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The Development of Streetwear and the Role Of New York City, London, and Supreme NY

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF STREETWEAR AND THE ROLE OF NEW YORK CITY, LONDON, AND SUPREME NY

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Abstract

The Supreme NY brand encompasses fashion and music, skateboarding, and art. This study explores streetwear subculture and Supreme NY ’s history, influence, and position within the market in a European context. The study interviewed shop owners, designers, and fashion icons in London, Berlin, Milan, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, and New York to elicit their perceptions of Supreme NY and the evolution of streetwear since the late 1980s. Results reveal that study respondents were significantly influenced by emerging music and skateboard culture in New York City during the 1980s and 1990s. Due to the so-called information age and rising number of new brands and collaborative projects, the streetwear industry is experiencing greater online activity than storefront patronage by enthusiasts. Results suggest that streetwear may evolve into apparel with a heavier presence online than on the street due to the growing rate of e-shopping and editorials. The term streetwear was also not concretely definable and responses from interview candidates suggested that more than apparel, streetwear is a social interactionist object and connotes a state of mind rather than a style of dress.

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Thanks also to Alice Chu.

Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my family, who have supported me each step of the way.

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Foreword: Eugene Kan—Editor, Hyperbeast.com

"There exists so many pockets of cultures and spheres of influence that defining streetwear will rarely elicit the same answer from any one person. Party people, skaters, playground athletes, artists … they all operate on different platforms within the streets and for them the context will always be different. I would never go as far as to superimpose streetwear's definition onto somebody else. For some, sneakers and T-shirts are one aspect of it while to others leather jackets and Dr. Marten boots are a quintessential part of their streetwear uniform.

But one thing I think we should agree upon is that cultural aspects are a big driver of regional definitions of streetwear. What happens on a ground level in Hong Kong and its cultural and societal contexts are going to make up that region's definition versus the happenings of say London, Vancouver, Shanghai, and New York.

Speaking of New York, the city has consistently defined itself on a global level. From the arts to business, New York City's melting pot and hustler mentality has created an enviable culture and city. Many have looked up to New York and in many ways adopted some of the sensibilities of what New Yorkers have done over the years. But along the way, whether it's a NY mentality planting the side, eventually streetwear will mutate and develop into its own movement with its own character."

Introduction: Streetwear

Streetwear is generally considered to be a highly individualized style of fashion that enfuses and embodies characteristics of skate, basketball, and hip-hop culture from the metropolitan U.S. East Coast during the 1980s. The evolution of the term streetwear can be interpreted as an anomaly. Accelerated developments within societal norms have allowed youth to forge new definitions of individuality under the pretense of rebellion.

Almost 250 customers stood along Lafayette Street in New York City's Nolita neighborhood on an early Thursday morning in September of 2011. The anticipation for Supreme NY's 2011 Fall/Winter collection had some die-hard fans camping out for almost 48 hours, awaiting the release of new apparel and accessories. It is clear that a cult-like following exists within the island of Manhattan for one of the world's oldest and most successful streetwear brands. With its deep history influenced by music, skateboarding, art, and fashion, Supreme NY has provided apparel, skateboard equipment, accessories and other pop culture paraphenalia at an expansive and continuous pace. It is a wonder, however, how the steady stream of marketing and Supreme's brand image has translated overseas in Europe. This study examines the brand perception of *Supreme NY* in a European context through an investigation of the brand's history, influence, and position within the market, while encompassing the ideas of commodity and consumerism, as well as social and economic status.

Bread & Butter Berlin, the annual retail and design trade show that occurs twice a year, brings together over 250 brands from all areas of Europe to present new collections and designs (see Figure 1). The Streetwear section is classified as a combination of "inspiring brands, sneaker connoisseurs, board sport enthusiasts, creative heads, blog entrepreneurs and the best international streetwear retailers" ("Sport & Street," 2011, para. 1). The diversity in presenters is

a true testament to the vast expansion within the Streetwear category.

For the purpose of this paper, a study was conducted to investigate the factors behind the development of streetwear within the selected European capitals. This study also looked to define the term and asked participants the following question: "What is streetwear?" in order to better understand the context and subject matter behind the term. Contributors involved in this study are engaged in multiple levels of the streetwear industry in Europe and New York City and play an integral part in directing the apparel, art, music, and skateboard market.

