

# **Strength of the Sweep: Exploring the Cleaning Culture of Black Women Consumers**

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*This qualitative research study delves into the rich cleaning culture among Black women consumers, aiming to uncover the underlying motivations, beliefs, and practices that shape their household cleaning behaviors. Through in-depth interviews, the research explores how cultural heritage, community expectations, and personal empowerment inform Black women's cleaning rituals and product preferences. The study employs a grounded theory approach to analyze participants' narratives, revealing a complex interplay between societal norms, familial traditions, and individual agency. The findings highlight the role of cleaning as a form of self-expression, a means to preserve cultural legacy, and a powerful avenue for fostering a sense of control and pride within domestic spaces. By illuminating the unique perspectives and experiences of Black women in the realm of domestic cleanliness, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior. It offers valuable insights for brands aiming to engage with this community respectfully and authentically.*

*Keywords: consumer behavior, Black women consumers, culture, household cleaning, marketing*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of “cleaning culture” encompasses the practices, beliefs, rituals, and attitudes that individuals or groups hold towards cleanliness and tidiness within their living environments. For Black women consumers, cleaning culture is not only a matter of maintaining a sanitary space but is often intertwined with cultural traditions, social expectations, personal sentiment, and identity expression (Hunter, 1998). This qualitative research study explores the multifaceted nature of the cleaning culture among Black women, exploring how historical, social, and cultural dynamics shape their cleaning behaviors and consumer choices.

Historically, the domestic sphere has been a site of complex identity negotiation for Black women. The legacy of slavery and the subsequent relegation of Black women to domestic work have left an indelible mark on the collective memory and practices within Black communities (Hooks, 1981; White, 1999).

Despite the oppressive roots of this association, Black women have reclaimed and transformed the act of cleaning into a space of empowerment and cultural pride (Harris-Perry, 2011). Research on consumer behavior has shown that cultural background can significantly influence purchasing decisions and brand loyalty (Solomon, 2019). Examination of the role of ethnicity in consumer behavior, suggests that cultural background significantly influences purchasing decisions and brand loyalty (Jamal, 2003; Webb & Maclaran, 2005). Scholars like Harris-Perry (2011) have argued that the concept of “cleanliness” for Black women can serve as a form of resistance to stereotypes, a means of asserting dignity and control over one’s environment. Similarly, research by Patton (2000) suggests that the act of cleaning can be imbued with therapeutic qualities, providing a sense of order and tranquility in the face of external chaos.

For decades, Black consumers have been consistently overlooked by companies that fail to recognize their importance as a vital demographic (Chui, Gregg, Kohli, & Stewart III, 2021). Consequently, literature specifically addressing Black women consumers’ nuanced motivations and sentiments regarding their cleaning practices is limited. Through a thematic analysis of the collected narratives, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of this demographic’s cultural, motivational, and emotional dimensions of cleaning. This approach allows for a rich, nuanced exploration into Black women consumers’ lived experiences and personal narratives (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2023). This study seeks to uncover the underlying motivations, values, and traditions that inform their cleaning culture by engaging directly with the participants.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for marketers and product developers aiming to engage with Black women consumers in a culturally sensitive and informed manner. To enhance engagement and foster a deeper rapport with Black women in the cleaning culture, stakeholders must actively recognize and honor the distinct motivations and emotions that inform their practices. By doing so, they can develop products, services, and promotional strategies that align with but also celebrate the experiences and values of Black women, thereby cultivating more impactful and authentic connections.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The act of cleaning within Black communities, particularly among women, has transcended its practical utility to become a cultural touchstone. The motivations influencing Black women’s cleaning culture are complex and diverse, ranging from historical legacies to cultural, mental, and community-based drivers. Understanding these motivations requires a nuanced appreciation of the intersectional experiences of Black women and the cultural significance of cleaning within this demographic. The literature reveals a few earlier studies illuminating aspects of this culture; however, greater depth and contribution into exploring these motivations is critical.

