would like to share my great enthusiasm and joy of having someone close to you to share garments with, as it gives us both the delight of wearing something belonging to someone you are close to (Sara)</li> <li>By wearing someone else's clothes, we also share our appreciation for our friendship and each other's style (Sam)</li> <li>This served as a friendship-building exercise for my partner and I. Though we had little prior contact, through this process we started to interact more. She recently invited me and sent a link to an online convention. We discussed the convention afterwards (Trish)</li> </ul>
<i>Self-esteem needs (e.g., confidence, respect, prestige)</i>	Increased confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I wore the red dress and paired it with tights, tall boots, and a layered denim jacket. I felt great and got many compliments (Alex)</li> <li>I wore the sand-color wool "British" jacket with the gray short pencil skirt. I paired them with a mustard silk blouse and felt like a million bucks J—very professional &amp; well-put-together yet feminine—in sum, quite powerful (Alice)</li> <li>My friends might say that they like my outfit and I would feel great hearing it (Mollie)</li> </ul>
<i>Self-actualization needs (e.g., personal growth, creativity, problem solving)</i>	Experimenting, creativity, and pleasure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I would never, ever purchase Balenciaga sneakers, not only because of their crazy high price, but because they are not aligned with my personal style (they are multicolored and sporty) but since I got them for "free" I was more open to experiment the different ways to wear them and match them with my clothing. At the end of the process, I have realized that I really like this "ugly" pair of sneakers (Sam)</li> <li>When I buy clothes myself, I only focus on certain styles, but if I get some exchanged clothing, I will try something I have never tried before (Tina)</li> <li>I was very excited as I don't normally purchase so many garments at once. It felt like a treat to receive so many pieces of items at once (Trish)</li> <li>I enjoyed the creativity of it. I don't shop that often and have been downsizing my wardrobe for a few years. Getting several new-to-me garments all at once was fun and energizing. I was more creative in how to style the garments—I worked harder to incorporate more accessories to make it into a true 'outfit' (Alex)</li> </ul>
<i>Transcendence needs</i>	Sustainability ideals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I very much want to reduce my environmental footprint so this swapping experiment is a great opportunity to do that AND to feed my creative side that loves to experiment with new clothes (Alice)</li> <li>Swapping allows to practice sustainable clothing consumption and explore new and exciting ways to renew my wardrobe. Clothes swap is a new and exciting opportunity for me, without forcing me to breach my personal [sustainability] commitment (Sam)</li> </ul>

### 3.1.3. Social: Deepening Friendships

Five (63%) women described how the process of exchanging and wearing each other's clothes resulted in a closer relationship with the swap partner, which gave a special meaning to the experience. Because clothing is "very personal," sharing it includes the sharing of the extended self, which results in deepening the relationship with the swap partner. The women who already had a close relationship with their partners prior to the swap, experienced more pronounced social benefits, as excerpts from Sam and Sara's journals indicate (Table 1). This sharing of the extended self with the swap partner created an additional layer of meaning for the women with prior bonds. Developing deeper friendships appeared to be of a greater benefit than even economic benefits for two swap pairs (Sam/Sara and Alice/Alex). In contrast, for Mary and Mollie, who did not know each other well before the swap, the social benefit did not surface. Yet, as Trish's comment shows, swapping can serve as a "friendship-building exercise" even for those participants who did not have a prior close relationship (Table 1). In extant research, swapping participants appreciated social interactions with like-minded people, the sense of community [4,13,14,16] and the opportunity to socialize and make new friends [18]. Such consumer–consumer interactions encourage engagement and a greater chance of performing specific consumption behaviors [33]. Temporary swap appears to take the human need for love and belonging to the next level as it extends brief interactions at swap events to an experience that deepens existing connections, making them more meaningful through sharing and encouraging the sharing of the extended self with a friend.

