

INTRODUCTION:

Hoodies were despised by my mother. The hoodie came with rules. Only allowed to be worn in the house. Observe my surroundings while wearing one. The biggest rule? Never put the hood up. These rules were non-negotiable.

By age ten, the death of innocent seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin would be the first time I comprehended why the hoodie had been restricted in my youth. The hoodie was used against Martin, as conservatives used the sweatshirt to attempt to justify his murder.

As Martin's hoodie would be used to villainize his character, the hoodie began taking a new form of life. Nearly a century before, the hooded sweatshirt would be created by the pioneer sportswear company now known as Champion Athletic Apparel. Hoodies were invented out of necessity, the sole purpose being to protect 1930s cold-storage warehouse laborers in upstate New York from the elements.

The hooded aspect came from monks in the medieval ages wearing the garment umbrella to cover their bald heads, for religious tradition and functionality. During this time the hood was referred to as a cowl that would be attached to the monk's robes. The hoods also became functional for outdoor work as it was considered a large sized hat.

The hoodie would also gain the attention of student athletes during the late 50s and 60s who were tired of training in the freezing cold without something to cover them. The players would have capes on the sidelines but those could only be used when the players were not in motion. They were not convenient for practices and intense winter weather. The hoodie also gave players the opportunity to wear their schools' crests and logos on their chests, creating one of the first forms of self expression within the hoodie.

It had become synonymous with discipline, self-determination, athleticism, and blue-collar labor. Traditionally made of French Terry fabric with an attached hood, dangling drawstrings from its grommets and a kangaroo pouch, it has been solidified in human culture, and is, arguably, the most popular basic apparel piece in American clothing history (next to the blue jean).

With the new found style of the 1950s, several communities adapted the garment for themselves. Winter jackets and coats were expensive, not causally purchasable or accessible for lower income families. The hoodie began taking a new form of purpose.

This garment has intrigued me since gaining consciousness. After writing a brief piece on it last Spring semester, thoughts continued to linger with me until this Fall. My professor, Nick Haramis, an editor at large for T, The New York Times Style Magazine proposed a class assignment in our class *New Approaches to Fashion Reporting*. After going to the Goodwill bins in Long Island, Nick would return with an Ikea bag full of clothing.

He told us to pick an item out of this bag and write about it, its history, the functionality and why it's impactful to human existence. I dug my hand in, swirling it around and grabbed something without looking. It was a Lakers hoodie. Bright sunshine yellow with Prince purple on the logo to represent the

team's colors. I almost took the root of looking into sportswear and its influence on the world but felt the hoodie had more to say.

I wanted to defend the hoodie, the misunderstood brainchild of Champion, and the wearers most affected by its image.

Chapter 1: Hoodies, Hip-Hop and Black culture

The shift was seen during 1973. The hoodie had taken the position of an act of rebellion. Eric “Deal” Felisbret, regarded as an early writer of graffiti, would see the clothing item in his own subculture. Felisbret was interviewed by Denis Wilson of Rolling Stone magazine in 2012, mentioning that “graffiti writers used the hoodie to keep a low profile, and break-dancers wore it ‘to keep their bodies warm before they hit the floor’”. Members of separate subcultures found neutrality with one another due to the way the world rejected them. One could customize the hoodie and make it their own.

The hoodie had been planted as the new cool for teenagers, increasing in notability after being seen in the 1976 film *Rocky* starring Sylvester Stallone. The “Rocky Steps” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art was the background for Rocky's drenched-in-sweat gray sweatshirt running montage. Around the states, many began to fantasize; thinking that buying themselves the outfit would lead to training and fighting like a heavyweight boxer.

Curious about this mindset, I asked my parents how they viewed the hoodie. My father was born in 1960 while my mother was born in 1966. Both my parents had no experience with the hoodie other than the context of working out. “I didn’t like them at first. I like them now,” my mother said to me at a bar in West Point, NY. My father, boyfriend, mother and I continued to discuss. Their first experiences with the clothing piece was *Rocky*. My boyfriend Mickey’s was at bar and bat mitzvahs, where the hoodie is often given to children as a take-home gift, complete with the logo of whoever is being celebrated. My mother’s opinion has recently changed due to my now understanding of her former reasoning. Her and I both wear the hoodie frequently, as we both enjoy streetwear fashion.

Younger generations began to wear it most frequently. Carol Tulloch, author, curator and Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transatlantism at the University of the Arts London (UAL) formed a touring exhibition titled “Black British Style” beginning at the Victoria & Albert Museum located in London (V&A) in 2004. In her curation, Tulloch included the hoodie saying, *“It’s all about belonging to a particular group and is key to subcultural identity...it’s about belonging to a group, hanging out together”*.

