

**Intro to Design Studies**

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Final Paper

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The wardrobe choices an individual makes says a lot about who they are as a human being. Clothes can be seen as an extension of the self; and so the choices we make say a lot more than we think they do. Often, people tend to misjudge or misconceive the individual based on materiality, which in turn leads to generalized stereotypes that eventually become a source of legitimacy for categorizing people. In what is presently deemed “a generation’s default wardrobe choice,”<sup>1</sup> the hooded sweatshirt has proven to represent much more than was originally intended by the Knickerbocker Knitting Company in 1919. This paper will aim to describe how the anonymity and visibility aspects behind the design of the hooded sweatshirt and its original intent to be used for labor workers has changed to become embedded in a complex political identity. As demonstrated in the UK, through the banning of hoodies in shopping malls, in the US, through the shooting of seventeen year old Trayvon Martin and the ‘Million Hoodie March,’ and further case studies, it is evident therefore that the hoodie has come to represent a culture of defiance.

The Champion black hooded sweatshirt, now commonly known as a ‘hoodie’, is a utilitarian piece of clothing that seems to emanate a sense of practicality, comfort, and mobility through its loose fitted structure. The hoodie is made out of 50% cotton and 50% polyester, which gives the wearer a sense of warmth and softness when worn and felt from the inside. It is essentially a long sleeved sweatshirt with an attached hood that can be worn by pulling it over the head or left hanging along the back of the neck. At the base of the front of the hood, there are two drawstrings which come out through metal clasps on both sides, and these allow the user to tighten or loosen the hood as much or as little as they please. At the end of both arms and the waist, there are close fitting elastic cuffs, which allow heat to remain trapped within the garment

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<sup>1</sup> Braddock, Kevin. "The power of the hoodie." *The Guardian*. August 09, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/09/power-of-the-hoodie>

and allow it to remain comfortably fitted along the waist. A large pocket is seamed into the front lower half of the hoodie, creating one uniform pocket with two points of accessibility. On the bottom of the left arm directly above the elastic cuff, a small red, white, and blue 'C' logo for Champion is embroidered.

The most significant aspect of this garment is the hood, as it connotes a sense of visibility and invisibility, and has led to different perceptions of its user based on this. By placing the hoodie over the user's head, the wearer is automatically confined within their own private space as it covers both sides of the face.<sup>2</sup> This confinement is what leads us to the notion of the hoodie being anonymous, and hence invisible, since it is a garment that is widely used by a large variety of people. Once the hood is up, the user is no longer viewed as an individual, but rather as a part of a larger collective of hoodie wearers. The simplicity in its design, as well as its dark color, further connotes this idea of being faceless, as it obscures the user's face from the public, and allows them to blend in to their environment much more easily. Despite this, the use of the hoodie throughout its inception has led to a negative association with criminal activity and youth rebellion. This stereotype is what allows the user to remain visible, and be subject to possible discrimination. Of course, the user has the choice whether or not to enclose within their private space or simply keep their hood down.

According to Alison Lurie's *The Language of Clothes*, clothing acts as a medium for communication, and therefore it can be seen as a language. At first glance, the wardrobe choices an individual makes automatically communicates their sex, age, and class. However, upon further analysis it can also offer information such as tastes, opinions, occupation, sexual desires,

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<sup>2</sup> Rahman, Osmud. "The hoodie: Consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning." *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016). 122.

and the current mood of the individual.<sup>3</sup> Clothing can be seen as a “non-verbal communicator... a system to transfer meaning— from a culture to a person to an object, from a person or an object to the public, and even from reality to an imaginative world.”<sup>4</sup> The connotations that are associated with an article of clothing transfer to its meaning, which can be seen as the product of an interaction between the cultural values and beliefs of the individual and their wardrobe choices. Meaning, however, is subjective as its interpretation depends on the witness and their cultural knowledge and identity, which might differ from those of the wearer.<sup>5</sup>

The Champion brand used to be known as the Knickerbocker Knitting Company in 1919. By the 1930s, they began to develop methods to sew thicker underwear material. The thicker material and added hood was meant to protect the user from the natural elements, such as the rain or cold winds, and provide warmth. The hoodies were directly targeted towards blue collar workers, such as employees at cold storage warehouses and laborers who worked through the winter and needed a garment that was flexible, comfortable, and trapped heat. The company also worked directly with high school track and football students to provide them with garments to wear on the sidelines in occurrences of bad weather. A fashion trend, which connected the hoodie with notions of individuality, began to emerge as the athletes began giving their girlfriends their track garments to wear.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lurie, Alison. *Language of clothes*. New York: Vintage, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Rahman, Osmud. "The hoodie: Consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning." 114.

<sup>5</sup> Barnard, Malcom. "Fashion as Communication." In *Fashion Theory: An Introduction*, 73-90. Florence, US: Routledge, 2014. Accessed May 3, 2017. Proquest.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Denis. "The History of the Hoodie." *Rolling Stone*. April 03, 2012. Accessed April 02, 2017. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-history-of-the-hoodie-20120403>.