### 3.1.4. Self-Esteem: Increased Confidence

Six (75%) women discussed in their journals how wearing swapped clothes made them "feel great" (Table 1). This feeling was reinforced when their colleagues, friends, or significant others complimented their looks and outfits, validating their styling efforts. Feeling "great" and "powerful" as well as recognition and admiration of their sense of style and taste by others increased women's confidence and self-esteem, a psychological need in the Maslow's hierarchy [25,26]. Previous studies did not discuss self-esteem as a benefit or motive to engage in CC; likely because these studies focused on the acquisition stage but not the use of swapped or rented garments. The enhanced self-esteem may be unique to the temporary swap experience where special meanings are created because of the sharing the extended self through swapped clothing and trying on a symbolic identity of the swap partner. Further research to understand the role of self-esteem in CC and specifically collaborative fashion consumption is needed.

### 3.1.5. Self-Actualization: Experimenting, Creativity, and Pleasure

Six women (75%) described how swapping presented the opportunity to experiment with new styles, colors, and designs they would have "never purchased" themselves (Table 1). For example, Sam had to perform extensive research to match the chunky "ugly", "multicolored and sporty" Balenciaga sneakers with her classy, clean, and elegant style. Stepping out of their comfort zones by doing things they never have done before resulted in participants' greater flexibility and open-mindedness. Most women (75%) very much enjoyed this process: they shared the excitement of the adventure and how much fun they had challenging the notions of what styles fit their personalities. Half of participants discussed how the process of incorporating the exchanged garments into their wardrobe inspired them to be creative and problem solve. Considering their style, the reflection of self from new perspectives resulted in the women's personal growth.

Temporary swapping addressed the complex and advanced self-actualization needs [25,26] for all participants but through different means: six women enjoyed trying new things; six women experienced intense feelings of joy during the process; and four women used the opportunity to express and enhance their creativity. While previous studies acknowledged similar benefits of swapping, they were not framed as addressing an important human need of self-actualization. For example, Long and Fain [17] (p. 2) reported that swap participants

were “pleasantly surprised” when they tried on “clothes they might not normally consider.” Armstrong et al. [2] found that swapping and renting consumers became more creative with already owned clothes.

Temporary swapping allowed for ‘safe’ experimenting with different styles and colors because women did not have to make economic decisions of purchasing new clothes. Instead, they were able to play with styling swapped garments and test them out by wearing them a few times (and receiving compliments) to decide if they liked them. While renting, borrowing at clothing libraries, or exchanging garments at conventional swap events allows for similar experimentation with different styles [2,16], it is typically not free. Further, when selecting rental garments or clothes at swap events, women are more likely to go for ‘safer’ choices that are in line with their style and personality, unlike the temporary swap experience, where their trusted partners hand-picked clothes for them. In our study, most women agreed that they would have never selected a particular garment themselves yet enjoyed wearing them. Therefore, temporary swap might facilitate a greater level of experimentation (than renting or market-mediated swapping) because the swap partners trust each other’s aesthetic and taste.

### 3.1.6. Transcendence: Sustainability Ideals

Three women (38%) discussed the sustainable benefits of temporary swapping, meeting the ultimate human need at the top of the Maslow’s hierarchy [25,26]. They described how swapping allowed them to acquire garments *without* an environmental footprint of purchasing new clothes and feeling guilty about it. Temporary swapping was a compromise strategy to remain committed to and practice sustainable clothing consumption, while satisfying the crave for experimenting with new and different styles and expressing evolving identities in the process.

Scholars discussed how CC in the form of swapping or renting allowed consumers to practice sustainable clothing acquisition [7,13–15]. Lang and Armstrong [4] concluded that one of the CC drivers was a concern for the environment. In Grimshorn and Jordan [16], swappers and clothing libraries’ patrons were politically motivated to seek sustainable consumption forms. Our study supported the results from the extant research.

## 3.2. The Risks of Temporary Clothes Swapping

Women discussed three types of risk associated with temporary swapping. The risks were classified according to the Maslow’s hierarchy [25,26] as they threatened some basic human needs, safety, and self-esteem. Using participant expressions (Table 2), we discuss how these perceived risks may stop people from adopting swapping and other forms of collaborative fashion consumption.

