



Swagger Like Us: Black Millennials and 1990s Urban Brands

Courtney Johnson, Iowa State University

Advisors: Kelly L. Reddy-Best & Eulanda Sanders, Iowa State University

Hip-hop is a significant cultural and artistic phenomenon that was created in the Black community beginning in the 1970s in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles and has since spread around the world (Aldridge & Stewart, 2005). Hip-hop culture has a unique and authentic fashion aesthetic, music style, and language (McLeod, 1999), and the relationships between these cultural outlets now have a global appeal (Power & Hauge, 2008). This research is centered around the evolution of this cultural-fashion movement in Black history as it relates to Black millennials today and their experiences fashioning their bodies. There is not a significant amount of literature on urban brands that emerged during the hip-hop cultural movement.¹ Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine Black millennials attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) about their knowledge and perceptions of prominent, Black-owned, urban brands that emerged in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s during the hip-hop fashion revolution. Black millennials currently attending or who are alumni of HBCU's were specifically chosen as the focus of this study because of the heightened immersion in Black culture that a HBCU environment provides (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.). We examine how they understand these brands as a part of their cultural history and how the brands may relate to their current experiences with fashion, race, and appearance.

Styles of dress that reflect ethnic or racial identities, such as the styles of urban brands, are often worn by individuals to express their belonging to a community with their common heritage (Kaiser, 2012; Lipsitz, 1997). The brands FUBU, Karl Kani, Phat Farm, Cross Colours, and Sean John were first produced between 1989 to 1998, and are considered five of the more popular urban brands of this time period (Kholmes, 2012). Therefore, these brands are the focus of this study.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens, we asked two research questions: 1) what are Black millennials' knowledge and perceptions of five of the prominent urban fashion brands that were founded in the late 1980s or throughout the 1990s including: FUBU, Karl Kani, Phat Farm, Cross Colours, and Sean John?; and 2) does urban style from the late 1980s or throughout the 1990s influence Black millennials' personal style today?

CRT examines the relationships between race, racism, power, and how those factors are embedded in American society, as well as history, economics, self-interest, and emotions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2107). CRT has three main tenets, the first of which is the social construction of race, in which we learn that race is a social construct, second, the idea of interest convergence, and third is the centrality of narrative, in which there is a focus on people of color's experiences to tell their own story to add to theory and literature (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

To answer the research questions, we used a qualitative approach where we completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 participants after approval from the Institutional Review Board. To be eligible for the study, participants had to identify as Black or African-American; be born between the

¹ There are numerous terms that are used interchangeably with "urban brands" such as urbanwear brands, hip hop brands, etc. For consistency, we use "urban brands," but recognize that many other terms are used.

years of 1990 to 1999; and be a current student or alumni of an HBCU. Each participant completed a single interview over a video-chat system in March of 2018, and the interviews lasted between 28 and 56 minutes. The interview schedule contained 27 questions, which all related to the research questions. To begin analysis, we first transcribed each interview verbatim and re-listened to each interview audio to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Then, we followed a grounded theory approach where we used open, axial, and selective coding to analyze the transcripts in MaxQDA, a qualitative software analysis program (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 30. Three men and 14 women were included. Three participants were currently an undergraduate, seven participants had completed a bachelor's degree, and four participants were current graduate students.

Based upon analysis of the data, four themes emerged including: (a) awareness of urban brands, (b) ambiguity, (c) 1980s/1990s urban brand influence, and (d) cultural appropriation. Each theme and the corresponding subthemes are identified and described below.

In the first theme, awareness of urban styles, we found three subthemes regarding 1980s/1990s urban fashion: definitions of urban fashion, memories of urban brands, and oversized silhouettes. When asked what "urban fashion" means, participants gave a variety of descriptors such as "expressive," "roughness," and "authentic." Their definitions or interpretations of urban fashion outlined how they feel it is unique and part of the authentic self for some Black people. The participants also related early memories of the urban brands from their childhood. For example, participant 6 shared, "There's just a bunch of nostalgia for me. I didn't really wear the clothes that much, but my reference is always the people I saw, the music videos, you know, 106 & Park, it's nostalgic for me when I think about that." Lastly, the most common descriptor included oversized silhouettes.

When asked about their perceptions of the 1980s/1990s urban brands, the participants provided ambiguous responses. Their responses varied from loving the brands to thinking the brands were outdated with no chance of coming back into style. This theme had seven subthemes: loved brands, no interest, unfamiliar, out-of-style, obligation to support Black-owned brands, no obligation to support Black-owned brands, and Black pride.

Next each participant expressed how the 90s fashion decade had influenced their personal style and how they felt it is currently influencing fashion. One participant expressed, "we still look to them to get our fashion and inspiration." Participant 13 said that the 90s era of fashion was more influential to fashion than other eras because the music then had meaning and soul."

Lastly, some of the responses from the participants indicated an awareness of cultural appropriation in relation to urban style. The emergence of these discussions showed that stereotypes in relation to Black individuals and urban style was of significance to participants. This theme had two subthemes: stereotypes and commodification. While some participants did not let stereotypes affect them, they did acknowledge that appearance-related stereotypes against Black individuals exist. Some participants also described how non-Black cultures capitalize or commodify hip-hop culture and urban fashion without the stigma that Black individuals face. Participant 9 discussed how urban fashion has become "watered-down," and that the term urban is used to be synonymous with the Black community, but now "everybody's trying to use the word urban to appropriate Black culture."

According to Delgado (1990), people of color speak from experiences framed by racism, which gives them a voice, such as when the participants explained their views on negative stereotypes associated with the urban aesthetic (Tate, 1997; Delgado, 1990). These voices and exchanges of stories are important because they help to construct the social reality (Tate, 1997; Bell, 1989; Matsuda, 1989; Williams, 1991),

in this case, the social reality of the lasting significant impact that the hip hop revolution and urban fashion has had for Black millennials today.

References

- Alridge, D. P., Stewart, J. B. (2005). Introduction: hip-hop in history: past, present, and future. *The Journal of African-American History*, Vol. 90 (3), 190-195.
- Corbin, J., & Struass, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: NYU Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.
- Kaiser, S. B. (2012). *Fashion and cultural studies*. London: Berg.
- kholmes. (2012). 15 designer clothing brands that ruled the '90s. *Vibe*. Retrieved from <https://www.vibe.com/2012/11/15-designer-clothing-brands-that-ruled-the-90s>
- Lipsitz, F. (1997). Dangerous crossroads: Popular music, postmodernism, and the poetics of place. *American Music*, 15(2), 238-242.
- McLeod, K. (1999). Authenticity within hip-hop and other cultures threatened with assimilation. *Journal of Communication*, 49(4), 134-150.
- National Museum of African American History & Culture (n.d.). Education steeped in African American culture: Historically Black colleges and universities. *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/education-steeped-african-american-culture-historically-black-colleges-and-universities>
- Power, D., Hauge, A. (2008). No man's brand – brands, institutions, and fashion. *Growth & Change*, 39(1), pp. 123-143.