

SAMANTHA STEIN

Kendall College of Art and Design
of Ferris State University

In partial completion of the
Master of Arts in Design

SPRING 2020

"IDENTITY"

Critical Commentary
on Identity Expression
Through Streetwear in
a Postmodern Era

“IDENTITY”:
Critical Commentary on Identity Expression
Through Streetwear in a Postmodern Era

Thesis presented
in partial completion of the
Master of Arts Degree in Design
Kendall College of Art and Design
of Ferris State University

COPYRIGHT

Font: Verdana, size 12 pt

Designed by Samantha Stein

Self-published through Blurb, May 2020

All rights reserved.

Samantha Stein

May 2020

ABSTRACT

Identity is something humans hold close to their personalities — making them practically one in the same. However, identity is much more complex than that. The way we curate identity operates in a fragmented state — changing from situation to situation to best suit what identity is needed. One tool to design our identities is through fashion and appearance.

The history of streetwear is extensive, so this thesis focuses on two of the most impactful and top brands at the time of writing: Supreme and Off-White. This thesis will tackle questions regarding authenticity, identity, ethics, and consumerism through analyzing how Supreme and Off-White have produced products with layered meanings and invaded spaces where fashion traditionally is not a primary concern.



THIS IS UNREAL

Figure 1. *right*, This is Unreal display from Virgil Abloh's "Figures of Speech" exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and love from all my fantastic friends and family.

I would like to give a special shout-out to the amazing faculty and staff of KCAD. A huge thank you to Gayle DeBruyn for her support, encouragement, and ability to challenge me to see things in a new way.

I would also like to thank Karen Carter for giving me the core knowledge and skills to understand how to analyze art and design in a deep, meaningful way. Ben Boss was vital in guiding me and trusting me to create an ADA compliant InDesign document — something I've never done before.

This project would not have succeeded without Colleen Johnson and Beth Lofgren of Baker College helping find resources, edit, and proof each chapter.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to my parents for allowing me to always follow my dreams and encouraging me in anything I set out to do. And to my husband, Colin, for pushing me to do whatever makes me happy and loving me on my most stressed and chaotic days, especially when it meant dealing with being long distance during our first year of marriage.

To all my classmates and friends — I deeply appreciate all you have done to support me and help me grow. I wish nothing but the best for all of you.

CONTENTS

*	II	ABSTRACT
*	2	LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS
*	6	INTRODUCTION
*	22	STREETWEAR BY DESIGN
*	41	MEANING BY DESIGN
*	60	SHIFTING SETTINGS
*	80	LOOKING FORWARD
*	87	BIBLIOGRAPHY

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FRONT MATTER

Figure 1. This is Unreal from "Figures of Speech", Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL, circa 2019, pg. 5

CHAPTER 1

Figure 2. Skateboards on display at Palace in New York, New York, circa 2020, pg. 13

Figure 3. Clothing on display at Off-White in Vegas, Nevada, circa December 2019, pg. 14

Figure 4. Shoes presented at "Figures of Speech" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL, circa 2019, pg. 18

Figure 5. T-shirts on display at Supreme New York (SoHo location), circa 2020, pg. 18

Figure 6. Assorted sweatshirts and hoodies from Supreme New York (SoHo location), circa 2020, pg. 18

Figure 7. A pair of Converse shoes in collaboration with CONCEPTS, pg. 20

Figure 8. *I shop therefore I am*, photolithograph on paper shopping bag by Barbara Kruger, pg. 23

CHAPTER 2

Figure 9. A man dressed in streetwear style, posing in the middle of a brick street, circa 2016, pg. 29

Figure 10. Victoria Beckham in Supreme, pg. 32

Figure 11. Kanye West in Supreme, pg. 32

Figure 12. Travis Scott in Supreme, pg. 32

Figure 13. Crowds at a streetwear drop that turned into a police-controlled event in New York City, pg. 35

Figure 14. An example of customized Vans from artist Sylvia Meza, pg. 36

Figure 15. An example of custom Jordans from Dillon Dejesus, pg. 36

Figure 16. An example of work-in-progress Jordan shoes, circa 2019, pg. 37

Figure 17. Off-White sweatpants on display in their Las Vegas store, circa 2019, pg. 38

Figure 18. Shoes, accessories on display at Stadium Goods, circa 2020, pg. 40

Figure 19. Off-White purse, circa 2019, pg. 43

CHAPTER 3

Figure 20. Pillows demonstrating Off-White's use of arrows, pg. 49

Figure 21. "Wet Grass" rug demonstrating Off-White's use of quotation marks, pg. 49

Figure 22. A pair of shorts demonstrating Off-White's use of stripes, pg. 49

Figure 23. Off-White's old logo,

prior to fall 2019, pg. 50

Figure 24. Off-White's new logo, fall 2019 and beyond, pg. 50

Figure 25. "BACKPACK" from Off-White, pg. 53

Figure 26. Store front sign for Off-White in New York City, pg. 54

Figure 27. Clothing label on an Off-White t-shirt, pg. 55

Figure 28. *Piss Christ* and *Winged Victory* from the photography series *Immersion* by Andres Serrano, pg. 57

Figure 29. Assorted works from Andres Serrano, pg. 58

Figure 30. Supreme x Serrano *Piss Christ* shirt, pg. 62

CHAPTER 4

Figure 31. Poster from Virgil Abloh's "Figure of Speech" pop-up shop, pg. 67

Figure 32. Supreme/Audubon bird call, pg. 68

Figure 33. Supreme x Oreo, pg. 68

Figure 34. Supreme transparent lock with key, pg. 68

Figure 35. Supreme x Band-Aid, pg. 68

Figure 36. Supreme lock box, pg. 68

Figure 37. Supreme Pelican 3310PL flashlight, pg. 68

Figure 38. Assorted Supreme stickers, including the box logo sticker given out with every purchase, pg. 70

Figure 39. Red clay brick from Supreme's Fall/Winter 2016 season, pg. 71

Figure 40. Glass cabinet from the Virgil Abloh x IKEA collaboration of Fall 2019, pg. 72

Figure 41. Entrance to Virgil Abloh's "*Figures of Speech*" exhibit, pg. 74

Figure 42. Promotional poster outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, pg. 75

Figure 43. Display of file cases with assorted shirts and graphic work, pg. 77

Figure 44. Display of Chief Keef wearing a Supreme box logo at the

"*Figures of Speech*" exhibit, pg. 77

Figure 45. Off-White clothes on display, pg. 78

Figure 46. Louis Vuitton clothes on display, pg. 78

Figure 47. View of one of the rooms at the "*Figures of Speech*" exhibit, pg. 78

Figure 48. A large curtain with a printed façade, pg. 80

Figure 49. A large scale of Kanye West's Yeezus, designed by Abloh, pg. 80

Figure 50. A room divided off by meat packaging vinyl curtains, pg. 80

Figure 51. Louis Vuitton ad featuring a Black boy and a translucent, red bag, pg. 81

Figure 52. Crime scene markers in the center of the Black Gaze portion of "*Figures of Speech*", pg. 82

Figure 53. Blacked out gas station price sign, pg. 83

Figure 54. Virgil x IKEA display, pg. 83

Figure 55. Directional sign for the "Church and State" pop-up store at the end of "*Figures of Speech*", pg. 84

Figure 56. Abloh in a portrait using random objects he had available in the workspace, pg. 85

Figure 57. A set of paper goods from a collaboration between NikeLab in Chicago and Virgil Abloh in conjunction with the exhibit, pg. 85

CHAPTER 5

Figure 58. Blue Flower and Skulls by Takashi Murakami, pg. 87

Figure 59. Back of the Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt, pg. 89

Figure 60. A Bathing Ape (Bape) face mask, pg. 89

Figure 61. An Off-White face mask, pg. 89

Figure 62. Front of the Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt, pg. 89

Figure 63. Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt, pg. 91

INTRODUCTION

NOTABLE TERMS

Fakes refers to imitations of streetwear products created through mimicking original designs with the intention of fooling consumers into believing they are purchasing an authentic product.

Hegemony, for the scope of this thesis, refers to the dominant cultural norms. Originally derived from Marxist theory, hegemony implies that one cultural group dictates the dominant culture within a society.

Hype/Hypebeast refers to the excitement and buzz around a product or brand. A hypebeast is someone who spends a significant amount of time dedicated to streetwear and streetwear beliefs.

Off-White is a luxury streetwear brand, founded by Virgil Abloh. Off-White is recognized by its distinct use of quotation marks and everyday elements to create a design.

Postmodernism, broadly put, is a discourse associated with various modes of art and philosophy that gained popularity during the mid- to late-20th century as a successor to modernism.

Resale market refers to the space that exists, either legitimately or illegitimately, for the reselling of streetwear products typically for a profit.

Sneakers refer to shoes made for fashion and sport. These shoes tend to vary from standard tennis shoes by becoming a statement piece. Notable examples of sneakers include the famous Air Jordan (a Nike shoe line birthed from a partnership with NBA star Michael Jordan) and Yeezy (an Adidas shoe line birthed from a partnership with rapper and producer Kanye West).

Streetwear refers to a category in fashion characterized by roots in skate, hip hop/rap, workwear and surf cultures.

Streetwear Values are broad ideals held by the general culture of streetwear. While these values will vary some from company to company and consumer to consumer, common themes include coolness — whatever that may mean for someone, authenticity, embracing performance and culture, and youthful, optimistic self-affirmation.

Supreme is a prominent streetwear brand founded by James Jebbia based in New York City. The company is credited with being one of the leaders of streetwear and a key player in the rise of popularity of streetwear culture.

Figure 2. Skateboards on display for sale at Palace in Soho, New York City.





Figure 3. Clothing on display at Off-White in Las Vegas, Nevada circa Winter 2019.

BIASES

Going into this project, the goal is to be transparent about biases and streetwear's place in society. It is a common notion that we cannot operate without some level of prejudice that we have formed through our life experiences and learned behaviors.

It is my intention to be clear about my own biases and perspectives. I am, at the time of writing, 23 year old white, able bodied woman.¹ I was fortunate to grow up in a middle class home as the youngest of two children to happily married parents — who remain together still. Due to the course of my life, social, and economic status, I acknowledge that having a Bachelor's and pursuing a Master of Arts degree is a luxury that others may not ever get to experience. Beyond these, I also admittedly have a deep appreciation for the streetwear aesthetic. Streetwear is a fashion trend that I have found myself partaking in as a consumer since attending undergraduate school in 2014. Inherently, I have a bias towards appreciating and buying into the desirability and hype of streetwear products — though I make an effort to understand the products and their meanings.

1. That is not to say that I do not have what may be considered disabilities. It is just to say that these do not affect my ability to see, hear, or move on a regular basis.

Additionally, I have relationships in my life that have connections directly to the fashion industry and brands associated with streetwear. My husband, at the time of writing this, resides in New York City, New York where he works for a notable sportswear company heavily affiliated with streetwear. This influences my brand loyalty. I wish to be clear that despite my brand loyalties and influences, I do not necessarily condone everything that has happened surrounding streetwear culture and ethics of the companies involved. While I do look at this topic from many angles, I cannot with good conscious refuse to acknowledge these biases.

Many appreciate and enjoy the aesthetic of streetwear in their personal lives for various reasons. It is not my place to assume biases of other consumers, but they are drawn to admire the designs, as well as critique them, for their own reasons. Outside consumer biases and personal interests, there are inevitably the biases and interests that designers, CEOs, celebrities, and other notable streetwear figures have.

Companies are driven by bias as well. The goal of a business is to make money. Naturally, businesses are going to make decisions that will, ideally, result in profit. When it comes to influencers, celebrities, and athletes, they often work out partnerships, sponsorships, and deals. While some may opt to wear and partake in streetwear on their own accord regardless, the monetary benefit of sponsorships and partnerships play a role in what influencers, celebrities, and athletes wear or use while in the public eye.

This topic was chosen because there is a trend forming over the past three decades that has shown an impressive rise to popularity that contemporary culture is responding to — in unique ways. I've also been conscious about designing this thesis to have high contrast text/backgrounds, a readable font, and an ability to work with a screen reader. It is my hope that I represent myself, my research, and KCAD in a good light and with intentional efforts to work towards inclusivity and accessibility.²

2. I also wish to state that I acknowledge everyone's needs are different. I hope I created something that allows a majority of readers to enjoy. I do not wish to claim that I am perfect but merely that I intentionally put in effort to ensure I do the best I can and learn how to be even better in the future.

