

## Sustainability of African-Americans' HMD clothing within the Clothing Life Cycle

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Keyword: African-American, sustainability, and hand-me-down

**Introduction:** The fast fashion trend has led to a new phenomenon whereby garments that may only have been worn a few times are disposed of (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). From the perspective of sustainability, such trend is causing an alarm as it is environmentally not sustainable. To remedy the situation, one possible strategy is to encourage the practice of hand-me-down (HMD) clothing to consumers. Little is known about HMD behavior, and less is known how ethnicity influences HMD behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore one ethnic cohort's, African Americans, use of HMD clothing in the clothing lifecycle from the perspective of sustainability.

**Literature Review 1) African Americans' HMD Clothing Practice:** The purchasing power of the African American consumer is expected to reach \$1.3 trillion in a few years (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). Despite the significance of the ethnic cohort, limited studies have been conducted on this ethnic cohort's clothing purchase and disposal behavior. In terms of disposal, Joung and Park-Poaps (2013) found that familial norms affected disposal behavior. Furthermore, African Americans have long engaged in the collectivistic practice of pooling resources (e.g., handing down clothing) to ensure survival (Katz, 1973). This mentality may have allowed African Americans to pursue the practice of HMD clothing and become sustainable.

**2) The clothing life-cycle and sustainability:** Belk (1988) suggests that our possessions serve as our extended selves, which we become largely attached to and do not want to let go of. Passing clothing down can be used as a way to part with clothing attachments without having to dispose of the clothing, thus being sustainable. To better explore how African-Americans engage in the HMD clothing, it is critical to understand the clothing lifecycle. The clothing lifecycle adopted for the study comes from Muthu (2014). His lifecycle encompasses purchase, consumption, dispose/reuse as a means to examine environmental impacts of clothing. Based on his model, this study examined the following: (a) the process of receiving HMD clothing instead of purchasing, (b) use, and (c) post-use/disposal.

**Method:** A comprehensive research question was addressed in order to achieve the research purpose: How can African Americans achieve sustainability through the practice of HMD clothing within the clothing life cycle? In order to confirm the research scope, a preliminary study was conducted. In the preliminary study, four participants (all female from ages 23-65) were interviewed for approximately one hour. From the pilot study, the researchers learned that age influences perceptions of HMD clothing. Thus researchers decided to further explore this phenomenon by focusing on female millennial consumers to control the age influence. Ten female participants born between 1993 and 1998 were interviewed regarding their experience with HMD clothing. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. For data analysis, researchers conducted analytical coding based on the clothing life cycle model.

**Results and Discussions:** The findings are as follow according to the clothing lifecycle. (1) The participants' receiving stage began with the family. Sustainability issues also seem to influence millennials acceptance of HMD clothing. Participant B mentioned that HMD clothing makes her feel "confident" and she likes to focus on sustainability and the environment because "it is really important because when you can reuse something instead of repurchasing and throwing it out so it has a longer lifecycle instead of short lifecycle like fast fashion." (2) In the stage of use, it was found that participants use HMD clothing on a daily basis, but the context of the wearing situation has an impact on which pieces are worn. One participant mentioned that the quality of the item affected the contexts in which she would wear HMD clothing. (3) In the stage of disposal, it was found that participants often pass the HMD clothing on again, donate to thrift stores or upcycle the clothing. For example, Participant F mentioned that she keeps the clothing because styles repeat or she gives it away to a friend or family member or to a store such as Goodwill. In addition, it appears that participants have learned to engage in HMD practice due to the cultures need to not waste. For example, Participant G mentioned that African Americans historically were given little so there was a need to learn not to waste by making the most out of what they had. This is also shown through participants' discussion on keeping clothing within the family to save resources. For example, Participant F also mentioned that kids clothing are passed down a lot in her family. When someone needs something "we all kind of help each other out... its just really common for African-American families to be kind of closer knit to me, I don't have any other experiences with any other cultures but it seems so common for it to be a close knit kind of family".

**Conclusion:** Based on the results of the study it appears that the African-American participants engage in the practice of HMD clothing because it allows them to save resources and to be sustainable. Ethnic background seems to impact HMD behavior through familial and perhaps historical influences. The finding suggests that understanding the culture holds the key in introducing and promoting a sustainable practice that can positively impact a society. The findings could provide insights to organizations who wish to introduce a sustainable practice to a group of people.

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