Dejongh Wells, co-founder of *Sole Collector Magazine*, has had an extensive history growing up within the New York City sneaker and hip-hop community. Wells recalls the manner in which Supreme NY has always enforced its brand image:

> Supreme is exactly what it is, it typifies its name, as a lifestyle, as the higher echelon, the best of the best, the cream of the crop. … Knowing that it began as a skate brand, it's a state of mind that defines who you are, 24/7, 365. Now though, I think Supreme as a brand is part of skate, hip-hop, and fashion, it encompasses all of them. (D. Wells, personal communication, June 9, 2011)

With only eight flagship stores around the world—including New York, Los Angeles, London, and Japan—accessibility to the brand is limited. In order to restrict access to its apparel and merchandise, only seven other retailers carry Supreme NY accounts. Its unique approach to customer management and service has forged a reputation over the years that is widespread and well known.

Both stores in New York and in Los Angeles have been known for the extremely poor and crass customer service. The low level of tolerance for those unaware with in-store rules—no unfolding, stock is in the back, limited questions, and a get-in-and-get-out policy—has still

allowed the brand to thrive. As brand front man and Supreme NY poster boy Aaron Bondaroff explains:

> In the early days it was like come in, don't touch; you can look with your eyes but not with your hands. It was a crazy way to sell garments but the customer learned the deal: don't fuck with us and we wont fuck with you. T-shirts were folded tightly like it was art … all the while the skate team and crew were just hanging-pretty heavy for an outsider. (As cited in "Inside Supreme," [Part 1], 2012, para. 18)

Season after season, an extensive lineup of men and women manages to wrap its way along Lafayette Street, waiting patiently for the doors to open. During the Fall/Winter release on September 7, 2011, 250 people between the ages of 12-45 braved an overnight rainstorm while waiting for new releases. One of the first in line, Nigel Powers from Toronto, took an 8-hour bus ride for this event. When asked about his thoughts on the brand and what triggered his demand and loyalty, he simply stated:

> Cause they're fucking cool. I hate [sales associates] in there but I don't know what the hell I'm thinking when I buy it … its over priced in Toronto [menswear boutique NOMAD holds the only account in the country] and it goes fast. There's something about it, it's so badass and raw, but still kinda fashion. Their shit isn't that different, but there's something about it that makes it the coolest. (N. Powers, personal communication, September 7, 2011).

With the brand's advertising and marketing, much of it is done through simple pictorial posters that hint at new projects and are pasted all over the chic SOHO shopping district as well as the more hip and young Lower East Side. Editorials featuring new collections are featured in very selective skateboarding magazines (e.g., Japanese publications such as *Huge*, *Grind*, or

Sense; see Figures 3 & 4) but do appear quite quickly on popular streetwear blogs and websites. Erin Magee, designer of New York-based MadeMe Clothing and production manager at Supreme NY, indicated that the word "marketing" did not exist within the confines of the company manifesto (E. Magee, personal communication, August 28, 2011). Although the term may not clearly be defined or "followed" within the brand and its reach to consumers, there is a very unique approach to how consumers are educated and kept up to date.

Profile: Supreme NY

Founded by James Jebbia, store manager at streetwear label Stussy during the 1990s, the store was originally created to cater to the demanding skateboard market. Jebbia, who came from a retail background had always been surrounded by skateboard culture although he himself did not partake in the sport. He created the company to fulfil the need of the youth at the time, one that mixed a rebellious attitude with a deep rooting in the arts. Since then Supreme has placed itself within the streetwear market for its authenticity, style, and quality. At the brands core was a group of young rebellious New York City skateboarders with a deep infatuation with punk and hip-hop culture (supremenewyork.com, 2012, About Page).

Supreme NY has developed a strong following of staff, customers, artists, designers, and musicians since its opening on Lafayette Street in 1994 (see Figure 2). An embodiment of the downtown New York culture, Supreme NY plays an integral part in its constant regeneration. Collaborative projects and limited quantity production allow for multiple collections every season. Working with highly esteemed designers, artists, photographers, and musicians, the brand consistently redefines its unique identity and attitude (supremenewyork.com, 2012, About Page). A sense of elitism accompanies the affordability of the products Supreme NY offers.

Course of Research

This study discusses the theoretical aspect of brand culture and development of streetwear over the past twenty years as well as the corelation and cohesion between New York City and the selected European cities. This study provides a more inclusive and in-depth analysis of Supreme NY's methodology, its position within youth culture and its constant evolution within the streetwear market. However, due to the scant corporate and finacial data available to the general public, the analytical research in this study is strictly qualitative and based on interviews with members of the industry and consumers.

