

## Gendered and Environmental Stresses of Affluent Laundry Consumption Practices

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**Background.** Laundry accounts for 25% of the carbon footprint in a garment's lifecycle (Rigby, 2016) and for 21% of the per capita residential water use in the United States (Shove, 2004). In addition, microfibers from domestic laundry discharge comprise of more than 85% of microplastic debris found on shorelines around the world (Carr, 2017). As shown in multi-country studies, laundry behavior varies greatly across cultures, resulting in different environmental footprints (e.g., Alborzi et al., 2017; Laitala et al., 2020). Therefore, the study of laundry practice in a particular culture/country cannot explain the practices and their environmental impacts in other countries. Laitala et al.'s (2020) laundry study conducted across five countries revealed that the United States had the highest energy consumption due to an extensive use of dryers, more frequent washing, and less efficient washing machines. While there are a few country-specific laundry behavior studies focusing on developed European countries like Germany (Kruschwitz et al., 2014) and the UK (Mylan & Southerton, 2017), there are limited studies on the laundry behavior in the United States. Examining the laundry behavior of the U.S. consumer is important because (a) the country is one of the largest apparel markets, and (b) previous research indicates that laundry practices are less sustainable in this market than in other developed economies. Therefore, the **purpose of this study** was to explore the conventions and habits of laundry and the meanings the U.S. consumers attach to this practice.

**Theoretical Framework.** Practice theory is a useful lens to examine inconspicuous consumption (Shove, 2014). According to the theory, rather than trying to understand how people adopt habits, it is important to understand how certain habits (like resource-intensive habits) capture and retain a cohort of practitioners (Shove, 2012). The central object of the practice theory approach is not to focus on the people who enact the practice, or their motivations and background, but on the practice they reproduce with an in-depth investigation of the context (Spaargaren et al., 2016). In line with practice theory, affluent consumption framework questions the view of consumption as an individual choice (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). The framework assumes that it is difficult to escape the nexus of consumption norms, and hence it is important to unmask the pervasiveness of consumption in everyday social life (Boström, 2020). Dubuisson-Quellier (2022) argues that consumption is encouraged through normative points of reference like wealth and standard of living. The author posits that in the affluent consumption framework, markets shape consumer dispositions to highly value the role of affluent consumption in their material lives. Both practice theory and affluent consumption framework were used in this study to provide a lens for examining laundry practice and its resource-intensive nature.

**Method.** To explore and understand laundry practices of U.S. consumers, an interpretive approach (Hodges, 2011) was employed. After the research was approved by an Institutional Review Board, a purposive snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants who (a) lived in a household of at least two people, and (b) were primarily responsible for doing laundry in the household (Mason, 2018). Data was collected through in-depth individual interviews. The interviews took place in-person, at the homes of the participants to allow for observation of the laundry space setting and demonstration of the practices such as collection of clothes for washing and use of equipment and resources (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). By describing the details of their daily laundry habits and associated routine, participants shared using their

own words in-depth reflections of how and why they made decisions about cleaning their clothes and linens (van Manen, 1990). An interview protocol with open-ended questions was used to ensure systematic data collection (Kvale, 1996). The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and were audio recorded. Data collection continued until saturation was reached and no new information emerged (Hodges, 2011). The final sample consisted of twelve participants, eight women and four men. Interviews were transcribed and coded into significant themes related to conventions influencing laundry practices (Spiggle, 1994). The conceptual lens of practice theory and affluent consumption framework helped in the iterative back-and-forth process of analyzing data and in refining the concepts to draw out their implications (Spiggle, 1994).

**Results.** Analysis and interpretation of the data resulted into two topical areas with two themes in each. The first topical area *Whether They Look Dirty or Not* explores how and why participants engage in excessive laundry. The first theme, *Does It Smell?*, illustrates that with the exception of pants and outerwear, most participants wash clothes after one wear. The notion of “clean” is based on social rituals and involves spotless clothes with a fresh smell. The second theme, *Different Rules for Linens*, demonstrates that for inconspicuous textiles, such as bedding and towels, requirements of smell and crispness did not apply because no one else could see them except the users. Therefore, many participants wash the linens “once maybe every other week or something.”

The second topical area, *Fast and Efficient Laundry Consumption*, shows how laundry practice has become similar to fast food and fast fashion consumption. The first theme, *We All Hate Folding*, reveals that, with the exception of folding clean laundry, the practice has become very efficient and involves very little labor and time commitment. Other tasks requiring manual effort (ironing and line drying) have been abandoned despite the fact that participants liked the idea of line drying and even felt nostalgic about it. The second theme, *Women Are Stressed Out More*, describes the high stress experienced by women when not keeping up with the laundry routine, which was in sharp contrast with the sentiments expressed by male participants. Women feel “overwhelmed” and “can’t really relax unless it is put away.” Following the gendered expectations of housework, women were under the pressure to conform to the normalized affluent laundry consumption patterns.

**Conclusions and Implications.** This study uncovered hidden conventions and social norms that drive affluent laundry consumption habits among U.S. consumers. The findings show that the use of fast and efficient machines (a) promote excessive laundry practice; (b) normalize affluent conventions around always wearing crisp, spotless, and freshly smelling clothing; and at the same time (c) reduce the expectation for time and effort required to complete laundry tasks. The paradox of higher standards for cleanliness but lower expectations for time devoted to the laundry practice results in a substantial pressure on women and contributes to a significant stress on the environment. This study underscores the importance of examining resource-intensive practices of inconspicuous consumption. It draws attention to market systems and institutions that encourage development of affluent conventions. The enhanced technology of the washers/dryers that do not indicate power and water usage as well as the purchase of “towers of clothes” enable and support these conventions. The findings can be used for developing strategies to address the hotspots of the resource-intensive laundry practice and minimize its footprint. The idea of sufficiency is relevant as it espouses a reduction in resource usage through simple household actions like wearing clothes longer, airing or refreshing instead of washing, washing at full loads only, and reducing wash temperature. Future research can examine the prevalence of laundry conventions and practices among the larger U.S. population.

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