Leased Products, Urgent Utility: How Product Acquisition Methods Influence Consumer Propensity to Sublease

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Abstract

Improving resource utilization and achieving sustainable societal development are issues of global concern. However, no research has yet examined the impact of product acquisition methods on consumers' product disposition tendencies. Through nine studies and one supplementary analysis, this paper identifies a novel "lease-sublease" effect. Specifically, Study 1 longitudinally tracked consumers' subleasing of their leased (vs. purchased) products in real life, and five subsequent online experiments (Studies 2a-2c and Studies 3a, 3c) and two laboratory experiments (Studies 2d and 3b) further confirmed this effect and revealed that it is driven by an urgency to maximize utility (Studies 3a, 3b, and 3c). Furthermore, this paper finds that the aforementioned effect is moderated by resource scarcity (Study 4), such that the effect disappears (vs. persists) under conditions of resource scarcity (vs. control). Finally, a single-paper meta-analysis confirms the robustness of the effect of product acquisition methods on consumers' product subleasing tendencies. This paper not only advances research on product acquisition methods and product disposition but also provides practical implications for promoting circular and sustainable consumption.

Full Text

Renting with Urgency: How Product Acquisition Mode Shapes Consumers' Propensity to Sublet

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Abstract

Enhancing resource utilization and achieving sustainable social development have become pressing global concerns. However, little research has examined how the mode of product acquisition influences consumers' tendencies in product disposition. The current study begins to fill this gap by examining this unaddressed research question. Across nine studies and one supplementary meta-analysis, the present research identifies a novel rental-subleasing effect. Specifically, Study 1 longitudinally tracks consumers' actual behaviors and shows that renting (vs. purchasing) a product increases their propensity to sublet it. The subsequent five online experiments (Studies 2a-2c, 3a, and 3c) and two laboratory experiments (Studies 2d and 3b) further replicate this effect and demonstrate that it is driven by the urgency of utility maximization (Studies 3a, 3b, and 3c). Furthermore, we show that the rental-subleasing effect is moderated by resource scarcity (Study 4). Specifically, we find that this effect disappears (vs. remains) under resource-scarce (vs. the control) conditions. Among these studies, we vary the product stimuli (e.g., bike, skateboard, and camping tent), change the sample sources (e.g., student and non-student samples), and use multiple methods (e.g., field experiment and lab experiment). Finally, using a single-paper meta-analysis as a supplementary analysis, the current study further confirms the robustness of the effect of product acquisition mode on consumers' propensity to sublet products. Together, these findings advance the understanding of how product acquisition modes shape consumer disposition behavior and offer practical implications for fostering circular and sustainable consumption.

Keywords: Rental, subleasing propensity, urgency of utility maximization, resource scarcity

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In the context of the sharing economy and circular consumption, subleasing has become a common strategy for consumers to optimize resource utilization. For instance, internationally, platforms like Airbnb enable more homeowners to sublet vacant properties on a short-term basis, while car-sharing services such as Turo allow vehicle owners to rent their personal cars to other consumers. Similarly, in China, the rise of online platforms like Xianyu and Zhuanzhuan has facilitated consumer subleasing across a wide range of product categories, including housing, bicycles, camping tents, and cameras. Promoting resource circulation through subleasing not only conserves resources and advances sustainable social development but also creates happiness for consumers (Donnelly et al., 2017; Huang & Fishbach, 2021; Huang & Wong, 2024). This sustainable consumption model has garnered widespread global attention (Huang & Wong, 2024), with the United Nations identifying the long-term responsible use of energy and resources for sustainable development as one of the most urgent issues facing the world in the next 50 years (United Nations, 2022). Therefore, subleasing, as an effective form of product disposition, holds significant practical

importance.

Previous research has explored the drivers of consumer product disposition, finding that consumers are more likely to dispose of products when motivated by profit (Paden & Stell, 2005), when purchasing second-hand rather than new products (Huang & Wong, 2024), and when products are used in sharing services (Huang et al., 2024). Conversely, consumers tend to retain rather than dispose of products when they have strong retention tendencies (Haws et al., 2012) or when products carry cherished memories (Winterich et al., 2017). Despite these valuable insights, most prior research has focused on products acquired through purchase, paying less attention to alternative acquisition modes where consumers do not own the product, such as rental. Building on prior product disposition research, this paper examines how product acquisition mode (purchase vs. rental) influences consumers' propensity to sublet products. Specifically, we propose that renting increases consumers' subleasing propensity compared to purchasing because rental heightens the urgency of utility maximization, which in turn increases subleasing tendencies. Additionally, we test when this effect reverses by examining the moderating role of resource scarcity.

This research offers important theoretical contributions and practical implications. First, it enriches the literature on product acquisition modes by examining their impact on product disposition behavior and introducing the "rental-subleasing" effect. Second, it advances product disposition research in two ways: it contributes a marketing-related antecedent (product acquisition mode) and provides an economic perspective on the underlying mechanism—specifically, that rental (vs. purchase) increases the urgency of utility maximization, thereby increasing subleasing propensity. This contrasts with previous research showing that sharing services accelerate disposition due to perceived psychological ownership loss (Huang et al., 2024). Third, this paper contributes to resource scarcity literature by revealing its relationship with urgency of utility maximization. Finally, it provides actionable recommendations for promoting circular and sustainable consumption.