Select menswear boutiques within major European cities (London, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Barcelona, and Milan) have been a pivotal influence on the youth market within their own ethnic demographic. The cities and respondents chosen have a heavy online prescense with the organization of community events as well as brand culture and promotion.The journey to each European country also investigated the manner in which New York City streetwear has set the precedent for these emerging subcultures and what aspects have been accepted and rejected in the streetwear youth cohort.

The study also explored the influence New York City provided in the growth and progression of streetwear within Europe. Opinions on topics such as music, skateboarding, clothing, travel, and the Internet impart insight on the factors that influenced the streetwear subculture.

Literature Review

Few studies have explored streetwear culture or delved into the viral world of Supreme NY and its global influence. A few studies have explored the development of youth culture, a key component within the world of streetwear since consumers are typically under 25 years of age (Owerka-Moore, personal communication, March 15, 2012). In order to understand the influence of Supreme NY within the streetwear market, one must explore youth cultureand how they link clothing and identity. With a diversity in youth labels such as skate, hip-hop, punk and others, groups are defined using visual cues. When teenagers trainsition into adulthood, their sense of individuality and expression through clothing is constantly pushed beyond traditional margins resulting in tension within societal ranks (Hethorn and Kaiser, 2004).

This theory of social interactionism has created the framework of this research within a discussion of clothing as symbols of identity. Paul Khalil Saucier discusses identity through the use of fashion as a primary symbol in constructive and reconstructive methods in his study *Cape Verdean Youth Fashion: Identity in Clothing.* Saucier quotes social theorist Terence Turner's book *The Social Skin* and explains that the body as a social canvas, has been called the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted (1980, pg. 53, para. 3). Though clothing itself plays a big part in the world of streetwear it seems as though it does not facilitate itself as a neccessity but rather as a display of youth identity. Saucier further explains that "the body surface is an especially compelling indexical sign. Bodily signifiers present an ever-present semiotic possibility for expressing identiy and intention, asserting legitimacy of the status quo or subverting it" (Hendrickson, 1996, pg. 53, para. 4). The real challenge facing youth cuture along with the garments in streetwear is the recontextualization of conventional uses of clothing. With fashion and youth culture being context-dependent it is key that when investigating streetwear

one must consider that fashion is a signifier that communicates whos is and who is not authentic and sincere (Saucier, 2011, pg. 54, para 2). The understanding of youth culture and identity within the subculture that is now known as streetwear explains that the emergance of the genre, like other forms of youth signifiers is a reflection of group identification as well the development of of societal boundaries.

The significant position of the sneaker, a constant symbol of the genre within contemporary youth fashion and society, is also an iconic part of streetwear. Supreme NY and its identity as recognized street/skate wear, as well as an empirical form of speech and societal statements, have presented the idea of having the "right" shoes or image as an globally endorsed message. In Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, the heavy promotion of Nike's Jordan brand created a passion amongst youth that made sneakers socially recognized artefacts that present symbolic and practical uses that can be considered examples of creative expression (Wilson & Sparks, 1996). Lull (2000) refers to the athletic shoe phenomenon as a good example of the correspondence of the ideological representation and social interpretation between symbolic and cultural power.

The popularity of the sneaker began in New York City. Considered as the hub of hip-hop culture, New York has cultivated a significant stylistic collective around the world. Brian Wilson and Robert Sparks (1996) discuss the interpretations of objects, coding, and the message portrayed by sneakers during the Jordan era of the late 1980s (see Figure 5). Similarities in the consumer group's reading strategies and the interpretations of codes can be attributed to cultural competencies that are gained as a result of a group's contextual location. Cultural theorist Paul Willis (1990) also noted that youth actively construct meaning, identity, and lifestyle through their interpretation and consumption of television, advertising, music, and clothes. With the

construction of meaning being considered so heavily by the market, this study will investigate how much of North American culture is embodied within the collections, artwork, demand, and buzz presented each year by Supreme NY.

Supreme NY has managed to create another strong demand with its customers in its consistent collaborations with sneaker brands like Nike and Vans. These merchadise themed collaborations sell out immediately and observations of online activity on websites such as superfuture and eBay show that the same pieces appear online just as quickly at a higher resale value. Inaccessibilty, more than the design itself, is a key factor in attracting Supreme's customers. Although Supreme would not say how many shoes would be sold in this edition, cultivating a feeling of exclusivity seems to be the central aim (Bahney, 2003, para.4).