In 1975, as hip hop culture became more popular in New York City, the hoodie was adopted by “all people who were sort of looked up to, in the context of the street.”<sup>7</sup> The garment was associated with graffiti artists who tried to maintain anonymity from the police, and break dancers who wore it to keep their bodies warm before they danced. By the early 1980s in the West Coast, the hoodie was being worn by a group of surfers and skaters known as the Z-Boys, who reinvented skate culture with their aggressive style and a so called ‘hoodlum mentality,’ to mask their identity when sneaking around to find places to skate.<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s, gangster rap was emerging, and artists such as the Wu-Tang Clan and Snoop Dogg began wearing hooded sweatshirts in their music videos, their album covers, and to public events. The hoodie “became a symbolic representation of youth culture’s desire to dissociate from authority figures and the older generations.”<sup>9</sup> The hip hop, skate, and punk cultures related over society’s disapproval of their ways of living and the unwelcome attention they received from the police and the public. It is evident, therefore, how the hoodie has been “further interwoven with a culture of defiance.”<sup>10</sup>

The hoodie, since then, has raised many questions and concerns regarding the safety and civility of the individuals who wear the garment and their relation to their environment. In the United Kingdom, the hoodie has “come to serve as a critical index of the young person from the inner city... it is embedded in a complex systems of visibility, images, representations, and meanings that make up analyses of the inner city.”<sup>11</sup> In 2005, a shopping center in Kent, England

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Denis. "The History of the Hoodie."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rahman, Osmud. "The hoodie: Consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning." 112.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, Denis. "The History of the Hoodie."

<sup>11</sup> Bell, Charlotte. "The Inner City and the ‘Hoodie’." *Wasafiri* 28, no. 4 (November 14, 2013): 38-44. doi: 10.1080/02690055.2013.826885. 38.

banned all hooded tops and baseball caps in an attempt to stop the intimidating young people who were associated with shoplifting and drugs. The inner city kids regarded this wardrobe choice as an affordable option, and used it as a tool which allowed them to conceal their identities and blend in, rather than stand out. In 2005 and 2007, the riots of the *banlieues* of Paris that resulted in the deaths of young men by police, resulted in state institutions and politicians prompting the hoodie as a symbol of ‘thugocracy’ of criminals, a term coined by Nicolas Sarkozy.<sup>12</sup> More recently, the hoodie has become a material witness to the shooting death of seventeen year old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. After the simple act of pulling the hood over his head, Martin, a black teenager whose presence, wearing a dark grey hoodie, seemed to threaten George Zimmerman, his neighborhood crime watch enthusiast, was shot in the chest.<sup>13</sup> This event triggered a nationwide reaction which prompted the beginning of a movement called the ‘Million Hoodie March,’ where thousands of Martin supporters gathered in public spaces wearing hoodies and subsequently increased the sales of hoodies at that time.<sup>14</sup>

People depend on clothing as an expression of themselves, as a method to constructing their individuality, and to fit into sociocultural contexts and circumstances. The banning of hooded sweatshirts in shopping malls in England demonstrated this attempt to break the sociocultural contexts that the garment is usually associated with, but failed to comprehend the connection to individuality and blending in that the young inner city kids could have felt towards the hoodie. As a result of his preconceived negative connotations with the hoodie, George

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<sup>12</sup> Bell, Charlotte. "The Inner City and the ‘Hoodie’"

<sup>13</sup> Nguyen, Mimi Thi. "The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015): 791-816. doi:10.1086/680326. 791.

<sup>14</sup> Rahman, Osmud. "The hoodie: Consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning." 112.

Zimmerman interpreted the meaning behind Trevor's wardrobe choice as a sign that he had just committed a crime and was attempting to conceal his identity. The use of the hoodie in the Million Hoodie March signified its power as a symbol for oppression, rebellion, revolution, and peace and acted as the communicator between those who felt oppressed by the system and the system itself. Through these events, it is apparent how the meaning and use behind the hoodie has been extended to represent much more than was originally intended. However, these only demonstrate extreme cases and may not fully apply to other daily uses of the garment.

Hoodie wearers, according to responses from a study conducted by Osmud Rahman, reported that their main reasons for wearing a hoodie were its comfort, function, warmth, and ease of movement. Furthermore, their decision to wear a hoodie depended on the situation, whether it was an athletic activity or simply for relaxation.<sup>15</sup> Initially, the hoodie is still being used as it was originally intended— to provide comfort, warmth, and mobility. However, its users have drastically altered from the designer's originally intended consumer and include a large variety of subcultures.

Through a vivid description of the hooded sweatshirt and a discussion of the significance of the hood, it is evident that this garment symbolizes visibility and anonymity, as well as individuality and collectivity. It is able to act as a blank canvas for expression and communication for both the individual towards society and for society against higher systems of power. As such, it has promoted false perceptions, as it is commonly associated with criminality as seen in the United Kingdom and has given rise to movements, as seen in the United States, where it has been used as a symbol for standing up for the oppressed. From the designer's

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<sup>15</sup> Rahman, Osmud. "The hoodie: Consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning." 112.

original intent, the hoodie has been embedded in a vast array of historical subcultures, from skater boys to hip hop rappers, and has come to represent its own culture of rebellion.



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*Champion*, Black Hoodie