### **Historical Context**

Cleaning has been a significant aspect of Black women’s lives, particularly in the context of historical servitude and domestic work. Black women faced limited employment opportunities, mainly in domestic service and low-wage agriculture. Even as the Great Migration of the 20th century sought to expand opportunities for Black Americans, many Black women continued to funnel themselves into jobs centered on household labor—such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. Despite shifts in the labor market during the 1970s, there was still a pronounced tendency for Black women to be overrepresented in service-oriented positions (Banks, 2019). This enduring association between Black women and domestic roles, particularly as cleaners and caretakers, can be traced back to the Post-Civil War era and earlier, thereby becoming a significant aspect of their collective identity (Humphrey & Schuman, 1984; Hunter, 1998; White, 1985).

### **Community and Family Traditions**

Qualitative studies have revealed that cleaning practices among Black women are not only routine but often tied to cultural traditions and familial teachings. The ethnographic study by Frederick (2003) in “Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith” highlights how cleaning practices are often communal activities that reinforce social bonds. Family traditions around cleaning can serve as a rite

of passage and a way to impart life lessons. The role of the Black church in reinforcing cleanliness as next to godliness has also been a significant cultural influence linked to a form of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993).

### **Cultural Identity and Expression**

Cleaning practices are also a means of cultural expression and identity for many Black women. Bednarski (2020) discussed how certain cleaning rituals, and the use of specific products are deeply rooted in Black cultural traditions and can serve as a form of cultural preservation. The act of cleaning, particularly on weekends, has become an emblem of pride and communal connection, a testament to the strength and grace with which Black women have long upheld their households. Weekend cleaning has long served as a sanctuary for Black women. This ritual transcends mere household chores, becoming a poignant symbol of cultural identity and familial bonds. It is imbued with the power to transport Black women back to the cherished memories of their youth, offering comfort and a sense of continuity amid life's challenges.

### **Cleaning and Mental Health**

Multiple studies focusing on demographics outside of Black women have explored the connection between cleanliness and mental well-being, revealing compelling findings. For instance, a study conducted by Ferrari, Roster, Crum, and Pardo (2017) examined young adults and uncovered a significant correlation between clutter and negative outcomes such as procrastination, feeling overwhelmed, and a diminished quality of life. Earlier studies illuminated the enduring effects of childhood living conditions on adult health, underscoring the significance of maintaining a clean and organized environment (Rahkonen, Lahelma, & Huuhka, 1997). Lastly, a 2021 study in China discovered that individuals residing in tidy homes were likelier to report good health (Gu & Ming, 2021).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a qualitative methodology rooted in grounded theory, to explore the cleaning culture of Black women. Grounded theory involves the construction of theory through the analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This methodology is particularly useful for exploring processes, actions, and interactions among participants (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is combined with thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data.

### **Sampling**

This study, conducted throughout 2022 to 2023, engaged fifty-one Black women consumers. Participants were recruited through a combination of standard qualitative methodologies, including referrals and convenience sampling, to ensure a diverse representation. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used consistently in the documentation of this research.

All participants self-identified as either African American or Black women and were native-born citizens of the United States. The research specifically focused on the consumer behavior of non-poor Black women, a demographic often overlooked in consumer studies despite their considerable economic influence and discretionary spending power, as highlighted by McKinsey & Company (2024) and Nielson (2017).

Of the participants, 29% were married, and household sizes varied from single occupancy to four-member families. Educational attainment among the group was notably high, with 49 participants holding at least a bachelor's degree and five possessing doctoral degrees. The age range of participants was broad, extending from 24 to 60 years old, providing a wide spectrum of insights into the consumption patterns within this demographic. Prominent career fields for the participants are as follows:

- Education: 22.22%
- Business: 38.89%
- Health: 8.33%
- Administration: 30.56%

The occupations of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

**TABLE 1  
OCCUPTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

Category	Occupation
Education	Community service, K-12 Teacher, Professor, STEM Education, Students, full time higher education – Administrative, Staff and Faculty
Business, Legal, & Administration	Management Trainee, Business Owner, Business Owner/Uber Driver, self-employed, Project Manager, Merchant, Associate Marketing Manager, Real Estate Broker, Accounting, Food Service Trainer, Technology Professionals, Human Resources, Attorney
Health	Department of health, Mental Health Therapist, medical staff