### 3.2.1. Health Safety Risk: Garment Contamination

The greatest risk of swapping for all participants was potential clothing contamination, which was perceived as a threat to one’s health, a basic human need. While mostly enthusiastic about temporary swapping experiences, women in our study agreed they would not exchange clothes with a “stranger” due to “hygienic reasons” (Table 2). All participants were open to another temporary swap with the same or different partner, but no one wanted to swap with someone who was not “close” to them. Even Sam, who relies primarily on secondhand when acquiring clothing, was open to renting, but would never lend her clothes to someone she did not know. To mitigate the risk, all women agreed that swapping with someone they know and trust was the key to a successful experience. Previous research identified the major concern as the lack of trust in the provider of rented or swapped clothes [2,15], which was mitigated in our study by self-selecting swap partner. Similarly, Matthews and Hodges [18] (p. 98) found women preferred swapped to secondhand clothes because they “knew exactly who and where the clothing came from . . . they felt more secure about the items”.



**Table 2.** The risks of temporary clothes swapping.

Maslow's Needs	Swapping Risks	Participant Expressions
<i>Safety risk</i> (e.g., security of body, health, and resources)	Garment contamination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I would certainly not swap clothes with people who I don't know personally, due to hygienic reasons. I would share clothes with another partner as long as it is someone close to me. I wouldn't be comfortable wearing clothes belonging to someone I don't feel close to (Sara)</li> <li>I liked that I swapped garments with someone I knew quite well, so there was this level of trust and comfort. Not sure if I'd be comfortable swapping with a complete stranger (Alice)</li> <li>I do have apprehensions regarding benefits of temporary swap of my personal garments with women that I don't know. For example, even though there are various clothes' rental services and even clothes swap apps (e.g., byrotation.com), I would feel comfortable to rent a bag, or a coat, a dress, nevertheless I wouldn't give my own clothing items for rental (Sam)</li> </ul>
	Garment damage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I had a dilemma when traveling: I took swap items on two separate trips. I did pause before doing this as I thought about potentially losing them or, for some reason, I had an unfounded thought that I was more likely to stain or damage them when traveling. I overcame this as I was more drawn to the 'new' items when packing (Alex)</li> <li>[For swapping], I hesitated to choose winter clothing, like sweaters, suede jackets, or silk shirts which needed more care. So I just chose the garments that I didn't wear or didn't like much (Mollie)</li> </ul>
<i>Self-esteem risk</i> (e.g., confidence, respect from others, prestige)	Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I was little nervous because I was not sure if I can find a partner who is close enough that I can ask a favor like that. I felt that swapping clothes is very personal, as if I share my personal information. It was little hard for me to find and talk to a swapping partner because I felt it is very personal of sharing/exchanging clothes. I thought that when I share clothes with other people, that person might be judgmental about what clothes and what styles I share with her (Mary)</li> <li>I believed that some friends would not be open to exchange their clothes as we are not too close (I hear them saying No, even though I never asked). Because of these possible obstacles, I decided to swap clothes with a friend who already borrowed some items from my wardrobe. Because of that my expectation was that she will be excited about this opportunity, and she will accept my invitation (Sam)</li> </ul>

### 3.2.2. Safety Risk: Garment Damage

Five (63%) women discussed the risk of accidentally damaging swapped garments. This included the garments they received from the swap partners as well as the ones they provided in exchange. These women had "unfounded" fears that they might unintentionally stain or misplace swapped items. Similarly, they considered that their garments might not be cared for properly. However, having trusted friends as swapped partners helped to alleviate these concerns. In addition, most swapped garments were from inactive wardrobes—not worn for several years, or new with tags, as Mollie's comment illustrates (Table 2). In previous research, consumers perceived the risk of personal liability for damaging rented garments [2]. Similarly, swap event participants were concerned that their garments could be damaged, even though they were ready to give up the ownership [7].