1.1 Product Acquisition Mode

Product acquisition mode refers to the pathway through which consumers obtain products (Harding et al., 2019). While consumers can acquire products through various means, purchase and rental are the most common (Liu et al., 2024; Nie et al., 2022). The fundamental distinction lies in ownership transfer: purchase involves acquiring ownership, whereas rental involves only temporary use rights (Durgee & O' Connor, 1995). Prior research has primarily focused on antecedents of consumers' choice between purchase and rental, categorized into individual factors (e.g., intelligence scores, Aspara & Wittkowski, 2019; global identity, Nie et al., 2022) and situational factors (e.g., search modality, King et al., 2022; perceived product scarcity risk, Lamberton & Rose, 2012). Although some scholars have examined consequences of acquisition mode, they have focused on immediate psychological and behavioral effects during acquisition. For

example, Guo et al. (2024) found that renting (vs. owning) reduces perceived social status, decreasing willingness to disclose the acquisition mode. Liu et al. (2024) found that consumers focus more on feasibility than desirability when renting, leading to preferences for functionally superior products. Only Harding et al. (2019) examined downstream effects, showing that rental increases the speed of mastering skill-based products, thereby enhancing usage commitment and subsequent behaviors like repurchase intentions and payments. Our research extends this work by investigating how product acquisition mode influences subsequent product disposition tendencies, specifically subleasing propensity.

1.2 Product Disposition

Product disposition refers to the process of separating a product from the self (Young & Wallendorf, 1989), encompassing various forms such as resale, donation, recycling, and disposal (Gong & Jiang, 2018; Huang & Wong, 2024; Trudel et al., 2016). Previous research has examined drivers across individual factors (Haws et al., 2012; Paden & Stell, 2005; Yang & Deng, 2014), situational factors (Gong & Jiang, 2018; Huang et al., 2024; Wang, 2021), and product factors (Huang & Wong, 2024; Trudel et al., 2016; Winterich et al., 2017). At the individual level, Lang et al. (2013) found that consumers with high fashion sensitivity, high income, younger age, and female gender show greater disposition intentions (for clothing disposal). However, strong retention tendencies (Haws et al., 2012) and emotional attachment (Yang & Deng, 2014) increase product retention. Regarding situational factors, Gong and Jiang (2018) found that incidental similarity (“dressing the same”) with identity-signaling products increases embarrassment and disposition intentions. Wang (2021) showed that goal frames differentially affect disposition intentions across hedonic, gain, and normative goals. Huang et al. (2024) demonstrated that participating in sharing services accelerates disposition due to perceived psychological ownership loss, especially when sharing with out-groups. For product factors, Huang and Wong (2024) found that consumers have higher resale intentions for secondhand than new products due to lower connection. Trudel et al. (2016) showed that identity-linked everyday products (e.g., cups, paper) are more likely to be recycled than trashed because disposal threatens identity. Similarly, Winterich et al. (2017) found that products carrying cherished memories are more likely to be retained, though memory preservation strategies (e.g., taking photos before donating) increase donation intentions.

Unlike prior literature, we focus on consumers’ short-term disposition tendencies (subleasing) for products where they only possess usage rights (i.e., rented products). We propose that rental increases subleasing propensity compared to purchase and introduce a new mechanism: the mediating role of urgency of utility maximization, thereby advancing product disposition research (Huang et al., 2024; Huang & Wong, 2024).

1.3 Rental (vs. Purchase) Increases Consumers' Urgency of Utility Maximization

Urgency refers to a state requiring immediate response (Zhu et al., 2018). Maximizing is a decision strategy pursuing optimal choices to obtain the best option (Goldsmith et al., 2017; Ma & Roese, 2014). Building on this literature, we propose the construct of urgency of utility maximization, defined as the psychological pressure individuals experience to maximize utility under constraints (e.g., limited resources or time). This urgency prompts decision-making focused on efficiency and returns to avoid resource waste. We argue that renting (vs. purchasing) increases this urgency for several reasons. First, rental provides only temporary usage rights (Durgee & O' Connor, 1995), with products returning to the lessor after expiration (Gao & Herbert, 1996). Second, prior research indicates that consumers primarily rent products for instrumental utility (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Paundra et al., 2017). Thus, rental consumers likely experience urgency to maximize short-term instrumental utility. Third, mental accounting theory suggests consumers categorize rental expenses as "short-term spending" versus purchases as "long-term investments" (Li et al., 2014), creating greater short-term pressure to maximize utility. Finally, real-world observations show consumers maximize product use during rental periods to get their money' s worth, whereas purchased products face no such urgency—exemplified by the phenomenon that "books not borrowed remain unread."