The term streetwear hints at being adopted into high fashion as early as the 1670s. In *The Essence of Style*, Joan DeJean (2005) discusses the incorporation of inexpensive gray serge cloth, which was typically worn by Parisian shop-girls, into the wardrobes of the upper class ladies due to their appreciation of atypical fabrics within the wardrobes of their social class (DeJean, 2005, pg. 18). Although this was a very early example, it may be said that the relationship between the clothing of the lower and middle class had an appeal to those with higher status. The streets of the common man and blue-collar worker serves as an idea for inspiring multiple levels of fashion and couture to provide an "aura of wealth and luxury" (DeJean, As cited in "Street Couture", 2006, para. 1) as DeJean wrote of the 17th-century version of the high-low mash-up, while maintaining roots and moving forward.

James Lull (2000), a professor of Communication Studies specializing in media and cultural studies, discusses topics relevant to streetwear culture in his book *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*. Lull uses concepts of cultural power to explain

how and why cultural resources are used to construct identity. He defines cultural power as the ability of groups and individuals to construct (usually partial and temporary) ways of life or constellations of cultural zones that appeal to the senses, emotions, and thoughts of self and others. According to Lull, cultural power is exercised when individuals and groups symbolically construct and "declare" their cultural identities and activities. Lull draws from the work of cultural theorists (e.g., Paul Willis, 1990; Dick Hebdige, 1979), and suggests that people symbolically explore language, hairstyle and, more importantly, fashion as a means of exercising cultural power. This power ideal may shift globally and has been used as an attempt to emulate one's self into another culture. Cultural power can also be a major factor that brings the global market and youth culture to the forefront of American culture. In allowing youth consumers to subconsciously draw inspiration from the established classic street/skate scene of North America , there is an effort to maintian a unique approach to the market.

British social theorist Dick Hebdige (1979) discusses the blending of elements in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, by introducing the idea of bricolage. The term refers to the construction or creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available, or a work created by such a process. The process of bricolage involves a "science of the concrete … which classifies and arranges into structures and minutiae of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a 'logic' which is not our own" (Hawkes, 1977, as cited in Hebdige, 1979, p. 103). The structures that are being used as a critical framework are therefore "improvised" or made up in response to the environment. In turn, the bricolage is then extended by the subcultural bricoleur, the ideology of object/meaning constituting a sign, which within a culture, can be assembled to form a discourse, a new vocabulary of communication (Hebdige, 1979) .

The content of bricolage is identifiable with the design process at Supreme NY, and leads to the development of product merchandise. Determining the bricolage of Supreme designers would be essential in seeing the impact that the brand has had globally. But one must be careful when the bricoleur relocates the object into a different position, within its own discourse, or places it in a totally different ensemble, thus communicating a new message. This new discourse and the resulting image portrayed by Supreme's collection, mentality, and cultural following are interpreted on different levels. The result is a better understanding in seeing how they are contextually interpreted by a variety of cultures.

While performing a comparative analysis of East and West coast streetwear style, *New York Times* writer Jon Caramanica (2011) attempts at defining the style/sub culture. He states that

> [Streetwear is the solution] to the same problem, the collision of hip-hop fashion, skateboarding gear and work wear that's generally called street wear. It's a neat trick of deracination, or post-racination. As rap music seeps more and more into the fabric of pop culture, its accouterments become more familiar. In these lines, lessons drawn from the 1990s explosion of brands … are mixed with the lessons drawn from the '90s appropriation of Polo and Tommy Hilfiger. The results are tough but relatable, a style that connotes insiderdom while excluding no one. (para. 3)

With Supreme NY also doing multiple collaborations, it would be beneficial to see the kind of demand these products have, and the extent that consumers would go to have these items in their possession. This research will help document one of the most influential global brands within the streetwear market.

Methodology

The methodology for this study was composed of qualitative techniques. Symbolic interactionism was used as the theoretical framework for this study. An offspring of the philosophy of pragmatism created by George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism is a body of theory that emphasizes the organization of everyday social life around events and actions that act as symbols to which participants orient themselves (Seale, 2000, pg. 38, para. 2). As a subjectivist sociology the theory explains that through social/symbolic interactions individuals give meaning to their social interactions and environments. Within the process a contruction of reality where daily 'objects' are distinctly identified in culturally and subjectively ways (Baston, 2001, pg. 5, para. 2). This in turn provides objects with an individualized context that are understood through cultural lenses and are given meaning through interactions and events. The theory also explains that youth subcultures use unique communicative practices and based on their cultural experience and perspectives ascribe subjective meaning to objects (Baston, 2011, pg. 6, para. 1). This theory forms the framework of the discussion about clothing as symbols of identity within this research. Interactionists frequently study this through observation of face-to-face interaction and a preferred method for doing this is through ethnography, which is the instrument used to understand the customer service aspect of Supreme NY (Seale, 2000, pg. 510, para. 13).