HISTORY OF STREETWEAR

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

“Street culture was born out of feelings of powerlessness and alienation...Streetwear nowadays embraces a variety of sub-cultures that have come together to give a sense of identity, belonging and at-homeness.”

- King Adz and Wilma Stone

As the name suggests, streetwear has influential roots on the “street.” Its history is diverse and complex. In their book *This is Not Fashion: Streetwear Past, Present and Future*, King Adz and Wilma Stone define streetwear as “a ‘fashion trend’ that changed the course of retail in the US, swiftly followed by the rest of the world. It is a subculture style that crossed over into the mainstream.”¹ Due to the vast reach of streetwear, it became a social, cultural movement that arguably has come to mean something different to each person who is part of the culture.

The term streetwear is credited with being coined in 1970 by New York

1. King Adz and Wilma Stone, *This Is Not Fashion: Streetwear Past, Present and Future* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2018), 23.

designer Willi Smith.² Streetwear fashion brands came into existence as early as 1980, primarily with the founding of Stüssy, when the surf brand’s apparel line gained popularity. The first companies were characterized by adopting street culture, workwear (such as that made by Detroit-based Carhartt) and sportswear accessible in a t-shirt, sweater, or shoes. There was an emphasis on authenticity and casualness. As Adz and Stone explain, understanding the history and growth of the street is complex as it stems from multiple facets of disparity and identity:

“The concept of streetwear was born out of a human reaction to the wounds of growing up in the sub/urban environment: poverty, disenfranchisement, trauma, domestic violence, divorce, neglect, abuse, mental health issues, drug dependency, racism, issues of sexuality, gender, class, religion and ethnicity, and other systematic forms of oppression and discrimination...It is, for example, paramount to remember that street culture was born out of feelings of powerlessness and alienation...Streetwear nowadays embraces a variety of sub-cultures that have come together to give a sense of identity, belonging and at-homeness.”³

Looking at the way streetwear has provided a “home” for its relative culture is comparable to the way other forms of art provide a home for their relative cultures. For example, metal music provides a space for metalheads to have that sense of identity, belonging and at-homeness.

In the years following 1980 and the rise of Stüssy, more companies sprung up and joined the streetwear fashion movement. As these companies came into existence, the consumer and cultural following gained momentum, creating a unique subculture, or smaller culture within the larger fashion culture (though some argue that streetwear has grown beyond a subculture). Though streetwear comes from a vast background, the “wardrobe essentials” work as a common theme. Footwear operates as

2. Adz and Stone, *This is Not Fashion*, 23.

3. Adz and Stone, *This is Not Fashion*, 24-29.



Figure 4. A collection of shoes presented at Virgil Abloh's "Figures of Speech" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL.



Figure 5. T-shirts on display at Supreme New York (SoHo location).



Figure 6. Assorted sweatshirts and hoodies from Supreme New York (SoHo location).

the largest driver of sales according to 62% of respondents of a survey conducted by notable streetwear news source *Hypebeast*. The respondents consider footwear as the product they are most likely to buy, followed by t-shirts and hoodies.⁴ "Hoodies, T-shirts and shoes remain the most desirable streetwear goods, with no limit to their wearability. These items can be worn year-round, in nearly all weathers and environments. Not only are they comfortable, they also function as blank canvases for the printed and embroidered graphics that inform streetwear clothing."⁵

Figures 4 through 6 on the previous page show examples of these categories.

Complex magazine, a forefront cultural magazine known for its coverage of sports, hip-hop and street culture, has identified the fifteen best American streetwear brands. Atop this early 2019 list at spots number one

4. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. "Streetwear Impact Report." Streetwear Global Market Research, *Hypebeast*, 2019, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://strategyand.hypebeast.com/streetwear-report>.

5. Menendez and Nitschke. "Streetwear Impact Report."

and two, respectively, are Supreme and Off-White.⁶ Supreme was founded in New York City, New York in 1994 by James Jebbia. Off-White was founded in 2013 by Virgil Abloh. These companies will be at the center of the remainder of this thesis due to their representation of the values streetwear culture prides itself on.

6. Mike DeStefano, "15 Best American Streetwear Brands Right Now," *Complex* (Complex, April 24, 2019), <https://www.complex.com/style/best-american-streetwear-brands-right-now/>.

Figure 7. A pair of Converse shoes in collaboration with CONCEPTS



HISTORY OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is a movement that gained popularity in the mid-20th century as a succession to modernism.

Modernism, as a movement, rose to popularity during the late 19th through to mid 20th centuries. Modernism thrived on technological and scientific advancements, mass media, and sublime narratives. This era saw artists such as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock. There was also the birth of mass media such as radios, movies, and a prevalence of advertisements.

Postmodernism came to be as a response to modernism. Though the term postmodernism dates back further, the mid 20th century is generally agreed upon as the start of the postmodern era. The term was first used in application to architecture. Jean François Lyotard is credited as the first person to use postmodernism in philosophy and social sciences when he wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979.

Modernism saw respect for grand narratives, abstract art, science, and reasoning. Postmodernism, in contrast, spoke to paradoxes of respect for the tradition as well as becoming self-referential and parodic. During this era, a "both/and" way of thinking arose.⁷ Postmodern theory centered a lot around language, ways of knowing, and identity. As Linda Hutcheon mentions in *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*,

7. Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodernism," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 121.

theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida questioned structuralism and “how we represent and understand the world around us.”⁸ In *Introducing Postmodernism: A Graphic Guide*, Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt state that postmodern theory is reliant on language and meaning. Saussure’s semiology also helped guide metaphor and added complexity to meaning.⁹ The use of semiotics and metaphor in a postmodern sense furthered examination of Truth and Identity — as opposed to assumed truth and identity. While Ferdinand de Saussure had proposed language as a system previously, postmodern theorists, such as Roland Barthes, took the concept and furthered it with his take on semiotics and myth. Barthes also analyzed ‘doxa’ — public opinion — and how we come to accept it.¹⁰

Postmodernism isn’t without criticism or paradoxes. One such example is the blurring of history and fiction in the sense that postmodernism was inward and outward looking. This is where we see the rise of self-referentiality and parody, especially in art. Barbara Kruger, for example, exemplifies the paradoxical parody that exists. She references both contemporary culture, “I shop therefore I am,” along with commenting on historical philosophy of “I think therefore I am.” An example of her work can be seen to the right. Her work remains an influence for Supreme’s stylized logo.

Postmodernism is not a straight-forward concept, much like modernism is. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City describes postmodernism as, “less a cohesive movement than an approach and attitude toward art, culture, and society.”¹¹ Despite its complexity, deconstruction, poststructuralism, identity, and semiotics have influenced art, architecture and culture. Dating as far back into the late 20th century however, postmodernism has been speculated to be fading out in favor of new movements such as post-postmodernism, metamodernism, and digimodernism.

8. Hutcheon, “Postmodernism,” 124.

9. Richard Appignanesi et al., *Introducing Postmodernism* (London: Icon, 2013), 61.

10. Hutcheon, “Postmodernism”, 125.

Figure 8. *I shop therefore I am*, photolithograph on paper shopping bag by Barbara Kruger.



LITERATURE REVIEW

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices edited by Stuart Hall was first published in 1997. Each chapter presents ways of dealing with representation. The introduction, written by Stuart Hall, sets up how culture is formed and its key components. Hall acknowledges that culture is one of the most complex concepts given the vast variety of definitions. He cites what is known as the cultural turn as a tendency to “emphasize the importance of meaning to the definition of culture.”¹² Shared meaning is necessary to develop culture. However, that is not to say that meaning is unanimous. Things typically have multiple meanings. Hall presents the “circuit of culture” to show how society works to form meaning and culture. Moving into chapter one, Hall goes into greater detail of how language, meaning, and representation are connected to form culture. He also explores if and how meaning shifts over time and over cultures. Both the introduction and chapter one will be important in understanding how Off-White uses meaning and representation to challenge culture.

Virgil Abloh, beyond his work as a designer, has given lectures at various universities and in collaboration with the Chicago Museum of Art for his “*Figures of Speech*” exhibit. This paper will be using the lecture given at Columbia University on February 6, 2017 as well as the video lecture that accompanied Abloh’s exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Art (MCA) from June

12. Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 2.

10 to September 29, 2019. Both of these talks addressed the philosophy Abloh uses when approaching his designs. In his Columbia lecture, Abloh addresses graduate students in efforts to help them understand how to create an identity by using his company, Off-White, as an example. He describes his use of quotation marks and designs as a tongue and cheek reference to duality and meaning.¹³ His talk for MCA discusses the oscillation between designing for the tourist and the purist and using irony.

Popular culture resource, *Hypebeast*, conducted an impact report alongside Strategy&. The report is split into eight sections—four articles and four interviews. The articles include “Defining Streetwear,” “Measuring Streetwear,” “How Streetwear Talks,” and “How Streetwear Sells.” The interviews are with fragment design founder Hiroshi Fujiwara, Contemporary artist Daniel Arsham, Rimowa CEO Alexandre Arnault, and StockX founder Josh Luber. The data was collected through consumer and industry surveys. The consumer survey was distributed through *Hypebeast*’s social media and websites to reach a global audience. It is important to note the surveys were incentivized with giveaways for greater participation. The report was released in 2019.

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist known for his contributions to the sociology of aesthetics. His work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* was written based on empirical research conducted between 1963 to 1968. The book was published in 1979, making it a staple in postmodern sociology and aesthetics. Bourdieu explores social and cultural systems and how they play into power structures. The book investigates the importance and engagement with aesthetics and taste, particularly in the middle class. His examination of distinction plays a role in understanding why people make the choices they do and why they represent themselves the way they choose to. All of these factors and explorations ultimately lead to insight on social distinction and judgment.

13. Virgil Abloh, “*Figures of Speech*,” (video, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, June 2019), <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Video/2019/Virgil-Abloh>).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Initial guiding research questions include the following:

What tensions exist in design between economic class and culture in streetwear?

What dynamics exist to create or reinforce these tensions?

How has streetwear developed alongside and within other genres, such as home goods, museums and hobby items?

How does this further social goals the streetwear industry promotes?

How does streetwear operate as a postmodern critique of consumption?

By analyzing streetwear through a postmodern lens, the intention is to identify the core aspects of this fashion trend. It is my intention to use streetwear to further the discussion on contemporary changes to political, societal and cultural hegemony, as well as critiquing if postmodernism has shifted to a new form of cultural understanding and philosophy.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The goal of chapter two is to understand the notion of identity in a postmodern society and use the concept to analyze how effectively streetwear contributes to individuality and authenticity. Authenticity in this case relates to one's ability to truthfully represent who they believe they are. This chapter will also explore the financial and business aspects of streetwear — how much consumers are spending and the value of streetwear companies.

The third chapter highlights the design of streetwear products and how they critique and are critiqued by the current cultural and ethical climate. Looking closely at Off-White's use of stylized quotation marks as well as Supreme's use of parody provides insight on postmodern culture, critiques consumer perceptions, and poses ethical questions for the fashion industry and fashion consumers.

Streetwear has infiltrated other modes of art and products outside of fashion. The fourth chapter will explore the relationship between seemingly mundane objects — such as shower caps, stickers, and bricks — and how Supreme uses them to affect consumers' attention towards otherwise mindless day-to-day accessories. This chapter also analyzes how Virgil Abloh uses the "*Figures of Speech*" exhibit to introduce streetwear and fashion into "high culture." The exhibit additionally tackles social issues such as racism and consumption.

CHAPTER TWO

STREETWEAR BY DESIGN



Figure 9. *Opposite*, A man dressed in streetwear style, posing in the middle of a brick street.

UNDERSTANDING AUTHENTICITY

AUTHENTIC IDENTITY CAN NEVER EXIST WITHOUT CONTRADICTION

The goal of this chapter is to understand the notion of identity in a postmodern society and to analyze how effectively streetwear contributes to individuality and authenticity. Authenticity, in this case, relates to one's ability to truthfully represent who they believe themselves to be. This chapter will also explore the financial and business aspects of streetwear — how much consumers are spending and the value of streetwear companies.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard states, "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before."¹ Many postmodern theorists have addressed identity since Lyotard and the rise of postmodernism. Walter Truett Anderson's *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* presents the idea that "the modern self-concept defines each of us as an individual, with a distinct identity...that remains the same wherever one goes."² In addition, Anderson states "We think of the self as a whole, but see it only in fragments. We think of it as somehow distinct from its surroundings, but never experience it apart from an environment."³ How can we form identity if identity is fragmented and rooted in a given environment? Regarding streetwear and

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 81.

2. Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1997).