### 3.2.3. Self-Esteem Risk: Vulnerability

Half of women discussed psychological risk experienced before swapping—they felt vulnerable when approaching a potential swap partner. This may be because clothing is perceived as very personal and highly intimate objects, our chosen skin. Thus, sharing clothing with someone, even a friend, might feel as a too personal favor to ask for. These women were afraid of being judged or rejected by potential swap partners, which would

negatively affect their self-esteem. One of the reasons for the risk of being rejected is explained by Trish, “the social environment still needs to be more developed to accept such an idea [clothing swap].” Participants agreed that easy-going, open-minded, and prejudice-free people are best positioned for a successful temporary swapping experience. Self-esteem concern, or vulnerability risk has not been discussed in previous research; it might be unique to temporary swap in the context of recruiting a swap partner. Henninger et al. [7] (p. 335) discussed that “social acceptance by peers plays a key role in determining which items are selected for swaps” but this psychological risk did not surface in our study.

### 3.3. Practical Considerations for Temporary Swapping

Based on their experiences, participants offered suggestions for people who might want to experiment with this type of CC, which included selecting a swap partner and choosing garments for the exchange.

#### 3.3.1. Selecting Partner for Temporary Clothes Swap

Six women (75%) discussed a major challenge of temporary swap—finding a partner who has similar body size and shape so exchanged clothes fit properly (Table 3). To avoid the fit issue and revive a ‘tired’ wardrobe, it was suggested to swap one-size accessories, such as bags, jewelry, scarfs, ponchos, hats, etc. Further, loose-fitted garments are easier to swap, for example, sweaters, full and flared skirts, outerwear. Temporary swapping might be an excellent option for a woman with fluctuating weight, especially, if her swap partner’s weight changed in different directions (loss vs. gain), when many/most items in both wardrobes no longer fit. Exchanging eight to ten no-longer-fitting garments and receiving the same amount of ‘new’ clothes that fit would reduce the need for a completely new wardrobe and extend the life of garments owned by both women.

**Table 3.** Selecting partner and clothing for temporary swapping.

Swapping Considerations	Participant Expressions
Partner’s size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I have to name one challenge [of swapping], it would have to be finding the person with a similar body shape and size to secure the fit. That’s why it would be a safe alternative to swap some items such as bags and accessories with friends that have different body size and height (Sam)</li> <li>• The biggest challenge is finding people that are the same size/body type (Alex)</li> <li>• I chose her because she has a similar height, a similar age, and a similar body structure even though she is a lot thinner. I thought I could find some clothes that are a little too small, and I thought she could find some clothes little too big for her (Mary)</li> </ul>
Partner’s aesthetic and style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This swapping strategy will work well for people that have similar wardrobe styles. It will not work well if wardrobe styles differentiate too much (Sara)</li> <li>• My partner and I have a generally similar aesthetic, it would be interesting to pair people that are completely different and see if it worked or not. For example, a buttoned up corporate lawyer with a hippie free spirit artist (Alex)</li> <li>• It is difficult to find a friend who is your size and has similar fashion taste (Trish)</li> </ul>
Partner’s background and lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was pretty familiar with my swapping partner’s social and economic status. I know she knows about my social and economic status, and I feel comfortable sharing my personal belongings (Mary)</li> <li>• We are similar in age, family structure, occupation, and body types (Trish)</li> <li>• It’s important to know the person you are swapping with, so you understand their lifestyle and needs and clothing preferences (Alice)</li> </ul>
Clothes selection: Items from inactive wardrobe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I chose the garments that I don’t wear that often, and that I have a similar extra style (Mollie)</li> <li>• The garments that I picked mostly are rarely worn by me. So they are somewhat new (Tina)</li> <li>• This designer suit looks like handmade. I bought it from a designer in Shanghai [10 years ago]. The suit is very well designed. The workmanship looks impeccable. But somehow I don’t see myself in this suit. It just doesn’t fit with my personality (Trish)</li> <li>• I got this jacket from my dad [15 years ago]. I never liked it but kept it because it’s from my dad (Mary)</li> </ul>