Visual, content, and comparative analysis of online blogs that featured entries, interviews, and streetstyle of notable streetwear designers, owners and icons were performed, followed by semi structured cognitive interviews with streetwear designers, owners and icons in their home city.

The first step of this study examined existing information on streetwear within each of

the cities in Europe. Articles and blog posts that discussed brands, community events, emerging companies, artists, products and collaborative projects provided a list of brands and icons that were interviewee possibilities.

Simultaneously, online information regarding Supreme brand history, collaborative choices marketting standpoint, and streetwear history in each city were referenced to develop a better understanding on the brand and market position. Although more in-depth information was provided during the interview process, much of the primary information for this study was collected directly from interviewees. Magazines, editorials and look books were analyzed with reference to how brand styling reflected the garments on display. Blogs and other internet sources were also investigated to enlist some of the factors related to brand image and styling. Postures, photo sets, and models were factors that used to evaluate brand image, positioning and the intended target market for the brand.

Upon investigation of website forums at Hypebeast, Highsnobiety, and superfuture, the validity of respondents was solidifed through the level of mentions of the company, brand products or person. Questions were posted on forums in each city asking forum users to identify what shops and/or people would be essential in the completion if this investigation. All respondents within this study are considered to play a vital role within the development of streetwear through the eyes of the participants on the forums. Using purposive sampling; where participants were selected on the basis of having a significant relation to the research topic, the participants were selected and interviewed (Seale, pg. 199, 2004). Their significance within this study was based on their leadership roles, their geographic location as well as knowledge and experience in streetwear.

This creative research endeavour entailed visits to England, France, Holland, Germany,

Spain, and Italy (countries, based on evidence found on forums, blogs, and websites, that boast a very strong skate and streetwear scene) with the aim to develop deeper comprehension of the elements, attitudes, and creative influences from retailer and customer perspectives. Each visit necessitated an approximate 5-day stay. Primary research was collected through the use of interviews with buyers, founders, and consumers of key boutiques within the realm of streetwear. Interview questions probed how and why the Supreme NY brand has become such a commoditized image and an important reflection of identity. The goal was to develop a better understanding of streetwear on a first-hand basis and a slow beginning to pinpoint the natural curiosity and pull of New York City's hip-hop culture.

The initial and dominant method of communication with interview respondents was done through the use of email and various other social networking platforms. Referrals from respondents were made when they believed that other individuals could provide a more indepth and unique perspective on the topic. Due to the nature of 'hidden' activity and public information, snowball networking played an important role in the access to unreported information within the pool of respondents (Seale, pg. 176, 2004).

Interview questions began with the career history of the respondent, specifically the steps taken to their current profession. Questions were focused on the introduction, development, and result of the streetwear scene within each city, along with their own understanding of the term. Consent and release forms were presented to respondents at the beginning of each interview which stated that the information provided during the interview would be used within the study and that the identities of the repondents shall be revealed. Interview data was recorded through field notes. The cities in which the interviews took place included New York, London, Berlin, Milan/Ferrara, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris.

Respondent Profile

Twenty one respondents were interviewed from New York, London, Berlin, Milan, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris. Interview questions focused on their definitions of streetwear as well as their opinions on the past, present, and future state of the market. Respondents also discussed their careers, professional decisions, relationships with New York City and the developments within the streetwear scene in their home city.

Eddie Prendergast founded the British streetwear label The Duffer of St.George during the 1990s and is currently the owner of the distribution agency “a number of names*” and menswear boutique Present Store in London. His distribution company carries menswear casual brands such as Bedwin & the Heartbreakers, Gourmet Footwear, Human Made by Nigo, Mr. Bathing Ape, and Billionaire Boys Club. The clientele for the boutique is men between the ages of 20-45.

Craig Ford is the managing director at “a number of names*” and owner of the A Bathing Ape store in London. His role in assisting the Japanese brand to sell A Bathing Ape outside of Japan has been substantial and he is still involved in the development of a number of Japanese clothing labels.

Kyle Stewart is a former skateboarder from Manchester, England and the current owner of GoodHood London. The boutique houses labels from Scandinavia, Australia, Japan, and the United States and caters to a male and female clientele between the ages of 20-40.