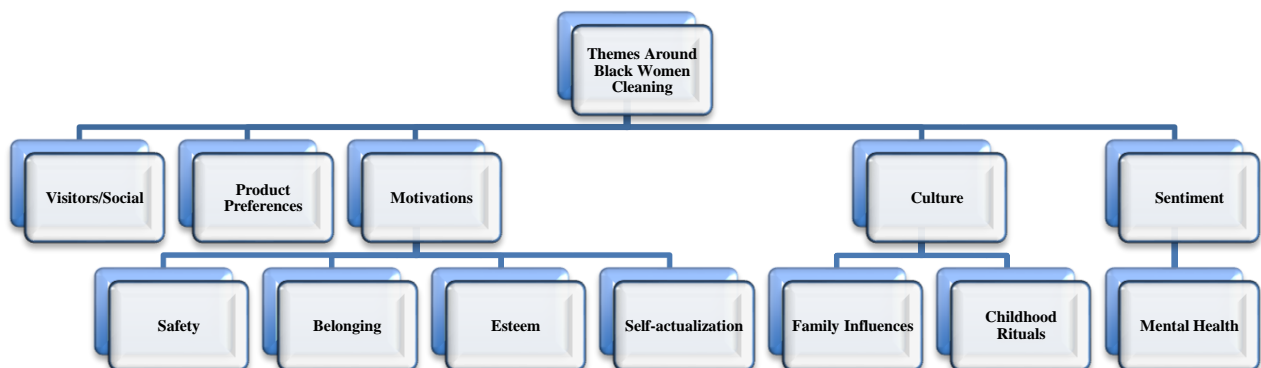
**Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-depth interviews via Zoom, which allowed for exploration of participants’ perspectives while providing the flexibility to follow emerging themes (Kvale, 1996). Field notes and memos were used to record observations and reflections throughout the research process, which is essential for grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

In-depth interviews provided abundant information about study participants’ motivations, sentiments, and culture regarding cleaning. Respondents were asked details about their cleaning experiences and factors that play into decision-making. Rituals and what cleaning looks like for them were also covered.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and ranged from 20-45 minutes. Each interview was transcribed and coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. The interviews were coded inductively, thus, resulting in critical themes emerging. The participants’ responses revealed the cleaning culture of Black women, a mental health component of sentiment, product preferences, community, and social expectations, and additional areas of motivation outside of just safety. Figure 1 illustrates the theme map.

**FIGURE 1  
THEME MAP**



**Theme 1: Sentiment and Mental Health**

*General Sentiment*

Respondents’ overall sentiment regarding household cleaning was mostly positive, with some expressing a neutral viewpoint. Respondents generally believe that the task is essential and cannot be avoided. Common descriptors used were “necessary” and “important”. Statements included:

- Molly: I'm sorry, cleanliness of my home is very important to me. And so that's high on my value list that my home be clean.
- Linda: I feel like it is necessary, especially in today's society.
- Kacy: I feel household cleaning is necessary. It's important to me.

### *Mental Health*

Participants reported that cleaning helped them relieve anxiety and provided a therapeutic experience. This finding supports existing research that highlights the positive impact of cleaning on mental health, such as reduced anxiety, enhanced peace of mind, and improved stress management (Cleveland Clinic, 2021). Participants shared their personal experiences, stating:

- Mary: It's actually very relaxing to do. It's very therapeutic for me, but it also helps me keep my sanity.
- April: Like it makes me feel better mentally.
- Stacey: It's a rewarding feeling to get off from work and to come into a clean space. It's like a refreshing and therapeutic experience for me. So, for me, I guess clean and tidy equals order.
- Chelsea: I have anxiety when the home is not really clean. And because I work here, it has to be clean all the time.

### **Theme 2: Product Preferences**

In this analysis, it was found that Black women prioritize certain values when choosing products. Scents and eco-friendly products have become increasingly important to them. According to the Nielsen Company (2017), 74% of Black women believe that global warming is a serious threat, which is 7% higher than non-Hispanic White women. Additionally, 55% of Black women consider a company's environmental record to be important when making purchasing decisions, which is 13% higher than the average (Nielsen Company, 2017). Personal preferences include:

- Amber: I find that the smell (lemon) isn't quite so pleasant to me, and so it really limits the amount of things that I can use, because mostly everything is marketed in a kind of like a citrus smell, like lemon or orange, and I just don't care for the smell. I feel like it brings down the smell of the household and it just never disperses, and it just makes everything smell weird.
- Zoey: I would say convenience. I like the convenience of travel size wipes because I can put them anywhere. I can take them with me anywhere. I like the convenience of a spray bottle too because I'm not constantly throwing out wipes. I'm really big on our ecosystem. I'm really big on the planet and so the less that I have to go throw away wipes I appreciate that because it's better for the planet. Some of these aerosol cans have carcinogens that are not good for the planet. So that would be something for these big companies to consider. I know Febreze and Clorox both have a line of eco-friendly disinfectant spray. I appreciate that, but just the convenience of it, if I could take it with me on the go, if I don't have to worry about throwing it away, I don't have to worry about it being big or being heavy; that is key for me. As long as it works then, like I said, just more eco-friendly, maybe biodegradable wipes or maybe the different canisters for the aerosol spray, different chemicals that aren't so harsh on our air or the atmosphere. That would be my one request. Like top of the list priority is just make things more safe for the planet.

- April: That they (cleaning and disinfecting products) are not laden with chemicals. Sometimes the artificial smells trigger my allergies. So, it doesn't have a heavy scent. It's natural and doesn't have a lot of chemicals. That's pretty much what's the most important to me. It's effective, but as natural as it can be.
- Tina: Just being me, I would probably make a lifestyle product that incorporated more eucalyptus and mint. More herbal infused scents because, you know, they say herbs have a lot of medicinal properties as well. I like the smell of eucalyptus or tea tree or peppermint or something along the lines of that. That also, for whatever reason, I associate that with being clean.

### **Theme 3: Culture**

Black women have a cleaning culture that is uniquely their own. Childhood rituals and family influences heavily fuel current cleaning rituals and buying behavior. These generational teachings and the transmission of cleaning practices from mothers to daughters prove pivotal in sustaining the culture of cleanliness. Below are some statements from this theme:

#### *Childhood Rituals*

- Amber: When I was a child, my mom would have like cleaning days for the house and usually on the weekend that was what we would use – bleach for the bathroom, the kitchen, and to mop the floors.
- Tina: My mom taught me. As a little girl, I would wake up every Saturday morning and I would be forced to clean the house. We had a routine where if you live here, you clean. So, it's something that I grew up doing and now it is an acquired feeling, an acquired smell on a weekend after long weeks of work. You put in a little bit more effort, make sure your house is clean or your clothes are tidy and you relax for the weekend. It makes the atmosphere a lot more satisfying when you're in a clean space. So, it was something that was passed on to me from my mother.
- Veronica: It's really ingrained in me from my parents, especially my mom, about the importance. So, I still use that brand or that product because I've seen it work.

#### *Family Influences*

Cleaning practices are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and are often passed down through generations, shaping the habits and preferences of individuals. A study by Roberti (2014) on the influence of family on consumer behavior found that mothers and other family members are key agents of socialization, impacting the brand choices and consumption patterns of younger family members, including those related to cleaning products. This intergenerational transfer of cleaning rituals and brand loyalties illustrates the significance of family in the continuity of cultural practices.

Moreover, the sensory experience of scents plays an integral role in cleaning. Research by Hirsch (1995) on the effects of odor on mood, memory, and behavior has shown that certain fragrances can trigger emotional and nostalgic responses. When these scents are associated with cleaning products and rituals, they can evoke memories of home and family, reinforcing one's sense of identity and belonging. This connection between olfactory cues and cultural ties is further supported by Herz (2004), who discusses how smell is linked to emotional memories and can serve as a powerful tool for social bonding. The familial influence on cleaning habits and the evocative power of scents in these rituals underscore the complex interplay between cultural practices, consumer behavior, and sensory experiences. Below are selected statements:

- Janet: So, I started using disinfecting products because my mom is really big on cleaning and my grandfather and my grandmother were very big on cleaning up. Around them I always was disinfecting and learning how to properly clean and from a young age, like I said, I worked in a children's nursery at age eight. So, at a very young age I was learning how to disinfect properly, what spaces and surfaces to disinfect with, what products, how often to disinfect. So, when I look for these products, I'm looking for something that kind of has a sense of nostalgia. That's why I think I gravitate so much towards that lifestyle of aerosol sprays and Clorox wipes because it's familiar to me. So, I have that same expectation of it's going to get the job done. It's going to keep the surface clean, but it's also convenient to use.
- Molly: So, I guess I'm a traditionalist in that I pretty much use the same products that I grew up using that I saw my mom use and that my mom had at home for us to use. So those are pretty much the exact same products now or the exact same brands as well. Now, some of those brands when I was growing up, they didn't have wipes. So, you know, you just sprayed it on the counter and used the towel or used the paper towel or what have you. My mother used these products. She made them available when I was young to utilize these products. So, when I moved out of my parents' home, I just bought what I knew. So, I guess prior exposure to those products, I have found them to be effective and because they have been around for so long, those are some of the factors that have influenced me to continue to use them or to purchase them.
- Robyn: I use whatever products I saw with my mother, or my grandmother use or just other women in my family use. Growing up, that seemed to be the most efficient for the household.
- Nicole: My grandmother cleaned with bleach. Just bleach in itself. So, when I grew up, you know, that's what we had in our house. My mom used cleaners with bleach in them, and I have continued that. It just gives a smell. I guess it smells clean.
- Taylor: It was my sister that got me on the wipes.

### **Theme 3: Motivation**

Cleaning provides a motivation aspect for women to maintain peace and eliminate germs from harming their families. It also has a deeper meaning to them when it comes to making them feel better about themselves. These participants' motivation for cleaning transcended just safety. Self-actualization was also noted. Below are pertinent responses:

#### *Safety*

- Kelly: To keep germs down and to make sure your house is clean in case someone comes by, you know, and it helps your family as well. So, you don't get sick. I try to protect myself and protect my family, too, because whatever I pick up here is going to follow me home.
- Beth: I work around different people and I also deal with chemicals at work. My daughter is at daycare around different kids. I was just cleaning to make sure everything is clean, but also kill germs.
- Chloe: Keeping a clean house. We have children. Although they're teenagers, I like to keep a house where if they drop something on the floor, they drop it on the countertop; They can pick it up and still eat it and put it in their

mouth and it will be safe, if that makes sense. So, I'm very meticulous and we have a lot of nieces and nephews and friends with children that come over. So, I'm more concerned about safety than anything, which is my motivation for cleaning.

Mya: My motivation is when company might come over or to get rid of, you know, the dust and germs and bacteria around the house. That's very much what it is.

Natalie: My motivation is clearly to maintain a sterile environment for my son. Even before COVID, it was very important with him having asthma and eczema that we maintained a clean, sterile environment as far as air and surfaces. That is what helps in maintaining his health.

### *Belongingness*

Zoey: My main motivation, it's almost like I just need more comfortable space. I work from home, so if my space is cluttered, then my mind is cluttered and I'm not as productive as I need to be. So that's my main motivation, to just keep a space where I feel comfortable and welcoming, but also to just making sure that it's welcoming for everybody else to come to the space and making sure that it's clean and sanitary. Just for health purposes, for myself as well as people who visit my space. It just makes my energy flow better. It makes me feel more confident about just going into my space feeling like I belong there.

### *Esteem*

Charlotte: My purpose is I really don't like to be dirty and it's just something when I clean, it makes me feel better about myself, when I have a clean area and I just know everything is in order.

### *Self-Actualization*

Megan: But for me, when your house is clean and organized, you can perform better outside of your home with whatever it is that you're doing, whether it's trying to get organized at work or managing multiple schedules with different people. So, for me, that's my motivation. That's one less stress I have to worry about. And so, I'm able to focus my attention on other things.

## **Theme 5: Visitors/Social**

Communal gatherings are central to Black cultural life, and a clean home is often seen as a reflection of the host's respect for their guests and community. This is especially important for women since they are held to higher standards for cleanliness and suffer more social consequences when they do not meet those standards (Thebaud & Kornrich, 2019). Cleaning is not only a personal endeavor but also a communal expectation. Whether scheduled or drop-ins, visitors were a common theme in the research. It was important for the respondents to have a clean home in case someone dropped by. Some of the respondents regularly entertain guests at their home; therefore, a clean home is important to them and the image a clean home portrays to their social groups matters:



- Kelly: I typically do have company. I have friends to come over. Family will come and visit. And definitely I like to have a clean space for everyone to come and enjoy themselves and just to relax. And it's just a different vibe and it's a different vibe from your family, your friends and you know, the feedback that you get about your place being clean and how nice it is. So, it's good to get those compliments.
- Molly: Typically, the only people that stop by are my family members whenever they choose to without them having to make an appointment. When my home is clean, that's when I feel most comfortable.
- Natalie: I love to host. So, if family or friends come to town, I want for my home to already be clean to the point where I don't have to scramble and clean because they're coming in town for a weekend or so.
- Cheryl: Well, the purpose for me is that it allows me to feel more comfortable in it. If people stop by, then I think just being in the practice of having it clean allows me to feel very comfortable if people just pop up at my home because I have the satisfaction of knowing that I don't have to run around, trying to get it clean because it's already clean.