Six participants (75%) argued that for a successful swap, partners should have a comparable aesthetic and clothing style, indicating that ‘psychological’ fit of clothes may also be important. Yet, it does not make sense to swap two identical wardrobes so some differences might make the experience more exciting and lead to the satisfaction of self-actualization needs. Alex suggested that if both partners are open to experimenting with different styles and aesthetic, temporary swap might be a safe yet thrilling adventure (Table 3). As women progress through different life stages and/or change their values, their clothing needs and wants also evolve, either gradually or radically, resulting in different preferences for aesthetic and styles. In this case, temporary swap might be a viable strategy to try different wardrobes at no cost.

Finally, half of the women noted that swap partners should have a similar background, indicating some compatibility of their wardrobes in terms of types of garments, quality, price points, etc. A swap partner from the same ‘social circle’ might be a reassurance of an equal swapping value for both parties. Accounting for the complex considerations when selecting a temporary swap partner might be challenging but is a prerequisite for a successful experience. Scholars have acknowledged the challenges of sizing and quality in the context of renting and swapping as well as the availability of products and services [2,7].

### 3.3.2. Selecting Clothes for Temporary Swapping

All women in our study selected most of the swapped garments from their inactive wardrobes—those they did not wear much/at all (due to changes in body size and/or aesthetic preferences) as well as never worn garments with tags (Table 3). About one-third of all swapped clothes (roughly 20 items) was brand new, never used. Women owned these new garments for 10–15 years, without wearing them once. In most cases, these items had sentimental value, such as a present from dad, special memories (e.g., vacation in Hawaii, trip to Shanghai, bought together with mom). Temporary swapping is a good strategy for such garments as people may not want to donate them. However, giving them to a friend who will use them made the women feel good: knowing their clothes were “in good hands”.

In support of our findings, participants in the Long and Fain’s study [17] also swapped some new clothes. Henninger et al. [7] explained that swappers brought in clothes they wanted to dispose of but did not want to donate or recycle. Further, Matthews and Hodges [18] found that women at home swap parties enjoyed seeing their friends using their clothing. Our findings, supported by previous research, corroborate the use of swapping as a strategy to extend useful life of unwanted or underutilized clothes, thus reducing the need and want for purchasing new products.

### 3.4. The Hidden Mechanics of Temporary Clothing Swapping

To explore why some women experienced a greater number of swap benefits or perceived greater risks than others, we created a matrix of all benefits and risks by participant and compared them with some key characteristics of participants (Table 4). First, we recorded the number of swapped garments used by women, which varied from one to nine. Next, we coded each participant journal reflection to determine:

- how close women were to their swapping partners;
- how much they enjoyed or loved clothes;
- how much they enjoyed the swapping experience overall.

For example, Trish and Tina “had little prior contact” before the swap (Table 1), so the closeness of their relationship was coded as “1”. In contrast, Sara’s highly enthusiastic quote illustrates that she was very close to her partner, Sam (Table 1); therefore, the closeness of their relationship was coded as “3”. Regarding the *love for clothes*, Alice’s quote was coded as “3”: “Clothing is such an important part of my life. I love dressing up for the day and styling new outfits. I love to express how I feel each day through clothing. It is one of the outlets for my creativity, a very easy one to practice every day.” In contrast, Tina was

assigned “1”: “Swapping should work for some people who would like to always have something “new” I am not that kind of person”.