Richard Ari is the store manager and buyer at The Hideout London which carries a large variety of Japanese streetwear brands like Neighborhood, (w)taps, and CASH CA, and is located in London’s SOHO district. The demographic that they cater to are males between the ages of 20-35.

Joey W. Elgersma and Michal Tesler are the Street and Sport production managers at Bread and Butter Berlin, Europe's largest fashion tradeshow. The show occurs twice a year and brings in almost 300,000 visitors from around the world.

Luca Benini is the owner of SlamJam Italy creative agency, BePositive Footwear, and also has three clothing boutiques in Milan and Ferrara, Italy. SlamJam deals with distribution for brands like Carhartt Street, Stüssy, Nike Sportswear, Visvim, and Supreme NY. Along with clothing, Benini is a firm believer in supporting up-and-coming artists and musicians and frequently organizes art shows and stage performances.

Greg Hervieux and Jay Smith are the owners of Parisian skate and streetwear boutique and streetwear lifestyle website BlackRainbow. They are also representatives for Nike on an international level. BlackRainbow consistently runs events for new products, artists, musicians, and other creative endeavours.

Stephane Ashpool and Charaf Tajer are local streetwear, basketball, hip-hop, and nightlife icons that own the Paris based Pigalle boutique and clothing brand, as well as popular Parisian nightclub Le Pompon. The store is diverse in its selection, consisting of high fashion houses such as Givenchy and Rick Owens, to contemporary streetwear labels such as Phenomenon and Norse Projects.

Edson Sabajo and Guillame Schmidt are the Dutch owners of Amsterdam based sneaker store and distribution agency Patta, and come from a deejaying and music background. Frequent trips to New York in the 1990s to discover new music and sneakers evolved into a premium sneaker store, musical label, and consultancy to Nike.

Ricard and Pol own the sneaker boutique and distribution agency 24-Kilates, and both come from a skateboard and deejaying background. Their interest in music and sneakers led

them to venture to Amsterdam, where their relationship with Patta propelled them to opening the first sneaker store in Barcelona. Known for exclusive collaborations with Reebok and Saucony, 24-Kilates carries a variety of sneaker exclusives from North America, Europe, and Asia.

Canadian-born Erin Magee is the production manager for Supreme NY and coordinates all of the collaborative projects. Her womenswear line MadeMe Clothing has also grown extensively over the past 5 years and is distributed worldwide. The demographic for her label is between the ages of 19-35.

Deejohng Wells is the cofounder of *Sole Collector* magazine, one of the the first and most herladed sneaker and footwear magazines in history, and grew up during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in Brooklyn, New York. He now hosts a radio talk show about sneakers and is a consultant to large sneaker brands like Nike, Reebok, and Adidas.

Chris Gibbs is the owner and buyer for contemporary/luxury streetwear boutique Union LA. His experience working with, owner and Supreme founder, James Jebbia has been extensive as he began his career in New York during the 1990s at Union NY. The boutique caters to clients between the ages of 25-40, carrying exclusive pieces from Japan, Paris, and the United States.

Alyasha Owerka Moore has an extensive resume and is most recognizable for his work with Phat Farm, Alphanumeric, Fiberops, and a number of other skateboard brands. Originally from Brooklyn, he has spent a large amount of time moving between New York, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. He has been referenced as the man who created the formula for streetwear, while boasting the first Nike Dunk/streetwear brand (Alphanumeric) collaborative shoe.

Affan Arif and Chris Mendez are native New Yorkers, who were born and raised in Queens, NY. Both were born in 1987 and have spent their lives growing up around New York

City musicians, artists, designers, and skateboarders. They are very well educated on the cities' happenings and currently manage an up-and-coming hip-hop group known as Worlds Fair.

Using the data collected through informal interviews and personal communication, a set of theoretical statements were derived. Cycles were approached between episodes of data collection and analysis, using one to inform the other so that the eventual research report exhibited concept-indicated links that had come out of the study.

Results

Streetwear

Qualitative interviews were held with storeowners, distribution agencies, musicians, trendsetters, and streetwear icons in select European cities and New York City. The respondents have had extensive experience in the apparel industry and were considered to be pioneers within their city.

Participants experienced difficulties in providing a concrete definition of streetwear; their responses often eluded specificity. "Streetwear as a definition? That seems almost impossible for me to describe … there's so many facets of it" mentions a puzzled Benji Kesselbach, store manager of German sneaker brand K1X at the New York City store (B. Kesselbach, personal communication, August 15, 2011).