## **FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS**

The findings reveal a complex interplay of cultural heritage, community expectations, personal pride, personal identity, health consciousness, and other factors that inform Black women's choices and behaviors in maintaining their living spaces. Several significant findings emerged, grouped into cleaning motivations and product preferences.

### **Motivation for Cleaning**

#### *Pride in Maintaining a Clean and Organized Home*

Black women expressed a strong sense of pride and satisfaction in maintaining a clean and organized living space. They viewed a clean home as a reflection of their personal identity and cultural values, emphasizing the importance of cleanliness and orderliness.

#### *Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment*

Black women viewed cleaning as a way to create a safe and welcoming environment for themselves and their families. They believed that a clean home was essential for promoting physical and mental well-being, and they prioritized cleanliness as a means to foster a positive and comfortable living space.

#### *Emotional Well-Being*

Cleaning was found to have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of Black women. Participants reported that engaging in cleaning activities helped them relieve stress, release negative emotions, and improve their overall mood. They described cleaning as a therapeutic and cathartic process.

#### *Sense of Control and Empowerment*

The study revealed that cleaning provides a sense of control and empowerment for Black women. Participants mentioned that they feel a sense of accomplishment and control over their environment when they clean. The feeling of empowerment extends beyond their physical surroundings and impacts other aspects of their lives, contributing to their overall confidence and self-esteem.

#### *Community and Social Expectations*

A clean home is viewed as a reflection of self-respect and respect for the community. This belief drives many Black women to maintain high standards of cleanliness. Social gatherings can influence the urgency and thoroughness of cleaning routines.

### *Generational Transmission*

The study identified the transmission of cleaning practices and values across generations. Participants highlighted the influence of their mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives in shaping their cleaning habits and attitudes. Cleaning was seen as a way to honor and carry forward the traditions and wisdom passed down through generations.

### **Product Preferences**

#### *Sensory Experience*

Participants emphasized the significance of pleasant fragrances in cleaning products. Fragrance plays a significant role in product selection, with preferences for scents that evoke cleanliness or have a cultural resonance.

#### *Awareness of Harmful Chemicals*

Black women expressed concerns about the potential health risks associated with certain cleaning products. They preferred products that are environmentally friendly, free from harsh chemicals, and safe for their families.

#### *Form Preferences*

The form of the cleaning products influenced consumer perception and utility. Preferences for cleaning products in the form of sprays and wipes, provided advantages and conveniences for participants.

## **CONCLUSION**

Illuminated in this study are the deeply rooted cultural practices, personal pride, motivational factors, and community influences that shape the cleaning behaviors of Black women consumers. The study has highlighted the intricate ways in which cleaning is not merely a mundane task but a significant cultural expression that carries historical significance, social identity, and a sense of empowerment.

Through rich narratives and personal testimonies, this research has revealed that cleaning is imbued with symbolism and is a conduit for tradition, with knowledge and practices passed down through generations. The participants articulated that cleaning is a form of self-care, a method for maintaining control over their environment, and providing a safe and welcoming space for their families. Also uncovered is the communal aspect of cleaning, where shared experiences and collective wisdom foster a sense of solidarity among Black women. This community dynamic is a source of emotional support and practical assistance, reinforcing the social fabric of their lives.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that consumer behavior within this demographic is influenced by the cultural significance of cleaning, with preferences for certain cleaning brands and products being tied to efficacy, scent, safety, convenience, and the emotional satisfaction derived from their use. Marketing strategies that fail to recognize the cultural context and values Black women place on cleaning may not resonate with this audience.

In essence, this study has provided a nuanced understanding of the cleaning culture among Black women consumers, emphasizing that, for many, cleaning transcends its functional role and is interwoven with identity, heritage, and community. As such, it is imperative for stakeholders, from product manufacturers to marketers, to approach this demographic with a culturally informed perspective that respects and reflects the profound significance cleaning holds in their lives.

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