3. Anderson, *The Future of the Self*, xii.

WHO ARE YOU?

identity tools such as other types of fashion, music, art, social groups, and biases, it is hard — if not impossible — to see it as something outside of the culture and spaces it exists in.

John Fiske's "The Jeening of America" also aids in connecting identity with streetwear. This writing presents observations on how jeans operate as representation. Taking "ragged" jeans, for example, Fiske points out that the raggedness is a "refusal of commodification and an assertion of one's right to make one's own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity



Figure 10.
Victoria Beckham



Figure 11.
Kanye West



Figure 12.
Travis Scott

system."⁴ Jeans operate as a representation of identity. How someone opts to style jeans speaks to their chosen identity. While streetwear operates almost identically, it is important to note there are differences that bring streetwear to a further level of anti-commodification. Primarily, while jeans have become widespread and drawn into numerous subcultures, streetwear operates as its own subculture. The key takeaway from Fiske is that jeans have shifted consumer perspectives on commodities and paved the way for streetwear to be an equalizer across a wide range of consumers with different identities.

Streetwear becomes an assertion of one's own culture. The question remains if this is a conscious effort on the part of the consumer, or if it is a choice the designers are making for them. It is worth noting that streetwear cannot operate outside of hegemony or popular culture though. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu states, "the aesthetic disposition which is one dimension of it [disposition], the distant, detached or casual disposition towards the world or other people, a disposition which can scarcely be called subjective since it is objectively internalized, can only be constituted in conditions of existence that are relatively freed from urgency."⁵ Pulling from this, we can see that identities are limited to the conditions in which we exist, furthering the concept that Anderson presents of identity being fragmented. Stuart Hall, similarly, suggests that identity and culture are deeply intertwined to the point that identity cannot exist outside of a culture.⁶

To understand how streetwear plays into identity, we must investigate what aspects of streetwear culture are vital to how we present ourselves to the world. Since our known identity is fragments of a larger whole, we can infer that our identities are more complex than a single piece of a whole. How we present ourselves is one such fragment of our identity.

4. John Fiske, "The Jeening of America," in *The Making of the American Essay*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-21.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 376.

6. Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 4.

These choices, particularly surrounding clothing, can operate as a tool to communicate a large range of values, beliefs, and symbols — all of which are fluid, as Anderson suggests. Streetwear is particularly recognized for its top-selling categories: sneakers, t-shirts, and hoodies.⁷ Each of these three categories aids in nonverbal identity communication within the shared streetwear community and culture. Even those outside of the loop, so to speak, can deduce something about a person based on their fashion choice — though these deductions may not be correct without a complete, indepth understanding of the streetwear culture unlike for consumers known as hypebeasts. The hypebeast is someone who invests into learning and engaging with streetwear fashion and culture. They tend to use streetwear as a dominant part of their appearance and hobbies to further their identity as a hypebeast. They pride themselves on obtaining exclusive, coveted products that are expensive, rare, or worn by well known, highly regarded streetwear icons, such as the celebrities shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12.

Similar to the desire to have an exclusive, unique product, the rise of customization has allowed an ability to create an identity and piece of art that stands out from what would otherwise be a standard product. “Directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference.”⁸ Customs, typically in the form of sneakers, allow for no one pair to be the same. Customizers can impart various fragments of their identity that exists outside of clothes into their shoes. Figure 16 on page 37 demonstrates a work-in-progress pair of customized shoes. Figures 14 and 15 on page 36 demonstrate completed projects and how customization can offer possibilities to combine an identity of streetwear with something else such as a favorite movie or favorite sports team. Acknowledging that identity is fragmented means consumers and artists have the opportunity to bring these fragments together to expand and curate an identity even further outside of commodification to a level what Fiske calls “excorporation”, meaning the subordinate makes their own culture using resources and commodities rather than allowing the

7. Menendez and Nitschke. “Streetwear Impact Report.”.

8. Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 4.



Figure 13. Crowds at a streetwear drop that turned into a police controlled event in New York City.

commodities to use them.⁹ Custom sneakers shift the focus on being used by commodification processes and consumerism to using commodities to showcase identity and curate custom art.

The Business of Streetwear

Consumers of streetwear, sometimes even unknowingly, make statements regarding their identity by wearing a particular piece of clothing out in public or on display in social media posts. One unique aspect of streetwear, as opposed to traditional fast fashion you find at stores such as Forever21, is exclusivity. While fast fashion tends to have six to eight seasons, streetwear thrives on two seasons: fall/winter and spring/summer. Some streetwear

9. Fiske, “The Jeaning of America”, 15.



Figure 14. *left*, An example of customized Vans from artist Sylvia Meza.



Figure 16. An example of work-in-progress customization of Jordan shoes.

Figure 15. *right*, An example of custom Jordans from Dillon Dejesus.





Figure 17. Off-White Sweatpants on display in their Las Vegas store.

brands close down between seasons while others remain open year-round, reducing two seasons to essentially one season. Having fewer seasons helps stretch out less product over a longer period of time. The opportunity to spread out limited run product is benefited by the marketing tactic developed by streetwear that focuses on exclusivity and building anticipation through calculated, intentional product drops.

Supreme, the leading streetwear brand and arguably the most famous, is valued at one billion dollars. Part of this success is due to their ability to develop exclusivity through drop tactics that they employ for each of their two seasons. Supreme revolutionized the drop tactic, and this method has been adopted by other notable streetwear and fashion companies including, but not limited to: A Bathing Ape, Stüssy, KITH, Nike and Adidas. The drop method that streetwear uses builds hype and excitement in consumers to buy a limited run product. The limited quantities aid in creating a higher value and demand for product due to scarcity in supply. Many cultural magazines and blogs have written on the drop tactics utilized by streetwear.

“This sales tactic, which consists of releasing a limited-edition product or collection in small quantities at select retail locations, without much warning, is what we have come to know as a “drop.” The basic idea is to create a sense of urgency and the illusion of scarcity among consumers...Supreme is perhaps the king of this retail strategy. Founded as a small skate shop in New York in the 1990s, the company is currently estimated to be worth one billion US dollars.”¹⁰

These drops are not exclusive to online sales, though online retail serves a large market of streetwear fans. Drops happen in stores. The stores are even harder to get into due to long lines, unknown product quantities, and limited brick and mortar locations. Supreme, for example, has only four

10. Marjorie van Elven, “The Business of Hype: Why so Many Fashion Brands Are Now Doing ‘Product Drops,’” *FashionUnited* (FashionUnited, October 17, 2018).

United States locations: Soho in New York, Brooklyn, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Unless you are in one of those four locations on the right day, at the right time, your odds of purchasing any of their products at the time of a release in a brick and mortar facility are slim.

Online also serves as the primary marketing platform. Companies tend to turn to social media, primarily Instagram, to release hints to followers about potential drops. These messages are sometimes straightforward. Others are cryptic. The clarity of a message depends on how suspenseful the company aims to make the drop. Other media sources, such as *Hypebeast*, release weekly updates on what drops are coming up. Supreme is notorious for releasing their look book previewing their season. They do not tell you when a particular item is going to be available for purchase. For them, drops happen every Thursday morning during a nineteen or twenty week season. It isn't uncommon to pull up their webstore or wait in line at a brick and mortar store not knowing exactly what you'll have the ability to purchase. Figure 13 on page 35 shows the intensity of



Figure 18. Products on display at Stadium Goods in New York City.

the crowds that accumulate due to excitement and desirability of the Supreme products. The drop method has shown to be a growing aspect of streetwear identity, especially in the case of Supreme.

As Anderson's ideas of cultural change state, the traditional methods of values and beliefs are more readily changed. With the rise of the drops, the value of being able to purchase an item that is so exclusive becomes a coveted opportunity. This opportunity fuels the exclusive and authentic identity that streetwear aims to have. It also shifts the products from a commodity to an experience. If a consumer is fortunate enough to purchase an item, they then have the chance to use that item to further their status in culture. Much like jeans are able to exceed the boundaries of commodification, as Fiske presented, streetwear becomes more than the commodity. It becomes a way of identifying with and producing culture. This also is reinforced when considering Hall's definition of identity as needing a process for the discourse of identity. While the consumer is led to believe

that the expansion outside of commodification leads to a way of presenting their authenticity and devotion to streetwear's core values, it ultimately does perpetuate an identity that may be construed as 'buying into the hype' — which, depending on what culture you subscribe to, can be good or bad. For example, someone that partakes in the streetwear culture may see being a hypebeast as a normal part of everyday life. However, those outside of the streetwear culture may see it as an extreme form of consumerism that is potentially financially wasteful.

Purchasing a streetwear item of any category has become more widely available with the rise of the resale market. Online platforms such as eBay, GOAT, and StockX have benefitted from the reselling of products. StockX, in particular, has created the most popular marketplace for buying and selling streetwear goods, among other novelty items. Valued at one billion dollars in 2018, StockX has created a market that allows for consumers to determine how much they want to sell an item for. According to Josh Lubber, cofounder of StockX, "StockX is supply and demand. We don't sell anything and we don't require people to pay a certain price or create artificial constraints of who can sell or who can buy. What it does is create transparency in the market."¹¹ Even in a resale market, the supply and demand balance is crucial. He goes on to explain why this works by saying,

"On StockX, the consumer is going to actually see all the data and every sale that's ever happened, every bid, and every app, and everything else. So there's full transparency into what the market thinks of that price and product. It allows that idea of that true expression of yourself...As soon as supply is greater than demand, that product's not scarce anymore. So it's not cool to a certain group who wants that totally unique self-expression. They don't want to possibly wear something that any person off the street can just walk in and buy."¹²

11. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. "Streetwear Impact Report."

12. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. "Streetwear Impact Report."

Streetwear companies rose from very innovative and resourceful means. Streetwear has since gained mass popularity, bringing massive success to companies. This also brought in higher price tags and some financial barriers for some. Supreme, however, operates a model that allows for easier financial access to their products, as long as you only want a t-shirt or one of their cheaper end products. Growing from a small shop in Brooklyn to having a massive internet, social media presence and seven stores across the globe, they have expanded into more expensive products and luxury goods. There has been a rise in luxury brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton designing their own interpretations on streetwear or collaborating with streetwear brands. The line becomes blurred between luxury and streetwear, furthering financial barriers into the streetwear culture.

The streetwear consumer base is now facing shifts from being a representation of those with lived, literal street experience to those who use it as a symbol of social status and as a way to claim they identify with the streetwear lifestyle.¹³ This is not to say that the costs are making it impossible for those with lower incomes to purchase the products. It's

13. That is not to say these shifts are inherently good or bad. This is merely an observation in the growing consumer base and audience.

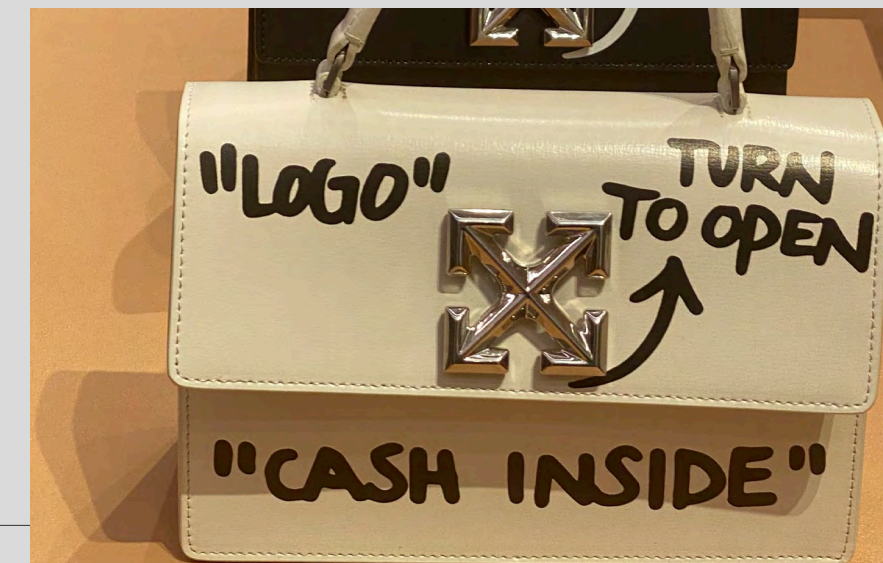


Figure 19. Off-White purse.

common for people to purchase the expensive products despite the prices in favor of the social status that comes with streetwear.