Popularity of the hoodie increased in the 80s, and 90s, as subcultures began adapting hoodies into their wardrobe. Rappers, skateboarders, surfers, and graffiti artists all deemed the comforting clothing a representation of each culture. These kids had what they needed on their backs: protection from cold climates by tugging one’s strings to narrow the opening, capability to layer with a down puffer jacket or a wool varsity bomber with flocculent chenille patches and wrinkled leather sleeves. The new uniform had become unrivaled.

Dr. Dawnn Karen who is a Professor of Psychology and is a pioneer in the field of fashion psychology at the Fashion Institute of Technology explains this reality for black people in depth. She sees the popularity of the hoodie happening during the late 80s and 90s due to thinking, “that was the time where you didn't have to be so prim and proper. You could let it hang out, you could be edgy. I just remember everything was so baggy in those time periods. The personality that comes with that, that nonchalant kind of introverted style. Even though when people think “edgy” or “baggy” they're going to think of extroverted personalities but it was the clothing that was extroverted. It's all about styling from the inside out.”

The hoodie became more of a presence during my years in middle school. My mother could no longer stop me from getting one from myself. Kids my age were getting them on our trip to Philadelphia. The design wasn't anything special, a typical cotton blend hoodie in either black, pink or blue, splattered with neon colored paint. PHILLY in all capital letters. I would wear the hoodie everywhere, it was a blanket that could be carried with me on my journeys during this time.

At the time, I was seeing Rihanna, Justin Bieber and other teen celebrities wearing hoodies. I looked up to using the hoodie as a statement piece for themselves. It wasn't understood to me why I wasn't wearing it before this time. I craved dressing like my peers and at this point in my youth my mother was never going to make me understand why it was a risk.

It became a safety blanket for me. How could it not? The hood over my head, constant warmth surrounding my body. With more understanding of America, particularly during the Black Lives Matter protests I attended in the Summer of 2020; the hoodie took the form of a protector and as a political object.

Chapter 2: Demonizing the Hoodie.

It was never that the hoodie itself was inappropriate, it is wearers of the hoodies bringing a behavior that is not accepted. On different bodies, the hoodie attracts sinister reactions.

In my adult life, I wear the hoodie more often than not. In March of last year, I had a stark white hoodie on by Heaven BY Marc Jacobs, deciding to go shopping at Crossroads on W. 13th St. It was a place that I frequented, loving their prices on designer clothing and the fact that I was still purchasing 2nd hand.

After walking around the shop for around forty minutes, I purchased three things. My boyfriend, Mickey, was still trying stuff on. As I waited for him, I noticed a t-shirt on the wall by designer Martine Rose and asked a staff member if they were able to pull it down for me to look at closer. “Promising Britain” read the shirt, with a Tory party member dressed as a clown, surrounded by the stars of the European Union.

I had made up my mind, I was going to get this shirt along with my previous purchase. Just as I finished my transaction, Mickey was done with trying things on. Him and I begin to walk towards the door of the store as the manager approaches me, “I can also help you ring that hoodie up too.”

“Excuse me?” I turned around confused.

“The hoodie you're wearing, you got it from here.”

The pure shock on my face made me feel red. Previously I had sympathized with those who had encountered racial profiling before but now, I have experienced it. Angrily zipping my coat down, showing the manager my hoodie with a key detail, a stain on the strings from dinner the night before. I could feel myself about to burst into tears, and I did. Releasing all of my frustration onto the manager.

“This is my hoodie, see the stain? And no fucking security or price tag. I walked into this place wearing this—even with my hood over my head! You didn't notice that or think to look at cameras before accusing me of this? Who buys things in a store and then lingers on after stealing?”

The manager began to take the role of the victim, blaming the accusation on what she had been told by their security officer. “He claimed he saw a tag hanging from the hoodie.” She walked away from me after saying that. The blindest look on her face, someone who had no empathy.

I felt at that point that I deserved an apology. After asking for one from the manager, she began to act as if the entire situation never happened. That she had not racially profiled me. This lack of emotion and inability to admit one's faults did not plague this woman. I demanded her to give me the number for the corporation and her name. She pulled out a pack of Post-It notes and placed them onto the desk in front of me. Writing silently and routinely, the manager was unfazed. Mickey defended me, noting to the woman that she was not forgiving in any sense for her mistake.

“Do you realize how this situation looks in the world we live in? That you, being a white woman accusing a black woman of theft has more meaning than you are understanding?”

Her nods and I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude was making me sick. She didn't care or understand how much the situation was being blown out of proportion. Instead of apologizing, she gave me more fuel to my fire. I walked out and have not shopped there since.

This was my first experience with racial profiling. This pit in my stomach, feeling defeated for having to defend myself for something I did not do. I had gone through the exact discrimination I had been writing about a week before.