**Table 4.** The mechanics of temporary swapping: Benefits, risks, and characteristics of swap participants.

Research Construct	Participants							
	Alex	Alice	Sam	Sara	Mary	Mollie	Trish	Tina
<i>Basic benefits of swapping</i>								
Physiological:								
Warmth and comfort	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Securing free resources:								
More clothes to wear	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>Psychological benefits of swapping</i>								
Social:								
Deepening friendship	+	+	+	+			+	
Self-esteem:								
Increased confidence	+	+	+	+	+	+		
<i>Personal growth benefits of swapping</i>								
Self-actualization:								
Experimenting	+	+	+		+	+		+
Self-actualization:								
Pleasure and fun	+	+	+	+	+		+	
Self-actualization:								
Creativity	+	+	+	+				
Transcendence:								
Sustainability ideals		+	+				+	
<i>Swapping risks</i>								
Safety risk (health):								
Garment contamination	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Safety risk (garment):								
Garment damage	+		+	+		+		+
Self-esteem risk:								
Vulnerability			+		+		+	+
<i>Key characteristics of the swapping experience</i>								
Number of swapped garments used/total swapped garments	6/8	6/8	9/9	9/10	5/7	5/8	1/8	3/8
Love for clothes (3 = strong)	3	3	3	3	2	1	1	1
Relationship between swapping partners (3 = very close)	2	2	3	3	1	1	1	1
Enjoyed swapping experience overall (3 = very much)	3	3	3	3	2	2	1	1

Holistic analysis and interpretation of women’s experiences displayed in the matrix (Table 4) demonstrate that two factors are likely to drive the success of temporary swapping. Women who had high *love for clothes* also had *closer relationship* with their swapping partners (Alex/Alice and Sam/Sara), perhaps because they selected partners who, same as them, use clothes to express their identities and/or as an outlet of creativity (self-actualization). Not surprisingly, the two swap pairs experienced more benefits (social, self-esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence) and enjoyed the swap more than the other two swap pairs (Mary/Mollie and Trish/Tina) who were lower on the *love for clothes* and the *closeness to the swap partner*. The women for whom clothing is not an outlet for self-expression (i.e.,

they are relatively low on *love for clothes*), used swapped garments less, put less effort into styling new outfits using them (did not use to express creativity), and overall enjoyed the swapping experience less.

#### 4. Discussion

This is the first study to examine the phenomenon of temporary clothing swapping that does not require the transfer of product ownership. Using an ethnographic approach, we disentangled the layered meanings constructed by women before, during, and after the temporary swapping through six-month journaling. To our knowledge, this is the first longitudinal study of collaborative fashion consumption and, specifically, swapping. We applied Maslow's hierarchy of needs [25,26] for a comprehensive understanding of temporary swapping benefits and risks. In the spirit of ethnographic tradition, we used a small purposive sampling, therefore, the research results may not be directly transferable to other consumption contexts. While some benefits and risks reported in our study have been discussed in previous research, they might not be directly applicable to other forms of CC, such as renting or buying secondhand clothing, because temporary swapping is a unique approach to collaborative clothing acquisition and redistribution.

Our study demonstrates that psychological and personal growth benefits experienced by temporary swap participants were at least as important if not more than meeting basic needs of securing free resources, or economic benefits. This finding has important implications for consumers, organizations, and businesses interested in promoting CC to reduce fashion's environmental footprint. Targeting women interested in clothing and appearance and demonstrating how swapping, and potentially other CC forms, can meet their higher-order needs (self-esteem, personal growth, sustainability ideals) should be the focus of marketing and promotion. For women less interested in clothing and appearance, marketing strategy can emphasize cost-savings, increased wardrobe variety, and responsible disposal of unwanted clothes through swapping.

Our holistic interpretation of the research results indicates that two factors are critically important for determining the overall satisfaction experienced by temporary swap participants: (a) closeness of the relationship between swap partners and (b) their love for clothes. The two factors appear to determine how engaged and excited participants were about the experience, and consequently how much effort and creativity they invested in incorporating the swapped garments in their wardrobes. Closeness of the swap partners can also influence their level of knowledge-based trust [34], not only in terms of aesthetic and functional judgements of the swapped garments, but also concerning hygiene, security of the swapping process, etc., thus shaping the entire experience. Women who had close relationships with their swap partner and loved clothes utilized a higher number of exchanged garments and wore them more frequently.