“A high percentage — 56%, according to our survey — reported spending an average of \$100-\$300 on a single item of streetwear... Notably, lower-income respondents were willing to spend up to five times as much on streetwear per month as they were on non-streetwear products...Almost half (49%) of industry respondents said their customer’s average monthly spend was \$100 to \$500, which was in line with what consumers reported. These results point to the ideal margin for targeting the streetwear audience. Many Supreme goods sit inside this sweet spot.”¹⁴

This aids in breaking down class structures in a postmodern society. Anderson states, “In the United States we manage to be obsessed with lifestyle and status while rather careless about class...Status has replaced class in much of the world, particularly among youth and in popular culture.”¹⁵ Anderson also goes on to state that status is the postmodern replacement for traditional, modern wealth classes — though they are not entirely erased, rather increasingly diminished in importance.¹⁶ This notion is reified by streetwear and consumers’ concerns over how they appear rather than traditional ideas of class. Particularly, streetwear is typically considered to be a youthful style, meaning under Anderson’s observations, young adults and teenagers are more likely to value the effect streetwear has on their status.

With all this in mind, it is important to note that the age of consumerism has not passed, and likely will never pass. Rather, consumerism is shifting. Anderson questions and ruminates,

14. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. “Streetwear Impact Report.”

15. Anderson, *The Future of the Self*, 202.

16. Anderson, *The Future of the Self*, 202.

“How are we going to get beyond this consumer society? Well, we aren’t...We are beginning to recognize consumerism as a political force in a way it has never been before...teens are notoriously conformist and style-conscious, and the globalization of communications media makes it possible for them to conform globally, style globally. This means among other things, big, big profits.”¹⁷

This is no exception for streetwear. Streetwear has become a global style trend that rejects traditional means of consumerism and commodification, yet it cannot exist outside of consumerism. “Popular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system...popular culture contradicts itself.”¹⁸ Considering the notion of contradiction, we can see that despite streetwear’s attempts to be an authentic identity, it can’t exist outside of society. Contradiction distorts the implied and sought-after authenticity and exclusivity of streetwear’s attempts of identification discourse. If we acknowledge the contradictions and general messiness of maintaining a true expression of who we believe we are, we must also acknowledge that “authentic” identity is formulated through a series of business models, designs, efforts to fit into a culture, and adhere to our own morals and beliefs. We will never see the whole picture at any given moment.

17. Anderson, *The Future of the Self*, 193-194.

18. Fiske, “The Jeaning of America”, 5.

A single, authentic identity is impossible. Instead, we can use streetwear to showcase a version of authentic identity that has been calculated either by the consumer or by the designer and business.

WHO ARE YOU?

CHAPTER THREE

MEANING BY DESIGN

UNDERSTANDING MEANING

"I STARTED OFF-WHITE AS THIS SEASONAL FASHION SORT OF LANGUAGE CONCEPT, POST THIS IDEA OF STREETWEAR, THIS IDEA OF FASHION LOOKING FOR A CHANGE." - VIRGIL ABLOH

This chapter highlights the design of streetwear products and how they critique and are critiqued by the current cultural and ethical climate we exist in. Looking closely at Off-White's use of stylized quotation marks, as well as Supreme's use of parody, provides insight on postmodern culture, critiques consumer perceptions, and poses ethical questions for the fashion industry.

Connotation in Quotes

Off-White has made great strides in the world of streetwear. Their products have taken a unique approach to playing with the line between street fashion and high-end, luxury fashion. The designs put forth by founder Virgil Abloh speak to ironic use of everyday sights and symbols that consumers otherwise would ignore. Figures 20, 21, and 22 show the various tools Abloh and Off-White have employed in product designs. There are stripes, resembling those of crosswalks and transit routes, Xs that pull inspiration from construction and factory, and most famously, are the quotation marks. Previously, Off-White also used the font Helvetica, as seen in figure 23, but has since shifted branding to include the font Laica as well as a new logo, pictured in figure 24. For the extent of this chapter, the changes to the logo or fonts will not be addressed. Instead the focus will be on the use of the quotation marks that remain vital to the designs they are used in.



Figure 20. Pillows demonstrating Off-White's use of arrows.

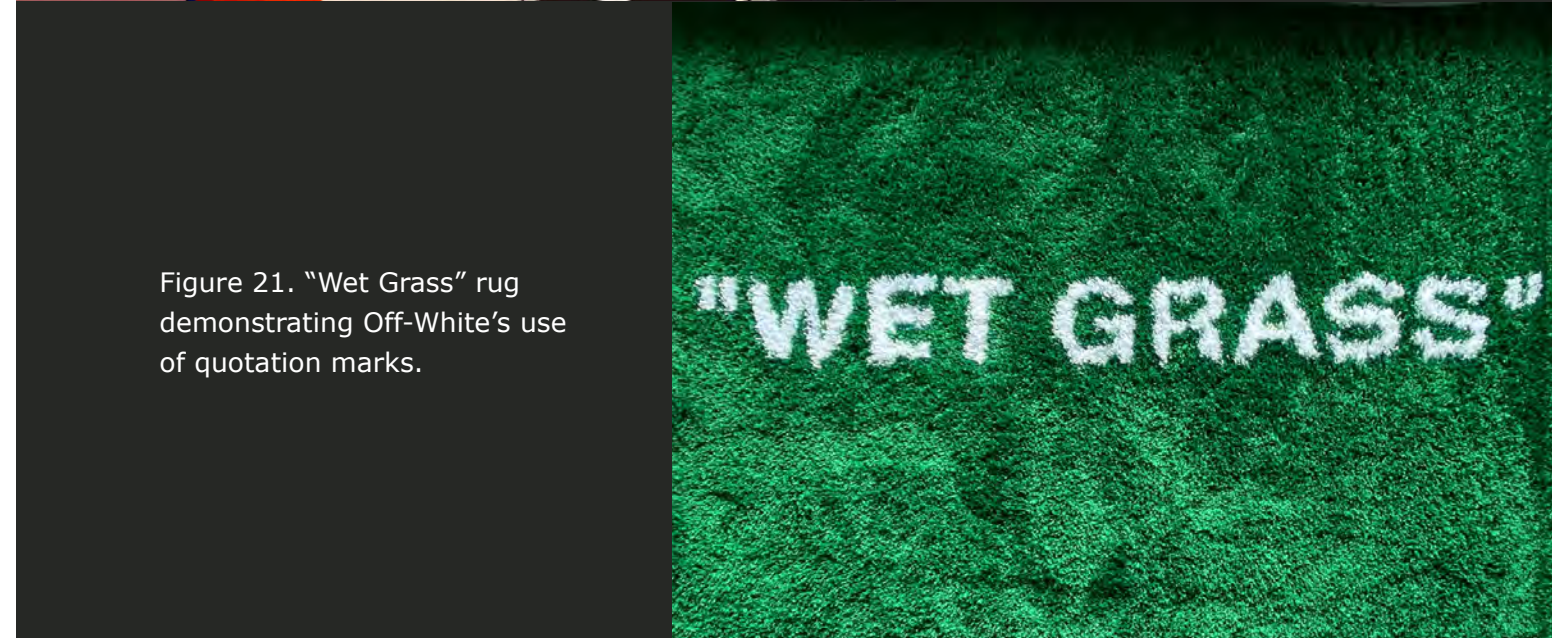


Figure 21. "Wet Grass" rug demonstrating Off-White's use of quotation marks.



Figure 22. A pair of shorts demonstrating Off-White's use of stripes.

OFF-WHITE c/o VIRGIL ABLOH™

Figure 23. Above, Off-White's old logo, prior to fall 2019.

Figure 24. Below, Off-White's new logo, fall 2019 and beyond.

©2013

OFF-WHITE c/o VIRGIL ABLOH™
Defining the grey area between black
and white as the color Off-White™

Off



White™



Off-White tends to design products that speak to the values and culture of streetwear. However, their products come with high end price tags. Streetwear typically uses limited run production and therefore products are priced accordingly. A streetwear style hooded sweatshirt from Supreme's website, for example, could have a retail price of nearly \$150, depending on materials or partnerships/collaborations.¹ For a similar product from Off-White's website, the price jumps to over \$500.² This is over triple the cost of the Supreme product. This seemingly creates a barrier to Off-White products and furthers the drive to be exclusive. Limited runs and high prices are not new or unique to streetwear, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Virgil Abloh's use of quotation marks are readily recognized and associated with Off-White's branding. During a lecture at Columbia University, Abloh refers to his quotation marks as a "tongue and cheek reference to duality and meaning" as well as a "loaded message in disguise."³ The use of quotation marks is seen on many Off-White products. They operate as a way of shifting the meaning from denotative to connotative. The backpack, shown in figure 25 for example — if it were to say simply BACKPACK — this would be denotative. It is the literal definition of the object. However, by saying "BACKPACK" — the object now has an extra layer of complexity, thus transforming it to a connotative meaning.

The connotative meaning is determined by sociocultural meaning. How we interpret something on a comparative level means we interpret it according to a shared culture that produced meaning extending beyond the literal. So, though we understand a backpack to fit into a specific space in culture with its own unique constraints and characteristics in our minds, the connotative meaning can shift as culture and, ultimately, language shifts.

"Certain words, like certain clothes, schools, and professions, are proper for the educated and others are not...quarantining of the vernacular resembled the humorist's frequent use of a frame of

1. "Sweatshirts," Supreme New York (Supreme, 2019).
2. "Sweatshirts," Off-White (Off-White, 2019).
3. Virgil Abloh, "Figures Of Speech", (February 6, 2017).

standard English to enclose vernacular stories...To enjoy colorful informality, yet be assured that the hierarchy of social values still stood, that the vulgar were still under control."⁴

What Abloh is doing by adding in simple, stylistic quotation marks is acknowledging the fluidity and possibilities for a deconstructed meaning. The design is no longer about the physical, but rather focused on the philosophical. In the case of the "BACKPACK", it is possible to see past this category of bags. The object connotes life lived out of a backpack. For example, the consumer may consider the practicality and denotative value of the backpack. Then, perhaps, they'll consider the cultural significance of carrying a backpack. How does a "BACKPACK" change the consumers' understanding and identity?

Laura Bovone tackles how fashion plays into a postmodern climate in her work "Urban Style Cultures and Urban Cultural Production in Milan: Postmodern Identity and the Transformation of Fashion" from *Poetics*.

"Fashionable clothes and accessories provide meaningful examples of the current changes, as if they were metaphors of our identity choices...If clothes are legible evidence of the part of ourselves that we want to make available to others, they do not solve the problem of postmodern instability and ambivalence."⁵

Abloh's use of quotes speaks to postmodern instability through irony. The quotation marks operate as a tool that speaks to ambivalence and instability within contemporary culture and within connotative meanings. Abloh states in an accompanying video for his "Figures of Speech" exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL,

4. Richard Bridgman, "Style and Criticism," in *Contemporary Essays on Style*, ed. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne (Scott, Foresman & Co., 1969), 210.

5. Laura Bovone, "Urban Style Cultures and Urban Cultural Production in Milan: Postmodern Identity and the Transformation of Fashion," *Poetics* 34, no. 6 (2006), 373.



Figure 25. "BACKPACK" from Off-White.

"[Being ironic] was like a dual language happening at the same time...this sort of language that became almost impenetrable by a big brand. But I say that all getting to the idea of quotes: it's the ability to say two things at one time."