The moment was something that I forgot about until working on this piece this year. Now remembering my connection with this project, makes it clear to me that black bodies are not able to wear anything without being criticized.

Sure, it may be thrown on for an easy wear but the prospect of being perceived as a threat brings greater concern for many black Americans. It became a matter of comfortability on every level, was harassment worth enduring when one placed the item on their body? It was worn by hip-hop figures such as Snoop Dogg and basketball player Allen Iverson. Thus, causing conservatives to build assumptions that if you were black wearing a hoodie, you must be a “thug”. The hoodie had become a proxy for racial profiling.

While I was living in London, the behavior was described as “anti-social”. Now in the American context, we describe this as “*averse to the society of others: unsociable*”. In the British context, (more the

Metropolitan police) the term is described as: “*behaviour by a person which causes, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to persons not of the same household as the person*” which is more closely related to the American term of ‘suspicious’ or ‘suspect’ behavior. These posters would confuse me, as they seemed to be outrightly prejudiced towards minority teenagers who had been deemed as committing anti-social behavior.

The piece was adored by youths and was clearly not going anywhere, causing several shops in Britain and Prime Minister Tony Blair in the early 2000s to ban hoodies/hoods from shopping malls, such as the Bluewater in Kent, England. The bans were supported by some, though loathed by others who felt they were being criminalized for simply wearing the item. The ban was reintroduced in Romford’s (town in east London) shopping centers in 2023 and was criticized again. Since there is little to no evidence that banning hoodies works, Jon Yates, the executive director of the Youth Endowment Fund feels that, “there can be a real downside to banning hoodies,” as “Hoodies tend to be worn by young people, so it's labeling a whole group as negative. It's quite draconian to stop people wearing what they want.”

There was no understanding of these youth in parliament. And it's noticeable within the United States as well. The lack of care or understanding for why the hoodie may be the best option for someone to wear. They never question rich consumers who use the hoodie as a play toy.

This control of fashion was something I saw happening in areas of London that are minority based. Hell, one can walk into either Harrods or Selfridges and purchase themselves a thousand dollar hoodie just because.

The hoodie during my time there was used for style but primarily for functionality. The neighborhood, Stratford, that I lived in was considered to be dangerous to my central London friends. The reasoning? I always knew it was because the area was more diverse than what many English students were used to. The town reeked of gentrification just dying to happen, as the Westfield mall near us had only been open since 2011 and the local Stratford shopping center opened in 1974. I watched kids come off the tube with their hoods over their heads, which would be encouraged by the Metropolitan Police to be taken down—even in the dead of winter.

Hoodies began to face separate realities for wearers. For the white working class, it had become a sign of toughness and motivation. Maybe you wore one while standing on the sidelines of your children's soccer game—or wore one to fix your roofing. You wore it without fear. If you were black, a metaphorical and physical target was aimed at you.

Art Director & Design Frederic Saint-Parck of Nigerian British brand Mowalola sees this connection between black people and the hoodie as existing since the early 90s. Mr. Saint-Parck was my direct boss as an intern at the designer while I lived in London, with his background in fashion and interest in politics, speaking to him was critical for more perspective.

When asking Mr. Saint-Parck why he believes the black community and the hoodie have a deep connection he explained that, “The hoodie is a very very significant thing for black people cause it's the main reason why Trayvon Martin died. There was no other reason. He walked into a candy store with a

hoodie on and Zimmerman, the shopkeeper, presumed he was up to no good and literally killed him in cold blood. If I saw a white man in a hoodie, I'd probably think maybe he just went for a jog or maybe he left from the gym. So definitely connotations."

NBA players were given a dress code by former commissioner David Stern in 2005, specifically targeted at any clothing that was associated with hip-hop culture. Durags, jerseys, chains, sneakers, boots (Timberlands primarily) and hoodies were all included in this new dress code for a league that is 73.2% black athletes. The ban made zero sense as no major sports leagues in North America had a dress code before this and the NBA was benefiting from using black athletes. This constant attempt to restrict one from embracing their own culture is what drives these laws and bans into place. For instead of seeing the garment as a cultural item, it is associated with crime, theft and violence.

When asking Dr. Karen about this idea, she agreed. Telling me, "No. and No. And hell no. My second lecture, I lectured all about the hoodie and talked about how someone of asian descent, hispanic descent, different versions of people can wear that same exact hoodie. Same brand, same color and it denotes a different meaning and they themselves would have worn it because they just wanted to be comfy. But the black person, emphasis on black male, they have to think twice, maybe three times. We did the hoodie because we were talking about Trayvon Martin but that could also go for a facial mask. It's a fact that black males in hoodies are treated in disproportionate ways."