A one-time addition of eight–nine garments to a wardrobe minimizes the desire to buy new clothes, thus reducing participants' environmental footprints while allowing the satisfaction of other needs (e.g., more garments to wear at no cost, increased confidence, and heightened creativity and experimentation). Women who love clothes and use them as a means for self-expression experienced greater pleasure throughout the entire swap experience. They may have carried their love for clothes over to the selection of swap partner, choosing someone who has the same passion. Therefore, temporary swap may be suited better for people who in some way self-actualize through clothes in comparison to people who obtain self-fulfillment through other means.

Armstrong et al. [2] (p. 21) argue that a major barrier to popularization of CC is “the absence of ownership.” Temporary swapping might play a critical role in the fashion marketplace transitions to sustainable consumption practices because it provides a middle ground between product ownership and non-ownership and thus facilitates a gradual dematerialization of consumer lifestyle. Further, Armstrong et al. [2] concluded that swapping is suited primarily for younger consumers. However, in our study, participants

were in their late 30s–early 50s, thus demonstrating that temporary swap might work for broader population than conventional swapping with ownership transfer.

The risks of temporary swapping include potential garment contamination and damage (*safety risk*) and vulnerability (*self-esteem risk*), with the hygiene issue being a major barrier for CC, confirming findings from extant research [2,15]. While participants enjoyed the temporary swap experience and were willing to participate again, it was only with someone they knew well and trust due to garment contamination risk. This implies that temporary swap might not work on a mass scale but may be a viable alternative consumption strategy with friends, colleagues, neighbors, etc.—within established communities. Vulnerability risk, which might be unique to the temporary swapping, has not been discussed in extant research and represents an opportunity for future studies to better understand it in the context of collaborative fashion consumption.

Another barrier for popularizing temporary swapping is the challenge of finding a swap partner of similar size, aesthetics, and background. Making peer-to-peer temporary swapping easy to practice (i.e., finding the ‘right’ swap partner; identifying ‘the right’ set of swapping garments) represents an entrepreneurial opportunity with the focus on building social connections, redistributing resources, and reducing the fashion industry’s environmental impact. The results of this study may be helpful for organizations and individuals to promote temporary swapping as an emerging CC social and business model.

With the rise of sharing economy, alternative clothing consumption practices are gaining momentum. New practices are becoming available and gaining accessibility and affordability (e.g., from Ralph Lauren and Rebecca Minkoff rental options at the point of purchase to free H&M interview suit rental). It is critical to continue experimenting with innovative ways to curb excessive fashion consumption while at the same time creating fun and rewarding experiences to refresh a tired wardrobe and meet diverse needs, including the desire for newness. Temporary swap is an example of such strategies that could help during the transition period to a green society. Scholars should focus on imagining, designing, and testing transformational forms of clothing consumption for the new green society, which will require products with new aesthetics and functions to help shape different lifestyles, practices, and construct unique meanings of sustainable consumption. Further, alternative fashion consumption practices and lifestyles must deliver values beyond aesthetic and functional benefits of products and services, and instead focus on addressing higher order human needs (social, self-esteem, self-fulfillment, pleasure, creativity, transcendence, etc.).

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## Appendix A

Appendix A contains the data collection instrument used by research participants to document their experiences before, during, and after swapping garments with their partner and when using swapped garments. The instrument is included as it was presented to participants, without any edits.

### COLLABORATIVE FASHION CONSUMPTION STUDY

*Thank you for participating in the study! Before swapping the garments, please complete:*

- (a) Garment description form for each of the garments you have prepared for swapping
- (b) Background information
- (c) The first set of journaling questions
- (d) Sign the consent form

*Please type up and save your responses.*

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#### GARMENT DESCRIPTION FORM

*Please provide a description of each garment prepared for swapping with your partner:*

Garment type and fit/silhouette (e.g., A-line skirt; oversized sweater; tailored dress; boxy blazer, etc.):

Brand name:

Fiber content (e.g., 100% cotton; 50% wool & 50% cashmere):

Is the garment dressy or casual?