-Virgil Abloh

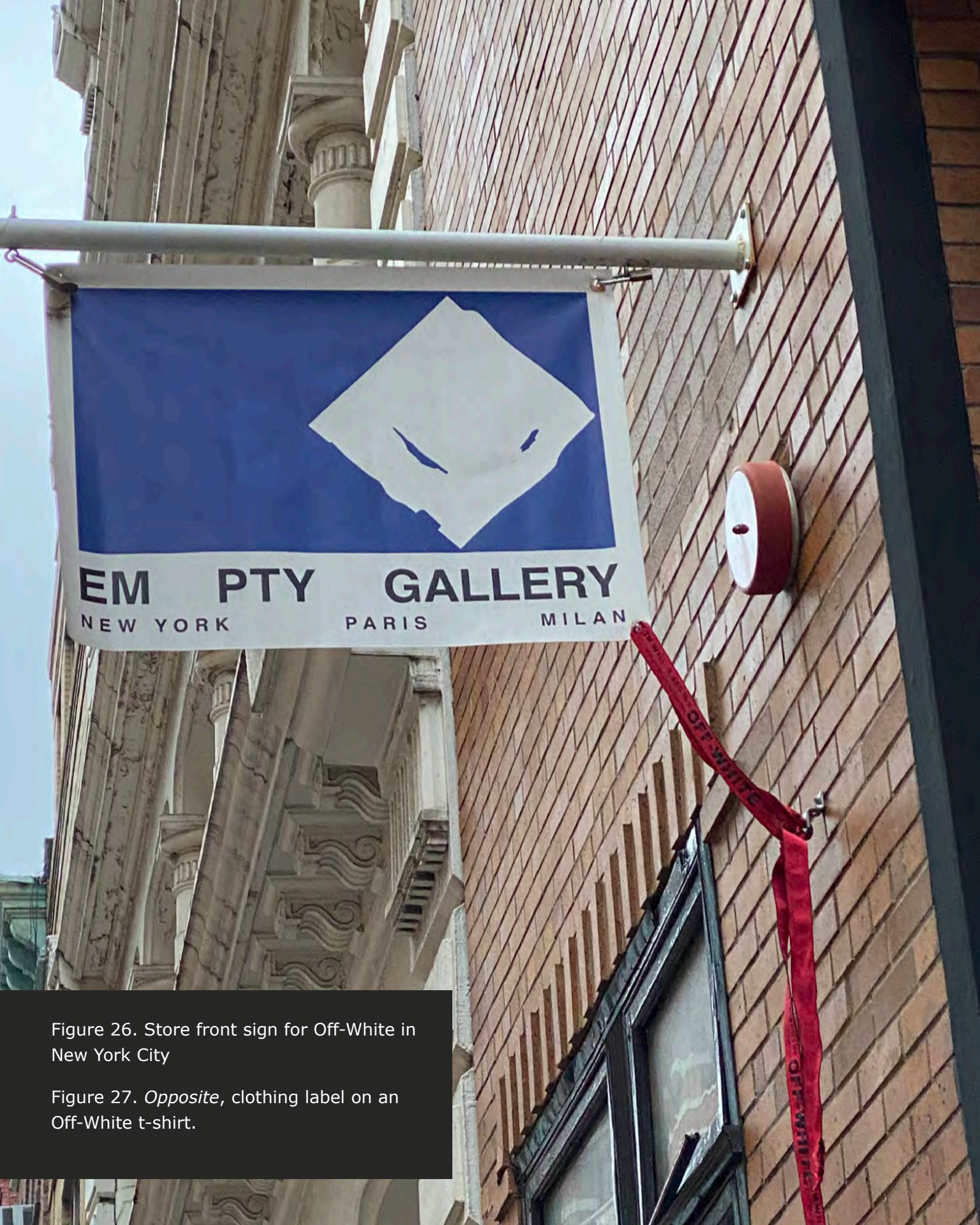


Figure 26. Store front sign for Off-White in New York City

Figure 27. *Opposite*, clothing label on an Off-White t-shirt.

"I come from a generation that was finding this newfound freedom in being ironic. It was like a dual language happening at the same time, you know, the presiding generation with, like, "this is how it's always been done," but the internet sort of cracking open this sort of language that became almost impenetrable by a big brand. But I say that all getting to the idea of quotes: it's the ability to say two things at one time. The crescendo is after, you know, a lifetime of learning and sort of the push and pull of how pop culture dictates taste, is I've been identifying with the power of advertising. How that, at its essence, is what drives culture. You know, it drives taste. It drives decisions. It drives everything from an election to, like, what you'd have for lunch."⁶

Pulling from *Culture, Media, Language* edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, "Language, which is the medium for

6. Virgil Abloh, "Figures Of Speech", (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019).



the production of meaning, is both an ordered or 'structured' system and a means of 'expression'...It could be rigorously and systematically studied—but not within the framework of a set of simple determinacies. Rather, it had to be analysed as a structure of variant possibilities."⁷ What Abloh is doing in his application of quotation marks is simply putting the variants and possibilities of language into an aesthetic representation.

Supreme Parody

Supreme shoppers tend to covet their t-shirts. Some of their most popular t-shirts include, but are not limited to: the traditional box logo, the portrait tees, and their shirts that pull in popular artwork from various points in history. At first glance, these t-shirts are seemingly simple. However, if we consider postmodern and modern art movements, we can see that there are clear references to and mimicking of different art pieces. These references take on many purposes. This section will investigate how Supreme uses parody and pastiche in their clothing to speak on cultural climate and social status.

To understand Supreme's designs, we must understand what pastiche and parody mean in a postmodern world. While similar, each term has nuanced differences that dictate which a design or piece of art functions as. In his paper *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Frederic Jameson states,

"Parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original...A good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original, just as a great mimic has to have the capacity to put himself/herself in the place of the person imitated Still, the general effect of parody is-whether in sympathy or with malice-to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write."⁸

7. Stuart Hall et al., *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), 17.

8. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, (1982), 3.



Figure 28. *Piss Christ* (left) and *Winged Victory* (right) from the photography series *Immersion* by Andres Serrano.

The use of art as a form of demonstrating status has been around for centuries. Aristocrats used art, architecture, and fashion the same way we do now to dictate and show off their wealth and political alignments. However, in contemporary times, our ability to access works of art and pull from them has greatly increased. In regards to wealth and appropriation Bourdieu states,

“The exclusive appropriation of priceless works is not without analogy to the ostentatious destruction of wealth; the irreproachable exhibition of wealth which it permits is, simultaneously, a challenge thrown down to all those who cannot dissociate their ‘being’ from their ‘having’...The dominant fractions do not have a monopoly of the uses of the work of art that are objectively — and sometimes subjectively — oriented towards the exclusive appropriation.”¹²

What Supreme is accomplishing is taking work that once spoke highly of one’s status, religion, and/or politics, and using it to bring high art to “low” culture. As stated in the previous chapter, streetwear was born out of street culture and disparity. Supreme is making a statement on the cultural conditions at play by using something heavily associated with holding social power, whether that be the aristocracy, church, or monarchs. Instead today, they’re making comments on social status and contemporary politics.

Supreme also achieves social commentary through the reproduction of already parodic work. One of the most notable works has been through their fall/winter 2017 collaboration with artist Andres Serrano. Serrano, a New York native like Supreme, has been making shocking art and photographs in solo and group projects since the late twentieth century. The particular piece of interest that Supreme pulled from is officially titled *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, but referred to as, simply, “*Piss Christ*.” The photograph can be seen in figure 28. This piece from 1987 is an image of a small plastic crucifix submerged in, allegedly, Serrano’s urine. In an exclusive interview with HuffPost, Serrano states,

12. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 282.

“The best artistic intentions are usually cloaked in mysteries and contradictions. It wouldn’t be interesting for me if the art were not “loaded” in some way. I always say my work is open for interpretation and that’s why I prefer not to read many of the “interpretations” out there. Suffice it to say, the work is like a mirror, and it reveals itself in different ways, to different people...The crucifix is a symbol that has lost its true meaning; the horror of what occurred.”¹³

While *Piss Christ* did not set out to spark controversy or even have parodic undertones, that was the result due to the dominant beliefs and iconic symbolism that the crucifix stands for in contemporary religion. Furthering the shock of the original, Supreme’s use of the photograph thirty years later reintroduced the controversy and potentially expanded the audience base. How art is interpreted does remain largely subjective however. While a Christian may turn to the shirt and see it as the horrific truth of what occurred on the cross, another may see it as a protest against organized religion.

Supreme’s stance on the work’s symbolism is not necessarily overt, however they operate as the catalyst for how consumers use the art. Adhering to Bourdieu’s notions previously mentioned, we can assume that regardless of how Supreme regards the work, it ultimately is a comment on who can access religious imagery — horrific or otherwise, as seen in their use of *The Last Supper* — and how the imagery is introduced to mass culture. This concept is broken down in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* by John Storey,

“The cultural tastes of dominant groups are given institutional form, and then, with deft ideological sleight of hand, their taste for this institutionalized culture (i.e. their own) is held up as evidence of their cultural, and, ultimately, their social, superiority. The effect of such cultural distinction is to produce and reproduce social distinction,

13. Udoka Okafor, “Exclusive Interview With Andres Serrano, Photographer of ‘Piss Christ,’” *HuffPost* (HuffPost, December 7, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/exclusive-interview-with-_18_b_5442141?guccounter=1).

social separation and social hierarchy. It becomes a means of establishing differences between dominated and dominant groups in society. The production and reproduction of cultural space thus produces and reproduces social space."¹⁴

What Supreme accomplishes through their parodic appropriation is a genericization of art. This allows for conversations regarding the meaning of the artwork to be shifted from a formal setting to one of the most casual settings possible: a t-shirt. The t-shirt, however, also opens up questions of ethics surrounding Supreme and their use of artwork.



Contemporary Controversies

An unavoidable topic that comes up when examining appropriation and parody, especially in design and fashion, is ethics. Issues such as sweat shops, animal cruelty, waste creation and cultural appropriation have all been the center of attention for numerous brands and companies.

Ethics can be very subjective and hard to nail down. At the time of the Serrano collaboration, Supreme was looking for

14. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: an Introduction*, 5th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2011).

the next shocking thing that they could get their consumers to find cool and influential, including counterfeiting.

In a study conducted by Brian Hilton, Chong Ju Choi, and Stephen Chen, the authors noted, "Ethical issues can arise in fashion at different stages of the innovation process such as disputes over intellectual property rights, confidentiality of information, marketing and finance."¹⁵ The products the authors identify as being center to their study and commonly subject to counterfeit are those that have a high credence. While the study points to luxury goods such as Dior, Versace, or Chanel, to name a few. These items have credence in the way that they are deemed high value through their reputation. Supreme also has developed credence in the streetwear industry. Fashion is particularly reliant on the reputation of the brand and their designs. This shifts so the consumers rely on credence to trust if a product is fashionable and worth buying.

Hilton, Choi, and Chen also define what they describe as condoned copies. These are copies that copy art and design from other fashion houses or designers.¹⁶ The issue with this type is determining when a copy is unacceptable and unethical. Particularly in the case of the *Piss Christ* shirt, Supreme and Serrano collaborated on their project. That shifts the ethical implications of using the image on the shirt. It also complicates the relationship between the art, the setting, Supreme, and consumers. What new ethical implications now exist?

What Supreme accomplishes through their appropriations and collaborations is a genericization of art. This allows for conversations regarding the meaning of the artwork to be shifted from a formal setting to one of the most casual settings possible: a t-shirt. Location plays a role in how we interpret images. Susan Sontag says, "...it is now the destiny of many photographic troves to be exhibited and preserved in museum-like

15. Brian Hilton, Chong Ju Choi, and Stephen Chen, "The Ethics of Counterfeiting in the Fashion Industry: Quality, Credence and Profit Issues," *Journal of Business Ethics* 55, no. 4 (2004): pp. 343-352, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-004-0989-8>, 346.

16. Hilton, Choi, and Chen, "The Ethics of Counterfeiting in the Fashion Industry: Quality, Credence and Profit Issues", 350.

Figure 30. Supreme x Serrano *Piss Christ* shirt.

institutions.”¹⁷ In a way, a t-shirt operates as a form of displaying. While it is not in a formal museum or installation, a t-shirt still allows for artwork to be put into the public eye. In particular, Sontag references how museums and institutions promote a collective memory and tells stories of not only death and suffering, but also survival. The *Piss Christ* Supreme shirt offers an opportunity for the image to be on display on someone’s chest rather than hanging in a museum — which is not to detract from the museums and exhibits that Serrano has displayed the original photograph at. The issue becomes more apparent when considered the added complexities and meanings when considering the power of consumption.

It is generally agreed that artists of any sort deserve payment for their work. Copyright and trademark laws are meant to help prevent copying designs, music, and art without permissions. However, it is a fair argument that the average person on the street does not understand the intricacies of copyright laws. It may be hard for the young adult in line to buy a Supreme shirt featuring appropriated work to understand where the boundaries are. Supreme is notoriously secretive about a lot of their products outside of what they release for carefully calculated advertising and marketing ploys.

People seemingly tend to believe that other people act in a way that is inherently good. We assume that others are acting in an ethical manner. Both utilitarian and deontological viewpoints allude to doing the right thing. How you determine what that right thing is varies between the two, but nonetheless, both viewpoints are concerned with acting ethically for some kind of greater good. We have to assume that someone is responsible for confirming that a company, artist, object, is developed and/or operated in an ethical manner. The question is who is doing that? Supreme has been, successfully, getting away with artistic appropriation. Consumers are not rational beings, as demonstrated by consumer behavior and marketing. Is it reasonable to rely on consumers to hold brands accountable? Gonzalo Diaz-Meneses tackles consumer involvement in “The Ethics of Consumer Involvement with Fashion: A Freedom under Social Pressure.”

17. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003), 86.

Diaz-Meneses starts his study by presenting two questions, “The first is whether interest in fashion is free since freedom is essential for ethics to exist. The second question lies in examining whether fashion involvement brings happiness; after all, happiness is the aim of all ethics.”¹⁸ He goes on to state, “in fashion marketing and in the fashion consumption pattern, not only do aesthetics clearly dominate ethics, ethics and aesthetics, and goodness and beauty are sometimes proposed in open contradiction.”¹⁹ Supreme is a prime case of demonstrating the way aesthetics dominate ethics. They are a sought after brand due to their cool factor and, in the case of the *Piss Christ* shirt, their shock factor. If aesthetics reign king over ethics in fashion consumption, is it up to consumers to navigate through what fashion is satisfactory both aesthetically and ethically?

Diaz-Meneses comes to the conclusion in his study that, “the consumer interested in fashion considers the possibility of an ethical choice in which personal and social motives clash. This volitive conflict takes place in the area of three basic freedoms, self-realization, comfort, and social acceptance.”²⁰ Given that consumers are conflicted and motivated by numerous social and ethical factors, it can be hard for them to commit to choosing between ethics and aesthetics. It is possible for ethics and aesthetics to find a balance point where neither is compromised, however, Supreme is not in that balance due to their tendency to appropriate and use artwork that has shock value. While consumers should be considering ethics when making purchases, there are too many factors and unknowns to always make the best choice. Furthermore, consumers should not have to make decisions on if a fashion house is ethical or not because to act ethically is to do the right thing. A fashion house should be doing the right thing to begin with and eliminate the confusion and complications for the consumer.

18. Gonzalo Diaz-Meneses, “The Ethics of Consumer Involvement with Fashion: A Freedom under Social Pressure,” *Textile Research Journal* 80, no. 4 (2009): pp. 354-364, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040517509339229>, 354.

19. Diaz-Meneses, “The Ethics of Consumer Involvement with Fashion,” 356.

20. Diaz-Meneses, “The Ethics of Consumer Involvement with Fashion,” 362.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTING SETTINGS

Figure of Speech n.6 Personification

Anthropomorphism
is the attribution of human traits,
emotions, or intentions to non-human
entities. It is considered to be an
innate tendency of human psychology.
Personification is the related

attribution of human form and
characteristics to abstract concepts
such as nations, emotions, and
natural forces, such as seasons and
weather.

**"The sun
smiled at us"**

Virgil Abloh

"Figures of Speech"

10 Jun - 22 Sep 2019

MCA Chicago

220 E Chicago Avenue

60611 Chicago, IL

Figure 31. *Opposite*, Poster from Virgil Abloh's "Figure of Speech" pop-up shop.



REINVENTING THE WAY WE INTERACT

WHILE WE CAN AGREE CLOTHING HAS CEMENTED ITS PLACE AS A FUNCTION AND OPENED UP TO DECORATION, OTHER OBJECTS HAVE ONLY MORE RECENTLY SHIFTED BEYOND FUNCTION BASED FORMS.

Streetwear has infiltrated other modes of art and products outside of fashion. This chapter will explore the relationship between seemingly mundane objects — such as shower caps, stickers, and bricks — and how Supreme uses them to affect consumers' attention towards otherwise mindless day to day accessories. This chapter will also analyze how Virgil Abloh uses his "*Figures of Speech*" exhibit to introduce streetwear and fashion into "high culture" as well as speak towards social issues.

Reinventing the Mundane

Supreme is no stranger to the outlandish. Their creation of Supreme branded accessories that, while purposeful, are mundane has been a long running joke for the streetwear community. These objects illustrate the critiques that streetwear fanatics will buy anything with Supreme's logo. This criticism is rooted in truth. According to an article from *HighSnobiety* written by Alec Leach, "Those novelties are all part of Supreme's sadomasochistic relationship with its fans — it has legions of kids lining up to spend thousands on its products every week, and it doesn't give them anything in return...It taunts its fans with stuff that they don't need, daring them to buy it anyway. Which they do. Season after season."¹ At the time of writing

Figures 32 through 37. Clockwise from Top Left, Supreme/Audubon bird call, Supreme x Oreo, Supreme transparent lock with key, Supreme x Band-Aid, Supreme lock box, Supreme Pelican 3310PL flashlight.

1. Alec Leach, "Supreme's Brick: 8 Reasons They Made It," *Highsnobiety* (Highsnobiety, August 18, 2016).

this thesis, Supreme is releasing their Spring/Summer 2020 season.² This season brings one of the most unique and almost perplexing “accessories” — Supreme Oreos. The average person may see the Oreos and wonder ‘who would buy such a thing? And why?’. Looking at the “Streetwear Impact Report” conducted by *HypeBeast*, we can see that accessories make up 7.6 percent of streetwear sales by consumers, third to tops (including shirts and hoodies) and footwear.³ While not a top selling product, it still plays a significant role in streetwear culture for other reasons. Consumers are influenced by various factors when considering what streetwear products to buy. Forty two percent of consumers cite contemporary art as an influence for streetwear.⁴ Whatever the influence may be, the accessories are carefully designed and created to draw in Supreme’s fans through decoration and creating significance of a product.

2. Though, also at the time of writing this, COVID-19 has led to a temporary closing of their brick and mortar establishments. Weekly drops have shifted to online only.

3. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. “Streetwear Impact Report.”

4. Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. “Streetwear Impact Report.”

Figure 38. Assorted Supreme stickers, including the box logo sticker given out with every purchase online and in store.



Figure 39. Red clay brick from Supreme’s Fall/Winter 2016 season.

Designers — whether in fashion, web development, or publications — are familiar with the notion that the product they are designing serves a function. Architect Louis Sullivan coined the idea that has since morphed into this principle: form follows function. John Heskett explains how function has since shifted in his book *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*, “Function in design became widely interpreted in terms of practical utility, with the conclusion that how something is made, and its intended use should inevitably be expressed in the form. This omitted the role of decoration.”⁵ What Supreme is doing is not changing form or function but rather introducing decoration. One such example is the famous Supreme brick released in the Fall/Winter 2016 season seen in Figure 39. In an article for the *New York Times*, Alice Rawsthorn discusses the recent shift from form to function. She brings forth the point that with technological advancements, the design of objects no longer necessarily dictates their

5. John Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.



Figure 40. A glass cabinet from the Virgil Abloh x IKEA collaboration of Fall 2019.

function.⁶ While we can agree clothing has cemented its place as a function and opened up to decoration, other objects have only more recently shifted beyond function based form. The application of Supreme's logo doesn't shift the function of the brick. It is still a regular, clay brick meant for building and constructing. The form is not shifted either — it still looks like a brick and has all the qualities of a brick. A consumer knows what it is and what it's meant to do by simply looking at it. This brings us back to why did this brick, among other Supreme accessories, cause such hype and anticipation?

Supreme's use of mundane objects to create hype among fans brings what Heskett describes as significance into play. The application of the Supreme

6. Alice Rawsthorn, "The Demise of 'Form Follows Function,'" *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 30, 2009).

logo brings expression and meaning rather than utility.⁷ This is not a novel approach to art. In fact, bringing significance to otherwise plain objects is a common theme among Pop Art. One observation from *Highsnobriety* is that the brick potentially came into existence "because art" in a similar fashion that Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, and Jeff Koons tried to use their art to bring a new perspective to everyday objects.⁸ Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans also took something mundane — a can of soup that most ignore the details of — and made it art. Not only did Warhol make it art, he also mimicked the repetitiveness of advertising that then became a redundant constant in lifestyle.⁹ This pop art tactic has been used by artists since the ages of modernity and postmodernity. What made Warhol's art resonate with viewers, and what Supreme accomplishes as well, is the play with identity. Rather than letting these everyday objects and letting them fall into an unnoticed existence, Warhol and Supreme give them an identity that shifts their value. According to an article published in *The Economist* in 2018,

"Warhol took the American myth of the self-made man to a logical extreme. Consumers, in his view, did not have stable identities. Unlike his Abstract Expressionist predecessors, he dismissed the search for an "authentic" self as a fool's errand. From his perspective, people seemed to have no fixed centre; they were merely bundles of urges that changed in response to the latest come-on, their appetites always primed but never sated. They were defined by what they bought, the shows they watched, the clothes they wore — all of which were disposable."¹⁰

The creation of the Supreme brick holds strong ties to Warhol's — and others' — use of pop art. It also could have come into existence for many reasons. Supreme is particularly good at not revealing their "why" for the creation of nearly all of their products. Regardless of the reason the

7. Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos*, 40.

8. Leach, "Supreme's Brick".

9. "Campbell's Soup Cans," *MoMA*.

10. "Living the dream; Art and consumerism." *The Economist* (November 17, 2018), 85.



Figure 41. Entrance to Virgil Abloh's "Figures of Speech" exhibit

Figure 42. Opposite, Promotional poster outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago

Supreme clay brick came to be, it managed to break ground for even seemingly stranger accessories to come. Some of these accessories can be seen in Figures 32 through 37, at the start of this chapter.

Classical Settings for Street Art

Traditionally, museums and galleries have operated as a cultural institution — and in many ways still do. However, as art and culture has shifted, the museums must also shift. Of course, pop art and contemporary art has found its place in museums. At the end of the day, pop art and contemporary art are still art. What happens when something seemingly focused on social culture and less on art takes over a museum space?

Virgil Abloh broke out of his well known role as a streetwear designer to curate a rotating exhibit entitled "Figures of Speech." The exhibit first opened June 10, 2019 in Abloh's home city of Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art. After closing in September of 2019, the exhibit was brought to Atlanta's High Museum of Art where it stayed through March



8, 2020. Abloh uses the exhibit to take the viewer through his life's work and his design philosophy. The exhibit was set in numerous rooms that transition from fashion, music, the Black gaze, and miscellaneous projects and collaborations. Figures 41 through 56 show portions of the exhibit's appearance at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.¹¹

The intention is not to say Abloh's work is the first to bring in something that would traditionally not be seen as museum worthy to a museum. That is also not to say that what Abloh has put together for his exhibit does not represent art or that streetwear cannot be art. In his accompanying exhibition video, Abloh states "I see the term "streetwear" as more of a catchphrase to define a way of making than what people might determine it as a style of clothing. In my eyes, it's an art movement less a fashion trend."¹² In particular, Abloh's rejection of streetwear as a fashion trend is unique. For the average consumer, streetwear is about clothes and how they express that portion of their identity. Abloh chooses to view streetwear more in the same vein as pop art. From Abloh's perspective, it is clear why his work belongs in a museum. However, there was speculation on whether or not Abloh could fit his work in a museum.

Museums thrive on standing and really taking in a piece. How often do we find ourselves staring at a painting, trying to take in the aesthetic pleasure while looking for the deeper meanings behind the work? Museums, whether intentionally or not, tend to push viewers to spend their time becoming cultured by the art they are taking in. Abloh is generally regarded as a very busy, fast paced man. Jon Caramancia states in his article, "Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?":

"That he has achieved so much so rapidly is its own provocation, one amplified by "*Figures of Speech*." It is his first museum

11. For the extent of this section, it is worth noting I will be focusing on the Chicago exhibit as it was the one I saw in person. The Atlanta exhibit featured primarily the same works but in a different layout due to the space Abloh was exhibiting in.

12. Virgil Abloh, "*Figures Of Speech*", (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019).

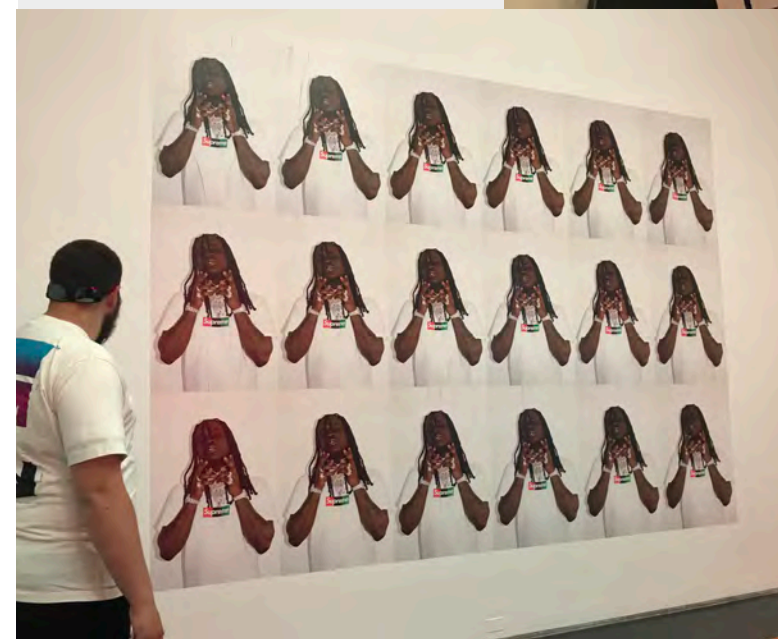


Figure 43. Above, Display of file cases with assorted shirts and graphic work.