1.4 Urgency of Utility Maximization Increases Subleasing Propensity

We propose that urgency of utility maximization enhances subleasing propensity. First, this urgency reflects a psychological state of urgently seeking to maximize benefits and avoid waste. Similar to loss aversion—the core behavioral economics concept where losses loom larger than gains (Gal & Rucker, 2018; Thaler, 2000) —utility maximization emphasizes full resource utilization. Subleasing, as an effective resource circulation method, helps consumers maximize product utility. Real-world evidence abounds: many consumers urgently sublet rental properties before lease expiration to recoup costs and maximize utility. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize:

H1: Compared to purchasing, renting a product increases consumers' propensity to sublet it.

H2: The effect of product acquisition mode (purchase vs. rental) on subleasing propensity is mediated by urgency of utility maximization. Specifically, renting (vs. purchasing) increases urgency of utility maximization, which in turn increases subleasing propensity.

1.5 The Moderating Role of Resource Scarcity

Resource scarcity is the subjective feeling of having fewer resources than needed (Fan et al., 2019). We propose that resource scarcity moderates the effect of acquisition mode on subleasing propensity: the rental-subleasing effect will disap-

pear (vs. persist) under resource-scarce (vs. control) conditions. Prior research shows that resource scarcity focuses individuals on solving immediate deficits, ignoring irrelevant factors to maximize scarce resource value. For example, Shah et al. (2012) found that participants with scarce shooting opportunities spent more time aiming for precision. Layous et al. (2018) showed that time scarcity makes individuals cherish remaining time and use it more productively. Mehta and Zhu (2016) found that highlighting scarcity reduces functional fixedness, enhancing product-use creativity. Following this logic, we argue that resource scarcity creates urgency to fully utilize resources. Therefore, under resource scarcity, both purchasers and renters will experience high urgency of utility maximization, eliminating the difference between acquisition modes. In control conditions, rental (vs. purchase) will uniquely trigger urgency, increasing subleasing propensity. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Resource scarcity moderates the effect of product acquisition mode on subleasing propensity. Specifically, under resource scarcity, purchase and rental do not significantly differ in their effect on subleasing propensity; in control conditions, rental (vs. purchase) increases subleasing propensity.

H4: The moderating effect of resource scarcity on the relationship between acquisition mode and subleasing propensity is mediated by urgency of utility maximization.

The research framework is presented in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

2 Overview of Experiments

We conducted nine studies and one supplementary meta-analysis to test our hypotheses. Study 1 (field experiment), Studies 2a-2d, 3a, 3b, and 3c test H1. Studies 3a-3c further test H2, examining the mediating role of urgency of utility maximization. Across these studies, we rule out alternative explanations including emotional attachment (Study 3a), emotions, product contamination risk concerns, product importance, and life necessity (Study 3b), and psychological ownership (Study 3c). To enhance practical value, Study 4 investigates whether resource scarcity moderates the rental-subleasing effect (H3-H4). Finally, following prior research (Chen et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024), we conduct a single-paper meta-analysis (SPM) across nine studies to examine the effect size and direction of product acquisition mode on subleasing propensity. Across these nine studies, we vary product stimuli (e.g., bicycle, skateboard, camping tent), sample sources (student and community samples), and methods (field and lab experiments). Note that "subleasing" refers to consumers temporarily transferring usage rights of purchased or rented products to third parties for profit.

For sample size determination, following prior literature (Ross et al., 2023; Shani-Feinstein et al., 2022), we recruited 80-100 participants per condition, except for Study 1, which was a longitudinal field experiment with expected attrition. To ensure adequate final sample size, we recruited 400 participants in Phase

1, successfully matching 113 in Phase 2 (56 in purchase condition, 57 in rental condition).

Table 1 summarizes the experimental designs and results across studies.

3 Study 1: Field Experiment Testing the Main Effect

Study 1 uses a field experiment to test whether product acquisition mode (purchase vs. rental) influences subleasing propensity, providing initial evidence for the rental-subleasing effect. Specifically, Study 1 employs a two-phase longitudinal design to examine actual subleasing behaviors in real life. We predict that consumers will show higher subleasing behavior for rented versus purchased products. Study 1 was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/qp8r-53t2.pdf).

3.1.1 Participants and Design

Study 1 uses a single-factor between-subjects design (product acquisition mode: purchase vs. rental). We conducted the experiment under the guise of a consumer habit survey by the China Consumers Association. Following Huang and Wong (2024), Study 1 uses a two-phase design. To ensure adequate sample size, we recruited 400 participants from Credamo in Phase 1 (69.00% female, Mage = 30.44, SD = 7.49; see Appendix 1 for details).

3.1.2 Procedure

In Phase 1, participants were randomly assigned to purchase or rental conditions. Purchase (vs. rental) participants first indicated whether they had recently purchased (vs. rented) a product. If yes, they recalled the experience; if no, they described a future purchase (vs. rental) plan. The product had to meet two criteria: (1) suitable for future subleasing, and (2) valued over 70 RMB. Rental products additionally required (3) potential idle time before lease expiration. Participants then wrote the product name and description, reported demographics and acquisition habits (1 = purchase, 2 = rental, 3 = other), and provided the last four digits of their phone number for matching.