Contributors commonly asserted that streetwear had "no professional purpose" (such as work clothes), allowed for comfort, and defined status. The multiple levels of expression contained by preferences with brands, style, and fit present cues of interest. Falling under the umbrella of apparel, inclusion within subcultures is a large driving force within streetwear. Sport, music, and fashion were mentioned as factors and were considered to be obvious influences, yet contributors found it hard to derive and pin down a very clear characterization. However, all

seemed to epitomize the derivation of the vague term in a coordinated relation when Supreme NY was suggested.

There were a few topics that were mentioned during the course of the interview that carried significance for the results of the study. These topics included the emerging music scene within New York City, opinions and regards to Supreme NY and streetwear development, the role of London within the subculture, and well as the impact of the information-age.

Interviews provided observations of the role that Supreme NY played on cultural development of streetwear brands and youth in European cities. Qualitative interviews in Europe and New York City resulted in observations and a deeper understandings of the entire streetwear entity, specifically the unique influence of London and New York City.

The aura in the streetwear scenes in London, Berlin, Milan, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris are as diverse as their cultural heritages. However it became clear that New York had played— and still does play—a pivitol role in the development of streetwear culture within these cities. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, New York had become a destination for cultural exploration for like-minded individuals in Europe—those who had a yearning to discover more about American culture with close associations to hip-hop, skateboarding, politics, and fashion. Within these six European cities, boutiques and distribution agencies have gathered a strong following and grown in popularity over the years. With further investigation, a consistent pattern emerged, these individuals made a conscious effort to bring music, clothing and sneakers, effectively creating a streetwear subculture movement in their home cities.

New York City

Based on the interviews with participants, the study revealed significant findings about the influence of New York City and Supreme NY and the development of the industry by the

hands of Londoners. Evidence shows that afro-american, especially hip hop culture, were a driving force in visiting New York City.

All of the respondents from Europe demonstrated a keen interest in American music/culture, which drew them to travel to New York City. This was the case with Luca Benini, who noted the following from his SlamJam Italy headquarters in Ferrara:

> When I was traveling over to Brooklyn in the 80s, it was to see [black] culture and find things I had never heard before. We didn't have the Internet, where we could simply scroll onto a page and get news about music and clothing in a matter of seconds. We had to go look for things that were new and fresh. New York had it all going on. During the 80s and 90s, anyone and everyone doing something creative would be [in New York], and it was easy to run into them. (L. Benini, personal communication, January 30, 2012)

These trips in turn led most of the interviewees to forge relationships with locals at record stores, and retail shops. The commute transformed quickly into frequent business ventures with parallel import as the key motivator. These individuals were able to provide their friends and acquaintances with product that embodied the New York hip-hop pop-culture, while simultaneously forging unique relationships due to the common appreciation of hip-hop.

Noted hip-hop academic Professor S. Craig Waktins (2008), whose studies on the interactions between youth, race, media and pop culture, describes hip-hop as a "passionate adherent, for both young and old, an avenue for expression that didn't exist before and a feeling that cannot be verbalized in anything near conventional terms" (as cited in Randall, 2008, para 4). He continues, stating "It's spoken word and New York City subway graffiti and films like *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N' the Hood* that shine an unsparing light on the collision of urban ghetto life and black youth" (as cited in Randall, 2008, para 3).

For Alyasha Owerka-Moore and his experience growing up in New York City, observing the development of hip-hop and American culture within the five boroughs thrust him forward into the streetwear subculture during a time when meshing music, skate culture, and fashion allowed youth to stimulate new horizons for creativity. “It’s a walk and attitude and youthful, often rebellious, voice that resonates with high school students in Kansas as well as club-goers in Tokyo” (Randall, 2008, para 3. (See Figure 6.) With the media and the commercial world extracting the cultural seed from New York and spreading it across the globe, multiple races of youth have used the common ground of hip-hop for a seamless interaction.

Supreme NY

Supreme NY has received a lot of mainstream recognition over the past year through west-coast hip-hop group Odd-Future-Wolf-Gang-Kill-Them-All (see Figure 11). The brand continues consistently impacting youth with its introduction of new artists, musicians, collaborative projects, and secrecy. In an article written about the brand and its founder, *The Business of Fashion* describes the brand as “a big chunk of skateboard culture and urban hip-hop with a dose of American sportswear prep and a winking, intelligent take on hipster irony” (“Inside Supreme,” [Part 1], 2012, para. 3). The attitude and lifestyle during the 90s was different than what Jebbia was accustomed to: “it wasn’t part of my world, but I knew it felt very rebellious. It felt right, and I liked it” (“Inside Supreme,” [Part 1], 2012, para. 20).