Chapter 3: How Luxury Stole the Hoodie

The Wu-Tang Clan would release their debut album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* in 1993, all members wearing hoodies with covered faces. The group went on to begin their own brand Wu-Wear, selling the T-shirts and hoodies popular with its members. The fashion industry couldn't help but to notice the youth flocking to their local record stores or thrift shops to look like the group. Emil Wilbekin, writer for the [The Cut](#) wrote in 2022 that, "This is when the fashion industry began appropriating the "urban" look, creating the luxury versions of the hoodie worn on the runways of Gucci, Prada, Versace, Ralph Lauren, Isaac Mizrahi, Chanel, and Giorgio Armani. Like hip-hop, the hoodie had crossed over — again."

While it is difficult to find an exact date for the transition of the hoodie, the 2000s brought the hoodie into Silicon Valley. Used by tech and finance companies, the garment became a replacement for the traditional suit. Young Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos fed into the aesthetic. Acting to not care about one's appearance was something both of these tech moguls thrived on, catapulting the politically charged garb onto crowds of tech bros aching to be noticed.

The mindset for them was the following: baggy, loose fitted clothing was meant to place focus on the work these people were doing, instead of what they were wearing. They associated the suit with the corporate lifestyle they desperately wanted to tear apart and the hoodie was the new cool. Meant to be a sign of respect for one's work. There is an assumption that dressing eclectically or well correlates with knowledge. That one who thinks deeply about what they are wearing can not be smart. They can not have self control. These people believed that dressing as unseen would mean they were taken more seriously.

When trying to place myself in their shoes, I find trouble trying to understand this logic. It has always read to me that there is this lack of self awareness from these tech bros. Most of them got their hoodies

from high-end brands such as Brunello Cucinelli or sneakers from Lanvin, making them hypocrites who believed that luxury dumbed one down but still participated in the system.

The hoodie could be used to make them seem more intelligent or be deemed as more serious, while for another group of people, it labeled them as criminals. And while everyone is entitled to wear the hoodie, it was never a thought process for people such as Zuckerberg and their minions that wearing one would place them at risk.

Fashion and its consumers are sometimes (*often*) narcissistic, seeing themselves as the first one to wear something or that they begin trends. Thus we fall deeper into the hole that is, the luxury industry claiming the hoodie. But the act of wearing a hoodie has become a privilege within itself, and this idea is ignored by high fashion brands. Vetements, Balenciaga and Burberry have been criticized for their use of the hoodie in luxury production.

Vetements and its original creator, Demna Gvasalia is no stranger to controversy. Not only has the designer come under fire for his ad production as Creative Director at Balenciaga but Vetements was truly his first problem child. Vogue at one point called the brand “Clothes for the revolution” despite them having price tags never being able to reach the communities who made the hoodie desired. One of the largest controversies surrounding Vetements was in 2016. The brand was selling hoodies for prices upwards of \$1,000 and being credited for introducing the hoodie into high fashion. The Fall 2016 Ready-to-Wear show presented a maroon hoodie with, “May the bridges I burn light the way” and a long matching sweat skirt: a theme during the show. Another set plastered “SEXUAL FANTASIES” in tangerine letters down the side of its skirt onto eggplant colored fabric.

Elaborated in [MIC Magazine](#)’s article on the racial history of hoodies, “Vetements embodies every traditionally elite fashion virtue: exclusive, unattainable and wholly not diverse.” Prices and tone-deaf designs centering wealthiness reeked of performativity from Vetements, instead of understanding the item's history.

Burberry designed a “noose hoodie” for their Fall/Winter 2019 collection titled ‘Tempest’ in London. The politically incorrect drawstrings brought forth backlash. The brand was accosted for glorifying suicide along with the act of lynching of black bodies. The show also took place during Black History Month. After issuing a formal apology, Burberry announced “New Diversity Initiatives” meant to focus on educating and inclusion within their staff to avoid instances such as these in the future.

Unrecognizability and confusion rose from those who had been risking their lives to wear hoods over their heads, as a cheap hoodie from Walmart had shape shifted into a light blue pixelated version seen in LOEWE’s Spring 2023 womenswear collection, retailing for \$2,500 on the brand site.

The hoodie has remained the essence of survival for the average person, yet the luxury fashion industry has been tricked into thinking this was a revival. It wasn’t; it was a rerun of originals.

The style was special though never recognized for its beginnings. Where I have my issues with the fashion industry is that this lack of explanation of history erases entire generations. It doesn’t give credit

to the correct founders. The founders who not only made the style cool but were taking a risk while wearing the hoodie. For this phenomenon is a real issue that seemingly only occurs to black bodies. By ignoring this, brands will continue to receive push back from consumers.

Ingenuity should be celebrated, yes, but how can one create impactful art without correct political understanding in a time focused on confrontation of the past?

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