Figure 44. Left, Display of Chief Keef wearing a Supreme box logo at the "*Figures of Speech*" exhibit.



exhibition, and fundamentally it asks how a museum — by practice, a static institution — can capture and convey the work of someone who moves quickly, has prodigious output, and who isn't nearly as preoccupied with what he did yesterday as what he might do tomorrow."¹³

The museum, much like all of Abloh's work, was an intentional choice. Kevin Coffee details how museums work as having a culturally formative role. His article "Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and the Formative Roles of Museums" states, "As part of a larger survey of cultural specificity and museum use, conducted in 2007...users and non-users share certain perceptions of the purpose of 'museum' as a place for the storage and presentation of objects or information that is rare, old, or privileged."¹⁴ Museums clearly hold significance as a formative institution and cultural source. However, museums cannot escape consumerism still.

The reason Abloh's work is successful in the museum is because he plays on the consumerism that litters everyday life. "Millions of people rarely, if ever, experience art in a museum setting. They see it on the streets, in their clothes and sneakers, on the walls around them. The way for art to have wide impact is to set it free — Mr. Abloh understands that his real museum is the world outside these walls."¹⁵ Abloh also introduces the notion of the tourist versus the purist. How we explore and interact with the world is key

13. Jon Caramancia, "Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?," *The New York Times*, (August 24, 2019).

14. Kevin Coffee, "Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and the Formative Roles of Museums," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, no. 3 (September 2008: pp. 261-279, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770802234078>), 263.

15. Caramancia, "Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?."



Figure 45. *Top*, Off-White clothes on display.

Figure 46. *Bottom left*, Louis Vuitton clothes on display.

Figure 47. *Bottom right*, View of one of the rooms at the "Figures of Speech" exhibit.

for the exhibit experience, the streetwear experience, and the inescapable consumer experience.

"A purist can find value in meaning based on an underlying premise. Whereas a tourist has curiosity, ambition, and is willing to sort of seek out, to sort of, you know, pacify that need to see something or to know about it...So a lot of my fine art is about demystifying and communicating, again, to a tourist and a purist, that these powerful loaded images are in some ways more impactful to society than, you

Figure 48. *Top left*, A large curtain with a printed façade.

Figure 49. *Bottom left*, A large scale of Kanye West's Yeezus, designed by Abloh.

Figure 50. *Right*, A room divided off by meat packaging vinyl curtains.



know, quote, unquote art or, you know, anything else. I don't feel responsible to a preconceived notion of art. I feel more responsible to a community that is trying to change the tide, or to sort of live in an optimistic society that art, design, music, and fashion actually change the world for the better."¹⁶

Abloh's work draws in streetwear consumers and plays on their curiosity and search for value. The notion of using a museum to provide gratification to a consumer. Pierre Bourdieu discusses this idea in *Distinction* as well.

"The art museum admits anyone (who has the necessary cultural capital), at any moment, without any constraints as regards dress, thus providing none of the social gratifications associated with great 'society' occasions. Moreover, unlike the theatre and, especially, music-hall and variety shows, it always offers the purified, sublimated pleasures demanded by the pure aesthetic and, rather like the library in this respect, it often calls for an austere, quasi-scholastic disposition, oriented as much towards the accumulation of experience and knowledge, or the pleasure of recognition and deciphering, as towards simple delight."¹⁷

While Bourdieu discusses the accumulation of experience or the pleasure of recognition, Abloh

16. Abloh, "Figures Of Speech"

17. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 272.

Figure 51. Louis Vuitton ad featuring a Black boy and a translucent, red bag.



tries to bring together both of these — shifting the “or” to an “and.” It is crucial to remember that museums fill a role in an era that is dictated by consumption. Abloh is aware of this and uses it to his advantage to not only draw in fans and consumers, but also to let them revel in an aesthetic experience. Additionally, to further his critique of consumption, Abloh featured a pop-up merchandise store at the end of his exhibit.

The store featured posters, shirts, accessories, limited run screens from Off-White designs, and even a \$5,000 chair.¹⁸ While visiting the store after experiencing the exhibit, there were limited amounts of guests allowed

18. The chair itself stated you had to contact Abloh via email to get the price and availability, however it has been reported online by those who inquired that it was \$5,000.

Figure 52. Crime scene markers in the center of the Black Gaze portion of “*Figures of Speech.*”



Figure 53. Above, blacked out gas station price sign.



Figure 54. Left, Virgil x IKEA display

in and limits on how many products you could buy. That did not stop a majority of people from spending lots of time picking out the item that they would purchase and use to prove they were there.¹⁹ Gift shops are not an unusual sight at museums. Abloh’s pop-up gift shop didn’t seem out of place in the slightest which speaks to the normalcy of consumerism infiltrating a place that is dedicated to aesthetics and cultural growth.

19. This is a personal observation from my own experience at the store. I will admit I was also guilty of spending nearly an hour picking out products to purchase to show I had visited the exhibit and give myself some notoriety as a streetwear fan.

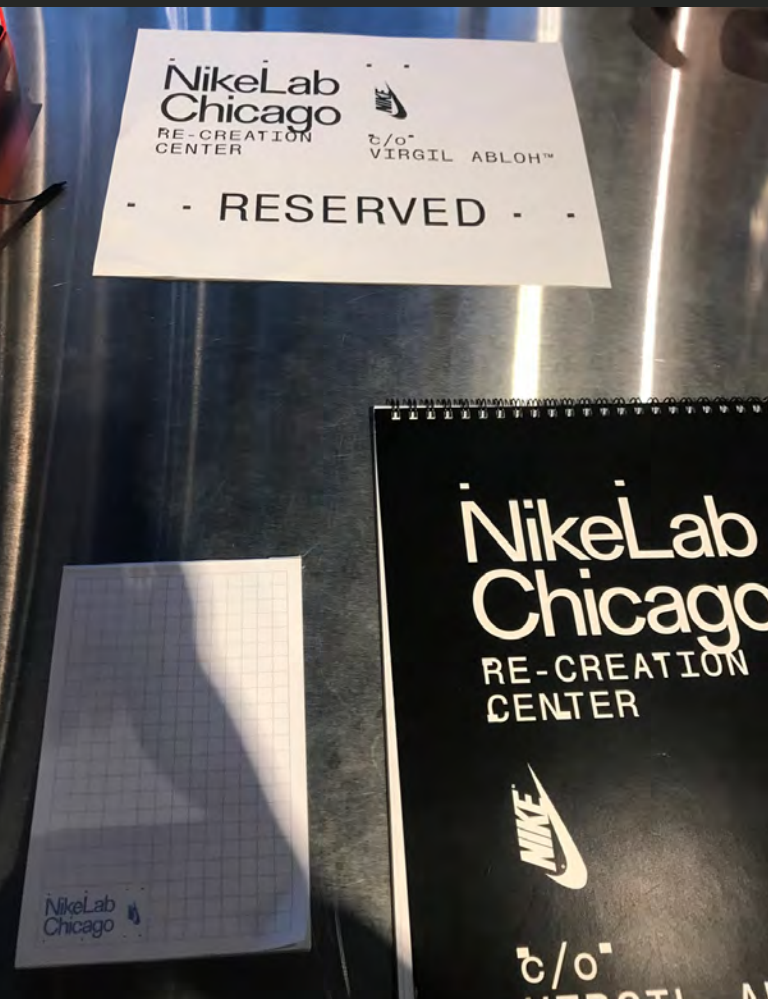


Ultimately, the exhibit was wildly successful. Abloh was able to do almost the opposite of what streetwear often does. Rather than co-opting "high art" and reinventing it for the street, Abloh took art meant for the street and placed it in a "high art" setting.

Figure 55. *Opposite*, Directional sign for the "Church and State" pop-up store at the end of "Figures of Speech"

Figure 56. *Above*, Abloh in a portrait using random objects he had available in the workspace.

Figure 57. *Right*, A set of paper goods from a collaboration between NikeLab in Chicago and Virgil Abloh in conjunction with the exhibit.



CHAPTER FIVE

LOOKING
FORWARD



Figure 58. Blue Flower and Skulls by Takashi Murakami.

THE FUTURE OF STREETWEAR

FASHION IS NO STRANGER TO CONSTANT SHIFTS, FADS, AND TRENDS. AS THE WORLD CHANGES, FASHION CHANGES WITH IT.

The question around streetwear’s future has been asked even before COVID-19. In December of 2019, Virgil Abloh was asked to reflect on the past decade of fashion and what the future may hold. He sparked controversy as he stated in an interview with *Dazed*, “(Streetwear is) gonna die, you know? Like, it’s time will be up. In my mind, how many more t-shirts can we own, how many more hoodies, how many sneakers?”¹ The statement that streetwear was going to die was used as a clickbait style headline across numerous articles speculating what Abloh meant. Abloh did go on to clarify his statement in an interview with *Vogue* by saying, “if you speak to anyone that’s been in streetwear for the last 15 years, it’s always had this sort of nine lives, dying and coming back, and dying and coming back.”² So rather than dying off entirely, streetwear was anticipated by Abloh to be at a turning point. While no one could have predicted at the end of 2019 what was going to happen in the coming months, streetwear definitely has found itself in a strange world.

Some companies have shown losses in the first quarter of 2020. Other companies have become more sought after for their face masks — staples

1. Emma Allwood, “Virgil Abloh: Streetwear? It’s Definitely Gonna Die,” *Dazed*, (December 17, 2019, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/47195/1/virgil-abloh-end-of-2010s-interview-death-of-streetwear>)

2. William Cowen, “Virgil Abloh Clarifies His ‘Streetwear Is Dead’ Comment, Previews NIGO® x Louis Vuitton Collab,” *Complex* (Complex, March 9, 2020, <https://www.complex.com/style/2020/03/virgil-abloh-adds-context-streetwear-remarks-previews-nigo-lv-collab>)



Figure 61. *Below*, An Off-White face mask.

Figure 62. *Right*, Front of the Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt.



Figure 59. *Left*, Back of the Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt.

Figure 60. *Above*, A Bathing Ape (Bape) face mask.



of companies like Off-White and Tokyo-based BAPE. Other companies and fashion houses have taken the opportunity to do their part to help support relief efforts and general safety of the public through fundraising and shifting to making products such as hand sanitizer. Supreme used their drop tactic to spark hype and interest over a \$60 box logo, designed by the highly respected and influential Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. The entire cost shirt was donated to Help USA. Help USA is a New York based organization, founded by now-Governor Andrew Cuomo, that has focused on helping end homelessness since 1986. Figures 59 and 62 on the previous page as well as figure 63 on the next page show the shirt Supreme released on Friday April 24, 2020.³

There is no right or wrong way to partake in streetwear. In agreement with Abloh, streetwear is at a turning point. While we all stay home, our daily styles have shifted. We are not in situations where aesthetics are as vital. We are in a situation where our health and safety comes first. Of course, that does not mean that aesthetics aren't still valued or won't be valued when we emerge from the COVID-19 restrictions. It may be possible that aesthetics will be even more valued after stay-at-home orders are lifted.

David Fischer, founder of *Highsnobiety*, wrote an introduction letter to the book *The Incomplete: Highsnobiety Guide to Street Fashion and Culture*. In regards to culture and streetwear's place in culture, Fischer states,

"That word always gets thrown around: "culture." There is a lot of culture. There's skate culture. There's music culture. There's art culture. I think what brought it together is this lifestyle that embraced it all — there wasn't a singular approach....We believe it's our role to really be able to connect back so that people know that all of this "culture" comes from somewhere. It's not just about product — if it were, we wouldn't have the same energy today as we did back then."⁴

3. This shirt, which sold out in seconds, raised \$1,052,040 USD, according to Help USA's instagram on May 4, 2020.

4. Jian DeLeon, Robert Klaten, and Maria-Elisabeth Niebius, *The Incomplete: Highsnobiety Guide to Street Fashion and Culture* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2018), 6.



Figure 63. Supreme x Takashi Murakami COVID-19 Relief Fund shirt.