Three weeks later, we invited all 400 Phase 1 participants to complete Phase 2. Ultimately, 113 participants completed the survey (69.91% female, Mage = 29.04, SD = 6.34; see Appendix 1). Participants first entered their phone digits, then recalled their product from Phase 1. After successful recall, they indicated whether they had sublet the product (yes/no). If yes, they reported the sublease price; if no, they reported future subleasing plans and intended price. Finally, participants reported product disposition habits and monthly income.

3.1.3 Results

Subleasing Behavior Across Acquisition Modes. A Pearson chi-square analysis showed that the rental group (92.98%) had significantly higher actual or planned subleasing rates than the purchase group (75.00%), Pearson ^{2} = 6.82,

$p = 0.009$. Binary logistic regression further confirmed a significant positive effect of acquisition mode on subleasing propensity, $B = 1.485$, Wald $^2 = 6.060$, $p = 0.014$, Exp(B) = 4.417. These results support H1.

Supplementary Analysis. For participants who had sublet or planned to sublet, an independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference in sublease prices between rental ($M = 1000.15$, $SD = 1257.24$) and purchase ($M = 6009.68$, $SD = 32306.23$) groups, $t(92) = 1.00$, $p = 0.321$.

3.1.4 Discussion

Study 1 provides initial support for H1 through a field experiment demonstrating the rental-subleasing effect. Supplementary analyses examining only actual purchasers and renters in the longitudinal data also support H1 (see Appendix 2). A limitation is that we did not measure exact ownership/rental duration, though we asked participants to recall recent experiences and the three-week interval suggests similar holding periods across conditions. The observed differences in our dependent variable indicate that holding time does not affect our conclusions.

4 Study 2: Subleasing Propensity Across Multiple Contexts

Study 2 aims to replicate the main effect across new contexts through four substudies (2a, 2b, 2c, 2d) using different product stimuli (gaming console, bicycle, camping tent, and skateboard) to test H1.

4.1 Study 2a

Participants and Design. Study 2a uses a single-factor between-subjects design (product acquisition mode: purchase vs. rental) with subleasing propensity for a Black Myth Wukong gaming console as the dependent variable. We recruited 160 participants from Credamo (65.63% female, Mage = 33.57, SD = 9.68), with 80 per condition.

Procedure. Following prior research (Harding et al., 2019; Huang & Wong, 2024), Study 2a manipulates acquisition mode through a scenario imagination task. Purchase (vs. rental) participants imagined buying (vs. renting) a 2,949 RMB gaming console for entertainment, noting reduced recent usage despite remaining useful life. Both groups then completed two 7-point items measuring subleasing propensity: "To what extent would you be willing to sublet this console to others?" and "How likely would you be to sublet it?" (1 = not at all willing/likely, 7 = very willing/likely; Huang & Wong, 2024). Finally, participants reported demographics.

Results. An independent samples t-test revealed significantly higher subleasing propensity in the rental ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.92$) versus purchase ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.16$) group, $t(158) = -3.63$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.57$. The effect remained

significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 156) = 14.65$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.086$.

Discussion. Study 2a replicates Study 1, demonstrating the robustness of the rental-subleasing effect for a hedonic product. Study 2b tests the effect with a functional product (bicycle).

4.2 Study 2b

Participants and Design. Study 2b uses the same design with bicycle subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 160 participants from Credamo (70.00% female, *M*age = 30.99, *SD* = 7.87), with 80 per condition.

Procedure. Similar to Study 2a, participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) a 1,299 RMB bicycle (see Appendix 3), then completed two subleasing propensity items (Huang & Wong, 2024). As a control variable, participants reported their general habit of subletting purchased (vs. rented) products (1 = yes, 2 = no). Finally, they reported demographics.

Results. The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.19$) than the purchase group ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(158) = -3.37$, $p = 0.001$, Cohen' s $d = -0.53$. The effect remained significant after controlling for subletting habits, gender, and age, $F(1, 155) = 6.16$, $p = 0.014$, $^2 = 0.038$.

4.3 Study 2c

Participants and Design. Study 2c uses the same design with camping tent subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 200 participants from Credamo (69.00% female, *M*age = 30.87, *SD* = 8.00), with 100 per condition.

Procedure. Participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) a 578 RMB camping tent (see Appendix 4), then completed two subleasing propensity items (Huang & Wong, 2024). As a manipulation check, participants recalled their acquisition mode (1 = purchase, 2 = rental; Harding et al., 2019). Finally, they reported subletting habits, gender, age, and monthly income.

Results. Manipulation Check: A Pearson chi-square analysis confirmed successful manipulation, with purchase scenario participants more likely to recall purchasing (97.00%) versus rental scenario participants (5.00%), Pearson $^2 = 169.35$, $p < 0.001$.

Subleasing Propensity: The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.18$) than the purchase group ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(198) = -2.76$, $p = 0.006$, Cohen' s $d = -0.39$. The effect remained significant after controlling for subletting habits, gender, age, and income, $F(1, 192) = 5.45$, $p = 0.021$, $^2 = 0.028$.