How long have you owned the garment (providing approximate range in years is acceptable)?

When did you wear the garment last time (approximate date is acceptable, e.g., spring 2018)?

If it was sold today as a new, what its price would be (providing an approximate range in \$\$ is acceptable):

Describe the garment, including color, fabric pattern/print, any decorative or functional design features (e.g., closures, pockets, trims, etc.)

On a scale 1 (don't like at all) to 10 (like very much), how do you like this garment:

Please explain what you like/don't like about it:

*Please include a photo of the garment below:*

---

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*Please provide some background information about yourself:*

Approximate age (e.g., early 40 s):

Household income range (select one):

Less than \$50,000

\$50,000–\$75,000

\$75,000–\$100,000

\$100,000–\$125,000

\$125,000–\$150,000

More than \$150,000

Education (select one)

Some high school

High school or equivalent

Some college, no degree

Associate degree

Bachelor's degree

Graduate degree

Occupation:

---

### Journaling Questions for Individual Reflection

*Please type up your responses to the questions below and include date for each entry. You are encouraged to be open and honest in your reflection on the experiences and providing as much detail as possible, including your thoughts, feelings, and emotions.*

Before exchanging garments:

- Why/how did you decide to participate in the study? What are your expectations? Please explain why you have these expectations.
- Please describe your clothing style/taste.
- Please briefly describe your perception of your swapping partner's clothing style/taste.
- Please explain how and why you selected the garments to share with your partner.
- Take photos of every garment and provide a brief description for each (use the included form to describe each of the garments prepared for swapping).
- Anything else you would like to share?

Right after receiving the swapped garments from your partner:

- Indicate the date when you exchanged garments with your partner
- As you look through the garments you received from your swapping partner, please describe:
  - your reactions/thoughts/feelings for each garment and what you did with them (e.g., tried them on right away; placed/hang in your closet, tried mixing & matching with the garments in your wardrobe; left in the original box/bag, etc.); please explain why;
  - your expectations for how much/how often you will use each garment and in which situations (e.g., work, leisure, etc.) and why;
  - note which items you liked and which ones you did not like and explain why.
  - Anything else you would like to share?

Every time you use swapped garments:

- When you wear a swapped garment, make a short note how it makes you feel when selecting/trying on an outfit; during the process of wearing the item and reflect on any feelings after.
- Take a photo of the whole outfit that you put together with one or more swapped garments (please do not include your face or other identifiable features such as birthmarks or tattoos, just the outfit).
- Write down any comments you might receive from anyone about your outfits and your feelings.
- Note any personal or social impact that your new outfits might have on your life.
- Please share anything else related to your experiences with the swapped garments.

Before returning garments to your swapping partner, please describe:

- how many garments you have used/worn and how often, please explain why;
- which garments you did not use/wear and why;
- how many garments you'd like to keep (longer/forever) and why?
- anything else you would like to share?

After the swapping cycle is completed, please reflect on the experience as a whole:

- Indicate the date when you swapped garments back.
- Note how many garments you did NOT return to your partner and kept for good in your possession. Explain how you negotiated with your partner to keep these garments. Why was it important for you to keep these garments? Did you have similar items in your wardrobe? If not, why?



- What did you like and did not like about the collaborative consumption process and experience? What were the positives/benefits and the negatives/challenges of the swapping experience?
- Would you do wardrobe sharing again with the same or different friend/ acquaintance? Why? Why not?
- If you did wardrobe sharing again, what would you do differently to ensure it is a success for both you and your swapping partner? (e.g., what would you discuss with your partner before exchanging garments?)
- Do you think this swapping strategy might work for other people? Why? Why not? Who would you swap the garments with? And who would you NOT swap garments? Please explain. Based on your experience, provide a set of recommendations or tips for swapping to work for other people.
- Anything else you would like to share?

*Thank you for participating in this study and sharing your experiences!*

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