No matter what happens as the world reemerges from COVID-19, the world of fashion will reemerge with it. The unique thing about streetwear is that it grew out of feelings of disparity. Streetwear thrives on making the best of situations outside of fashion. The values of streetwear, coolness, authenticity, embracing performance and culture, and youthful, optimistic self-affirmation are all present in identity formation. The clothing and accessories are merely tools for a greater identity.

Though the material goods of streetwear will change, the core of streetwear carries on. As long as humans strive to communicate their identities through self-expression, streetwear will have a place in the world.

THIS IS UNREAL

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abloh, Virgil. "Figures of Speech." Columbia GSAPP, February 6, 2017. <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/events/455-virgil-abloh>.

Abloh, Virgil. "Figures of Speech." Museum of Contemporary Art. Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, June 2019. <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Video/2019/Virgil-Abloh>.

Adz, King, and Wilma Stone. *This Is Not Fashion: Streetwear Past, Present and Future*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2018.

Anderson, Walter Truett. *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*. New York, NY: J.P. Tarcher, 1997.

Appignanesi, Richard, Chris Garratt, Ziauddin Sardar, and Patrick Curry. *Introducing Postmodernism*. London: Icon, 2013.

Allwood, Emma. "Virgil Abloh: Streetwear? It's Definitely Gonna Die." *Dazed*, December 17, 2019. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/47195/1/virgil-abloh-end-of-2010s-interview-death-of-streetwear>.

Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1968.

- Bovone, Laura. "Urban Style Cultures and Urban Cultural Production in Milan: Postmodern Identity and the Transformation of Fashion." *Poetics* 34, no. 6 (2006): 370–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.10.004>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bridgman, Richard. "The Colloquial Style in America." In *Contemporary Essays on Style*, edited by Glen A. Love and Michael Payne, 208–22. Scott, Foresman & Co., 1969.
- Caramancia, Jon. "Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?" *The New York Times*, August 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/22/arts/design/virgil-abloh-mca-chicago.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>.
- Coffee, Kevin. "Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and the Formative Roles of Museums." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, no. 3 (September 2008): 261–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770802234078>.
- Cowen, William. "Virgil Abloh Clarifies His 'Streetwear Is Dead' Comment, Previews NIGO® x Louis Vuitton Collab." *Complex*. Complex, March 9, 2020. <https://www.complex.com/style/2020/03/virgil-abloh-adds-context-streetwear-remarks-previews-nigo-lv-collab>.
- DeStefano, Mike. "15 Best American Streetwear Brands Right Now." *Complex*. Complex, April 24, 2019. <https://www.complex.com/style/best-american-streetwear-brands-right-now/>.
- DeLeon, Jian, Robert Klaten, and Maria-Elisabeth Niebius. *The Incomplete: Highsnobiety Guide to Street Fashion and Culture*. Berlin: Gestalten, 2018.
- Diaz-Meneses, Gonzalo. "The Ethics of Consumer Involvement with Fashion: A Freedom under Social Pressure." *Textile Research Journal* 80, no. 4 (2009): 354–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040517509339229>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- The Economist. "Living the Dream; Art and Consumerism." *The Economist*, November 17, 2018. https://go-gale-com.ferris.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=ITBC&u=lom_ferrissu&id=GALE|A562284773&v=2.1&it=r&sid=ITBC&asid=9c6c4e41.
- Elven, Marjorie van. "The Business of Hype: Why so Many Fashion Brands Are Now Doing 'Product Drops.'" *FashionUnited*. FashionUnited, October 17, 2018. <https://fashionunited.uk/news/retail/the-business-of-hype-why-so-many-fashion-brands-are-now-doing-product-drops/2018101739501>.
- Enkvist, Nils Erik. "On Defining Style." In *Contemporary Essays on Style*, edited by Glen A. Love and Michael Payne, 120–32. Scott, Foresman & Co., 1969.
- Fiske, John. "The Jeaning of America." In *Understanding Popular Culture*, 1-21. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Gaut, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, 1997.
- Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis. *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Routledge, 1980.
- Hall, Stuart, and Paul Du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1996. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.9523&rep=rep1&tyty=pdf>
- Heskett, John. *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Hilton, Brian, Chong Ju Choi, and Stephen Chen. "The Ethics of Counterfeiting in the Fashion Industry: Quality, Credence and Profit Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 55, no. 4 (2004): 343–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-004-0989-8>.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Postmodernism." In *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, edited by Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, 120-130. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*. 1982. https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University, 1991.

Jensen, Robin M.. *The Cross : History, Art, and Controversy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2017. Accessed March 16, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Leach, Alec. "Supreme's Brick: 8 Reasons They Made It." *Highsnobiety*. Highsnobiety, August 18, 2016. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/08/18/supreme-brick/>.

Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Menendez, Enrique, and Axel Nitschke. "Streetwear Impact Report." Streetwear Global Market Research. *Hypebeast*, 2019. <https://strategyand.hypebeast.com/streetwear-report>.

"MoMA Learning: Campbell's Soup Cans." *MoMA*. Accessed March 2020. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-campbells-soup-cans-1962/.

Museum of Modern Art. "Postmodernism." *MoMA*. Accessed January 21, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/84>.

Rawsthorn, Alice. "The Demise of 'Form Follows Function.'" *The New York Times*, May 30, 2009.

Shapiro, David. "How Skate Brand Supreme Learned to Love Trademark Law -- New York Magazine - Nymag." *New York Magazine*. New York Magazine, April 26, 2013. <https://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/supreme-2013-5/>.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, NY: Picador, 2003.

Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: an Introduction*. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2011.

Tate. "Appropriation – Art Term." *Tate*. Accessed February 11, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/appropriation>.

Udoka Okafor. "Exclusive Interview With Andres Serrano, Photographer of 'Piss Christ'." *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/exclusive-interview-with-_18_b_5442141

Ullmann, Stephen. "Style and Personality." In *Contemporary Essays on Style*, edited by Glen A. Love and Michael Payne, 157–65. Scott, Foresman & Co., 1969.

IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1. Stein, Samantha. *This is Unreal*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 2. Stein, Samantha. *Skateboards at Palace*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 3. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White, Vegas*. Photograph. Las Vegas, NV. December, 2019.

Figure 4. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White x Shoes*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 5. Stein, Samantha. *Supreme T-shirts*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 6. Stein, Samantha. *Supreme Hoodies*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 7. Stein, Samantha. *Converse x Concepts*. Photograph. North Muskegon, MI. January, 2020

Figure 8. Kruger, Barbara. *Photolithograph on Paper Shopping Bag*. MoMA. Accessed January 21, 2020. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/64897?artist_id=3266&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.

Figure 9. Stein, Samantha. *Colin Street Portrait*. Photograph. Houghton, MI. January 2016.

Figure 10. Okwodu, Janelle. Vogue. August 10, 2017. Vogue. [vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on](https://www.vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on).

Figure 11. Okwodu, Janelle. Vogue. August 10, 2017. Vogue. [vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on](https://www.vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on).

Figure 12. Okwodu, Janelle. Vogue. August 10, 2017. Vogue. [vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on](https://www.vogue.com/article/supreme-celebrity-fans-the-one-brand-everyone-can-agree-on).

Figure 13. @ll_cool_jey, "Supreme Drop." Instagram. 2014. <https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.ferris.idm.oclc.org/book/ed17/part3/ch14/psec209.html>.

Figure 14. Meza, Sylvia (@lucha_loafers). "Lion King Vans." Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/lucha_loafers/.

Figure 15. Dejesus, Dillon. "Hornets Jordans." Angelus Direct. <https://angelusdirect.com/blogs/artists/dejesuscustomfootwear>

Figure 16. Stein, Samantha. *Jordan Customization*. Photograph. December 2019.

Figure 17. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White Sweats*. Photograph. Las Vegas, NV. December, 2019.

Figure 18. Stein, Samantha. *Stadium Goods Display*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 19. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White Purse*. Photograph. Las Vegas, NV. December, 2019.

Figure 20. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White Pillows*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 21. Stein, Samantha. "WET GRASS" Rug. Photograph. Brooklyn, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 22. Brevitz, Colin. *Off-White Shorts*. Photograph. Brooklyn, NY. March, 2020.

Figure 23. Off-White. "Videos." Videos. March 2020. <https://www.off-white.com/en-us/videos>.

Figure 24. Off-White. "Videos." Videos. March 2020. <https://www.off-white.com/en-us/videos>.

Figure 25. Off-White. "Quote Backpack." Bags. March 2020. <https://www.off-white.com/en-us/shopping/off-white-quote-backpack-14752294>.

Figure 26. Stein, Samantha. *Store Front*. Photograph. New York City, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 27. Brevitz, Colin. *Off-White Shirt Label*. Photograph. Brooklyn, NY. March, 2020.

Figure 28. Serrano, Andres. "Immersion." Series. Accessed March 2020. <http://andresserrano.org/series/immersion>.

Figure 29. Serrano, Andres. "Wall." Wall. Accessed March 2020. <http://andresserrano.org/wall>.

Figure 30. StockX. "Supreme Piss Christ Tee Black." T-Shirts. Accessed March 2020. <https://stockx.com/supreme-piss-christ-tee-black>.

Figure 31. Brevitz, Colin. *Personification Poster*. Photograph. Brooklyn, NY. January, 2020.

Figure 32. Supreme. "Supreme/Audubon™ Bird Call." Spring/Summer Lookbook. January 2020. <https://www.supremenewyork.com/previews/springsummer2020/accessories/supreme-audubon-bird-call>.

Figure 33. Supreme. "Supreme/OREO cookies (Pack of 3)." Spring/Summer Lookbook. January 2020. <https://www.supremenewyork.com/previews/springsummer2020/accessories/supreme-oreo-cookies-pack-of-3>.

Figure 34. StockX. "Supreme Transparent Lock Clear." Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/supreme-transparent-lock-clear>.

Figure 35. StockX. "Supreme x Band Aid Adhesive Bandages (Box of 20) Red." Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/supreme-x-band-aid-adhesive-bandages-red>.

Figure 36. StockX. "Supreme Lock Box Red." Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/supreme-lock-box-red>.

Figure 37. StockX. "Supreme Pelican 3310PL Flashlight Red." Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/supreme-pelican-3310pl-flashlight-red>.

Figure 38. Stein, Samantha. *Supreme Stickers*. Photograph. North Muskegon, MI.

Figure 39. HighSnobiety. "Supreme Brick." 8 Possible Reasons Supreme Made an Actual Brick This Season. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/supreme-brick/>.

Figure 40. Brevitz, Colin. *Glass Cabinet*. Photograph. Brooklyn, NY. April, 2020.

Figure 41. Stein, Samantha. "Figures of Speech" Entrance. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 42. Stein, Samantha. *Promo Poster*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 43. Stein, Samantha. *Filing Cases*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 44. Stein, Samantha. *Chief Keef Supreme Display*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 45. Stein, Samantha. *Off-White*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 46. Stein, Samantha. *Louis Vuitton*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 47. Stein, Samantha. *Room 3*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 48. Stein, Samantha. *Curtain Façade*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 49. Stein, Samantha. *Yeezus*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 50. Stein, Samantha. *"Blue"*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 51. Stein, Samantha. *Louis Vuitton Ad*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 52. Stein, Samantha. *Markers*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 53. Stein, Samantha. *Sunoco, Blackened*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 54. Stein, Samantha. *IKEA x Virgil Abloh*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 55. Stein, Samantha. *Church and State*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 56. Stein, Samantha. *Abloh Portrait*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 57. Stein, Samantha. *NikeLab Paper Goods*. Photograph. Chicago, IL. August 31, 2019.

Figure 58. Gagosian. "Takashi Murakami: Flowers & Skulls." 2020. <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2012/takashi-murakami-flowers-skulls/>

Figure 59. Supreme. "COVID-19 Relief Box Logo Tee." News. April 21 2020. <https://www.supremenewyork.com/news/792/images?image=0>.

Figure 60. StockX. "BAPE Ape Head Mask Black." Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/bape-ape-head-mask-black>.

Figure 61. StockX. "OFF-WHITE Logo Face Mask (FW20) Black/White" Accessories. 2020. <https://stockx.com/off-white-logo-face-mask-fw20-black-white>.

Figure 62. Supreme. "COVID-19 Relief Box Logo Tee." News. April 21 2020. <https://www.supremenewyork.com/news/792/images?image=0>.

Figure 63. Supreme. "COVID-19 Relief Box Logo Tee." News. April 21 2020. <https://www.supremenewyork.com/news/792/images?image=0>.

WHO ARE YOU?

Samantha Stein | Master of Arts in Design