4.4 Study 2d

Participants and Design. Study 2d uses the same design with skateboard subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 200 undergraduate students from a large public university in western China (59.00% female, Mage = 19.84, SD = 2.02).

Procedure. Participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) a 499 RMB skateboard (see Appendix 5), then completed subleasing propensity and manipulation check items. Finally, they reported subletting habits and demographics.

Results. Manipulation Check: Purchase scenario participants were more likely to recall purchasing (89.00%) versus rental scenario participants (19.00%), Pearson ^{2} = 98.63, $p < 0.001$, confirming successful manipulation.

Subleasing Propensity: The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity (M = 4.17, SD = 1.50) than the purchase group (M = 3.71, SD = 1.57), $t(198)$ = -2.12, p = 0.036, Cohen' s d = -0.30. The effect remained significant after controlling for subletting habits, gender, and age, $F(1, 195)$ = 4.66, p = 0.032, ^{2} = 0.023.

Discussion. Study 2d replicates the previous sub-studies. However, Studies 1 and 2a-2d do not reveal the underlying mechanism, which we investigate next.

5 Study 3: The Mediating Role of Urgency of Utility Maximization

Study 3 comprises three sub-studies (3a, 3b, 3c) testing H2. Study 3a uses skis to test the mediation of urgency of utility maximization while ruling out emotional attachment as an alternative explanation. Prior research shows emotional attachment influences disposition (Yang & Deng, 2014), so we test whether rental (vs. purchase) reduces attachment, thereby increasing subleasing. Study 3b uses electric scooters to replicate the mediation and rule out emotions, product contamination risk concerns, product contagion risk concerns, product importance, and life necessity as alternatives. Prior research identifies contamination concerns as a barrier to renting (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Edbring, 2016), suggesting purchasers may avoid subletting due to contamination fears. Study 3c uses projectors to rule out psychological ownership as an alternative, as rental (vs. purchase) reduces psychological ownership (Bagga et al., 2019), which impedes disposition (Huang et al., 2024).

5.1 Study 3a

Participants and Design. Study 3a uses a single-factor between-subjects design (product acquisition mode: purchase vs. rental) with ski subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 160 participants from Credamo (69.38% female, Mage = 32.37, SD = 8.49), with 80 per condition.

Procedure. Participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) skis valued at 1,015 RMB (see Appendix 6), then completed two subleasing propensity items. Next, they rated urgency of utility maximization and emotional attachment on 7-point scales. Following Goldsmith et al. (2017), Ma and Roese (2014), and Zhu et al. (2018), we measured urgency of utility maximization with three items: "I want to maximize this ski' s utility as soon as possible," "I urgently want to make full use of this ski," and "I urgently want to quickly obtain this ski' s maximum value" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.796$). Emotional attachment was measured with three items from Thomson et al. (2005) (e.g., "My feelings for this ski can be described as 'affection' " ; $\alpha = 0.815$). Finally, participants reported demographics.

Results. Subleasing Propensity: The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 0.84$) than the purchase group ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(158) = -2.74$, $p = 0.007$, Cohen' s $d = -0.44$. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 156) = 7.38$, $p = 0.007$, $^2 = 0.045$.

Urgency of Utility Maximization: The rental group perceived significantly higher urgency ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.69$) than the purchase group ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(158) = -2.51$, $p = 0.013$, Cohen' s $d = -0.39$. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 156) = 6.02$, $p = 0.015$, $^2 = 0.037$.

Mediation Analysis: We tested the mechanism using Process Model 4 (5,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013) with urgency of utility maximization as the target mediator and emotional attachment as a competing mediator. The indirect effect of urgency was significant (indirect effect = 0.2972, BootSE = 0.1267, 95% CI [0.0823, 0.5878]), supporting H2. However, emotional attachment' s indirect effect was non-significant (indirect effect = 0.0142, BootSE = 0.0297, 95% CI [-0.0351, 0.0861]). The mediation path is shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

Discussion. Study 3a replicates the main effect and reveals the mediating role of urgency of utility maximization, supporting H2 and ruling out emotional attachment as an alternative explanation.

5.2 Study 3b

Participants and Design. Study 3b uses the same design with electric scooter subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 180 undergraduate students from a large public university in western China (73.33% female, Mage = 23.17, $SD = 2.92$), with 90 per condition.

Procedure. Participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) an electric scooter valued at 1,699 RMB (see Appendix 7), then completed subleasing propensity and urgency of utility maximization measures ($\alpha = 0.830$). They also rated alternative explanations: emotion (two items: sad/happy, unhappy/pleasant;

r = 0.836; Kim & McGill, 2011), product contamination risk concerns (two items: "not at all worried/afraid" to "very worried/afraid" ; r = 0.845), product contagion risk concerns (two items; r = 0.751), product importance, and life necessity. Finally, they reported demographics.

Results. Subleasing Propensity: The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity (M = 4.64, SD = 1.20) than the purchase group (M = 4.21, SD = 1.45), $t(178)$ = -2.21, p = 0.028, Cohen' s d = -0.32. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 176)$ = 4.99, p = 0.027, ^{2} = 0.028.

Urgency of Utility Maximization: The rental group perceived significantly higher urgency (M = 5.34, SD = 1.04) than the purchase group (M = 5.01, SD = 1.08), $t(178)$ = -2.09, p = 0.038, Cohen' s d = -0.31. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 176)$ = 4.13, p = 0.044, ^{2} = 0.023.

Mediation Analysis: Using Process Model 4 with urgency as the target mediator and emotions, contamination risk, contagion risk, product importance, and life necessity as competing mediators, the indirect effect of urgency was significant (indirect effect = 0.1312, BootSE = 0.0761, 95% CI [0.0133, 0.3134]), supporting H2. All alternative mediators were non-significant: emotion (indirect effect = 0.0328, BootSE = 0.0402, 95% CI [-0.0180, 0.1576]), contamination risk (indirect effect = 0.0066, BootSE = 0.0632, 95% CI [-0.1103, 0.1525]), contagion risk (indirect effect = -0.0264, BootSE = 0.0380, 95% CI [-0.1595, 0.0163]), product importance (indirect effect = -0.0221, BootSE = 0.0421, 95% CI [-0.1399, 0.0432]), and life necessity (indirect effect = -0.0041, BootSE = 0.0228, 95% CI [-0.0854, 0.0245]).

5.3 Study 3c

Participants and Design. Study 3c uses the same design with projector subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 160 participants from Credamo (61.25% female, Mage = 31.12, SD = 8.48), with 80 per condition.

Procedure. Participants imagined purchasing (vs. renting) a projector valued at 1,116 RMB (see Appendix 8), then completed subleasing propensity and urgency of utility maximization measures (α = 0.820). Psychological ownership was measured as an alternative explanation with two items (e.g., "I feel this projector is mine" ; r = 0.835; Fuchs et al., 2010; Peck & Shu, 2009). We also measured perceived time urgency and instrumental utility focus. Finally, participants reported demographics.

Results. Subleasing Propensity: The rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity (M = 5.43, SD = 1.21) than the purchase group (M = 4.81, SD = 1.75), $t(158)$ = -2.62, p = 0.010, Cohen' s d = -0.41. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 156)$ = 6.52, p = 0.012, ^{2} = 0.040.

Urgency of Utility Maximization: The rental group perceived significantly higher urgency (M = 5.84, SD = 0.62) than the purchase group (M = 5.44, SD = 1.21), $t(158)$ = -2.61, p = 0.010, Cohen' s d = -0.42. The effect remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 156)$ = 6.51, p = 0.012, ^{2} = 0.040.

Mediation Analysis: Using Process Model 4 with urgency as the target mediator and psychological ownership as a competing mediator, urgency' s indirect effect was significant (indirect effect = 0.3198, BootSE = 0.1373, 95% CI [0.0857, 0.6248]), while psychological ownership' s indirect effect was non-significant (indirect effect = 0.1481, BootSE = 0.1687, 95% CI [-0.1502, 0.5114]), supporting H2.

Supplementary Analysis. The rental group experienced greater time urgency (M = 4.21, SD = 1.33) than the purchase group (M = 3.36, SD = 1.43), $t(158)$ = -3.90, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s d = -0.62. However, groups did not differ in instrumental utility focus (Mrental = 5.40, SD = 1.00 vs. Mpurchase = 5.18, SD = 1.20; $t(158)$ = -1.29, p = 0.199).

Discussion. Study 3c again supports H1 and H2 while ruling out psychological ownership as an alternative explanation. Next, we examine boundary conditions.

6 Study 4: The Moderating Role of Resource Scarcity

Study 4 has two objectives. First, using bicycles as stimuli, it tests whether resource scarcity moderates the effect of acquisition mode on subleasing propensity (H3). We predict the rental-subleasing effect will disappear (vs. persist) under resource-scarce (vs. control) conditions. Second, it tests whether this moderation is mediated by urgency of utility maximization (H4).

6.1 Participants and Design

Study 4 uses a 2 (product acquisition mode: purchase vs. rental) × 2 (resource scarcity: scarce vs. control) between-subjects design with bicycle subleasing propensity as the dependent variable. We recruited 320 participants from Credamo (67.50% female, Mage = 31.48, SD = 8.80).

6.2 Procedure

Following Wang et al. (2020), we manipulated resource scarcity through a scenario recall task. Scarcity condition participants recalled a situation where they felt "resource insufficient" or "resource deprived," while control participants recalled daily life. Participants described the scenario in detail, then completed two manipulation check items: "In the recalled situation, I felt 'my resources were lacking' " / "I did not have enough resources" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Wang et al., 2020).

After the scarcity manipulation, participants completed the same acquisition mode manipulation as Study 2c (purchase vs. rental of a bicycle), followed by measures of subleasing propensity and urgency of utility maximization (α = 0.799). Finally, they reported demographics.

6.3 Results

Manipulation Check: Resource Scarcity. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on perceived resource scarcity revealed no significant interaction ($F(1, 316) = 0.52$, $p = 0.474$, $^2 = 0.002$). The scarcity condition reported significantly higher scarcity (M = 6.02, $SD = 0.78$) than the control condition ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 318)$ = 255.52, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.446$, confirming successful manipulation.

Urgency of Utility Maximization. A 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed significant main effects of acquisition mode ($F(1, 316) = 10.42$, $p = 0.001$, $^2 = 0.032$) and resource scarcity ($F(1, 316) = 3.78$, $p = 0.053$, $^2 = 0.012$), and a marginally significant interaction ($F(1, 316) = 3.49$, $p = 0.063$, $^2 = 0.011$). Simple effects analysis showed that in the control condition, the rental group reported significantly higher urgency ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.76$) than the purchase group (M = 5.20, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 316) = 12.98$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.039$. However, under resource scarcity, urgency did not differ between rental ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.89$) and purchase ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.82$) groups, $F(1, 316) = 0.93$, $p = 0.336$. The interaction remained marginally significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 314) = 3.40$, $p = 0.066$, $^2 = 0.011$.

Subleasing Propensity. A 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed significant main effects of acquisition mode ($F(1, 316) = 20.62$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.061$) and resource scarcity ($F(1, 316) = 12.77$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.039$). Importantly, the interaction was significant ($F(1, 316) = 5.35$, $p = 0.021$, $^2 = 0.017$). Simple effects analysis showed that in the control condition, the rental group showed significantly higher subleasing propensity ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.24$) than the purchase group (M = 4.28, $SD = 1.72$), $F(1, 316) = 23.48$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.069$. However, under resource scarcity, subleasing propensity did not differ between rental ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 0.99$) and purchase ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.27$) groups, $F(1, 316) = 2.48$, p = 0.116. The interaction remained significant after controlling for gender and age, $F(1, 314) = 5.45$, $p = 0.020$, $^2 = 0.017$, supporting H3. Results are shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

Moderated Mediation. Using Process Model 7 (5,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013) with acquisition mode as the independent variable, subleasing propensity as the dependent variable, urgency of utility maximization as the mediator, and resource scarcity as the moderator, we found a significant moderating effect on the indirect effect (indirect effect = -0.3164, BootSE = 0.1721, 95% CI [-0.6910, -0.0070]). In the control condition, urgency' s mediation was significant (conditional indirect effect = 0.4318, BootSE = 0.1385, 95% CI [0.1808, 0.7252]), but it was non-significant under resource scarcity (conditional indirect effect = 0.1154, BootSE = 0.1073, 95% CI [-0.1004, 0.3211]), supporting H4.

6.4 Discussion

Study 4 demonstrates that the rental-subleasing effect disappears under resource scarcity (vs. control conditions) and that urgency of utility maximization mediates this moderation, advancing Studies 1-3.

7 Supplementary Analysis: Single-Paper Meta-Analysis

To examine the effect size and direction of product acquisition mode on subleasing propensity, we conducted a single-paper meta-analysis across nine studies (Studies 1, 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 3a, 3b, 3c, and 4). Following Borenstein et al. (2021), we used a random-effects model (0 = purchase, 1 = rental). Results showed that rental (vs. purchase) significantly increased subleasing propensity ($r = 0.216$, $p < 0.001$), 95% CI [0.169, 0.262]. Following Gignac and Szodorai' s (2016) guidelines where $r = 0.1$, 0.2, and 0.3 represent small, typical, and large effects respectively, this correlation is typical ($0.216 > 0.2$ but < 0.3).

8 General Discussion

8.1 Research Conclusions

Does product acquisition mode influence subleasing propensity? Across nine studies (one field experiment, two lab experiments, six online experiments) and one meta-analysis, we find that rental (vs. purchase) increases subleasing propensity. This rental-subleasing effect is driven by urgency of utility maximization (Studies 3a-3c) and disappears under resource scarcity (vs. control conditions) (Study 4). We also rule out alternative explanations including emotional attachment, contamination risk concerns, and product importance.

8.2 Theoretical Contributions

First, we identify the rental-subleasing effect, enriching product acquisition mode research. Prior work focused on antecedents of rental versus purchase choice (e.g., intelligence, global identity) and immediate consequences (e.g., status perception, functional preferences). Our research is the first to examine how acquisition mode influences product disposition, extending understanding of acquisition mode consequences (Guo et al., 2024; Harding et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2024).

Second, we advance product disposition research in two ways. We contribute a new marketing-related antecedent (acquisition mode) to the literature examining individual, situational, and product factors. Additionally, while Huang et al. (2024) explained accelerated disposition through psychological ownership loss in sharing contexts, we provide an economic perspective: rental increases urgency of utility maximization, thereby increasing subleasing propensity.

Third, we contribute to resource scarcity literature by revealing its relationship with urgency of utility maximization. While prior research shows scarcity affects

preferences for feasible products (Wang et al., 2020), increases superstitious behavior (Wang et al., 2021), and enhances creativity (Mehta & Zhu, 2016), we are the first to empirically demonstrate that resource scarcity triggers urgency of utility maximization, expanding scarcity' s consequences.

8.3 Practical Implications

Our multimethod findings offer actionable recommendations for promoting circular and sustainable consumption. First, rental increases subleasing propensity (Studies 1, 2a-2d, 3a-3c), suggesting that businesses developing second-hand markets should focus not only on post-purchase idle items but also on "idle during rental" subleasing opportunities. Rental platforms could add subleasing modules allowing users to sublet unused rental periods, enhancing resource utilization and product lifespan. Housing, car, and clothing rental platforms could develop "sublease remaining rental period" features with insurance and guarantee services.

Second, governments and communities can build localized idle-item subleasing platforms with convenient matching systems, payment processes, and credit evaluation mechanisms to incentivize low-cost, high-frequency transactions. Policy support (e.g., tax reductions, green credits) should encourage rental platforms to incentivize subleasing. Environmental organizations should promote the message "subleasing is environmental protection" through campaigns like "Let idle items circulate, give Earth a breather" or "Subleasing: not just saving, but respecting resources," disseminated via community events and social media.

Finally, since urgency of utility maximization drives the effect (Studies 3a-3c) and mediates resource scarcity' s moderation (Study 4), marketers should highlight this psychological driver by emphasizing "subleasing maximizes usage value." They can also incorporate scarcity cues (e.g., "limited-time subleasing incentives," "limited inventory") to enhance urgency and motivate subleasing.

8.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant future research. First, due to secondary data access challenges, we used field, lab, and online experiments. Future research could combine secondary data with experiments to enhance robustness. Second, we only measured subleasing, but disposition includes other forms (e.g., lending, donation, disposal); future research could examine these. Third, we did not examine emotional differences between purchase and rental. We speculate that purchase may trigger greater decision regret than rental due to higher resource involvement and potential losses when products underperform. Future research could investigate this. Fourth, our longitudinal experiment did not measure exact ownership/rental duration. When duration is sufficiently long, it may affect psychological ownership and subleasing propensity, representing another avenue for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Demographic Information for Study 1

Phase 1 Data (n = 400): 73.75% (n = 295) reported purchase as their habitual acquisition mode; 26.25% (n = 105) reported rental.

Phase 2 Data (n = 113):
Table 1 Product Disposition Habits
| | Number (n) | Percentage (%) |
|−|−|−|

Table 2 Monthly Income Level
	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
–	–	–
3000 RMB and below		
3001-6000 RMB		
6001-9000 RMB		
Above 9000 RMB		

Appendix 2: Supplementary Analysis for Study 1

Numbers of actual purchase/rental versus planned purchase/rental participants:

Phase 1 ($n = 400$)	Phase 2 ($n = 113$)

Actual subleasing behavior among actual purchasers and renters:

- Actual purchase ($n = 56$)
- Actual rental ($n = 52$)

A Pearson chi-square analysis showed that the rental group (59.62%) had significantly higher actual subleasing rates than the purchase group (32.14%), Pearson $^2 = 8.21$, $p = 0.004$, supporting H1. However, planned subleasing rates did not differ significantly between rental (80.95%) and purchase (63.16%) groups, Pearson $^2 = 2.02$, $p = 0.155$, though rental rates were directionally higher.

In summary, whether using "actual plus planned subleasing"or "actual subleasing only" as the dependent variable, rental participants reported higher subleasing propensity, supporting H1.

Appendix 3: Experimental Materials for Study 2b

Purchase Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you purchased a bicycle valued at 1,299 RMB. Although your purchased bicycle remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you rented a bicycle valued at 1,299 RMB. Although your rented bicycle remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Appendix 4: Experimental Materials for Study 2c

Purchase Condition: Imagine you and friends planned a long hiking trip, for which you purchased a camping tent valued at 578 RMB. Due to unexpected circumstances, the trip ended after only a few days. Although your purchased tent

remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine you and friends planned a long hiking trip, for which you rented a camping tent valued at 578 RMB. Due to unexpected circumstances, the trip ended after only a few days. Although your rented tent remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Appendix 5: Experimental Materials for Study 2d

Purchase Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you purchased a skateboard valued at 499 RMB. Although your purchased skateboard remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you rented a skateboard valued at 499 RMB. Although your rented skateboard remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Appendix 6: Experimental Materials for Study 3a

Purchase Condition: Imagine that to meet your entertainment needs, you purchased skis valued at 1,015 RMB. Although your purchased skis remain usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine that to meet your entertainment needs, you rented skis valued at 1,015 RMB. Although your rented skis remain usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Appendix 7: Experimental Materials for Study 3b

Purchase Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you purchased an electric scooter valued at 1,699 RMB. Although your purchased scooter remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you rented an electric scooter valued at 1,699 RMB. Although your rented scooter remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Appendix 8: Experimental Materials for Study 3c

Purchase Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you purchased a projector valued at 1,116 RMB. Although your purchased projector remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.

Rental Condition: Imagine that to meet your daily needs, you rented a projector valued at 1,116 RMB. Although your rented projector remains usable for a long time, you notice your usage frequency has decreased recently.