“Supreme isn’t here to make things cooler, or jump on the bandwagon when things are getting hot,” explains Erin Magee, production manager and designer for Supreme:

> It’s more like an educational thing. There are certain things we like and so we do collaborationss with them. For example; who knew about George Condo [see Figure 12] before he did the Kanye album cover? [See Figure 13.] We had him for our skate decks

> before it blew up through Kanye. We don't promote, we introduce. (E. Magee, personal communication, August 28, 2012)

The product being sold season to season may be closely compared to that of an art gallery; the shop closing for installation, then reopening with new merchandise. Glenn O'Brien, the style adviser to men's fashion magazine *GQ*, discusses the collaborative skateboard decks with artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Doing a collaborative project is not something new, "it is not to be the first commercial venture to enlist artists to create merchandise, but the first to offer the artists creations at a regular price" (O'Brien, as cited in Supreme, 2010, pg.10 para. 1). The brand exists as a vehicle for artists and designers, dissecting emerging creativity and spreading information and thought through its channels.

During the boom of the sneaker-collecting era of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jebbia would send his buyers for buying trips out to Europe—not to meet with brands and designers, but to scour sneaker stores for country-exclusive pairs that were being supplied to the European market:

> We would head over to London or Paris, or even more remote places, and look for exclusives that cats in New York were never able to get. So, we would hit up a big retailer like Footlocker, find a pair of Nike dunks that were being made exclusively for France or England, and buy out the whole stock. (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 9, 2012)

Gibbs agrees that parallel imports were the primary resource in understanding the markets between Europe and New York City streetwear and style. "It was simple really. The market wanted something exclusive, something that could not be found down in SOHO or Brooklyn.

That's what we did. We brought over what we could from Europe, and kids wanted what we had even more" (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

The following that James Jebbia was able to cultivate through the three different channels of retail allowed for Supreme NY to grow and develop at a exponential rate. The import market, and exclusivity of brands at Union and Stüssy, along with the limited quantities and restrictive circle of friends, gave Supreme, and Jebbia, a comfortable position within the New York City landscape. The microscopic dissection of supply and demand for the consumers in New York as well as around the world, based on a clear magnetism of New York City culture, has allowed Jebbia to present a product that encompasses the multiple facets of streetwear in a simplified structure (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

After using comparative analysis it can be said that Supreme uses a few overlapping factors in its style ediorials and look books. The brand typically uses models who their own sales associates or affiliates of the brand, and background settings are usually taken on the street or within a simple white backdrop. The brand portrays its products and models as everyday consumers without extreme fashion depictions.

The Role of London

Although the New York City youth and hip-hop movement has been praised for its role within streetwear, it has been the keen relationship between London and New York City that catapulted the industry and streetwear sector forward. The reality of the situation is that although New York City is considered to be the Mecca of hip-hop music and street culture, it was a few key business-minded British figures who, through travel, really connected the dots between the two influential cities with the use of music, fashion, sport, and art (C. Ford, personal communication, January 15, 2012).

The act of parallel buying and import is what really began the streetwear movement and resulted in a relationship that would bind London and New York. Parallel import noncounterfeit products, in this case sneakers and clothing, were imported from another country without the permission of the brand in order to be resold at the host country, usually for a higher price. The movement of products and personnel between cities, followed by underground distribution of exclusive products, resulted in a give-and-take relationship that allowed one culture to develop from the two (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

During the early 1990s, pop culture was being delivered from country to country through radio, television, and viral marketing: "The idea of travel and discovery was exciting. To visit New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, or Paris was a reality that the [youth] would save up for" (C. Ford, personal communication, January 15, 2012). Ventures of this manner would lead to the discovery of new musical movements, styles, artwork, hobbies, and people.

Discussing Supreme's role, Chris Gibbs of Union LA mentioned the similar buying methods during the 1990s with exclusive sneakers that were only made available for Europe. His work with Union NY was closely linked with Supreme, as he got the job with Union NY. At that point of the mid 90s James Jebbia, who has been primarily known for the founding and marketing genius behind the brand, also owned Union and the Stüssy New York Chapter:

> I was just a kid working at a shitty skate shop and my girlfriend at the time, and now my wife, was working for Supreme. I first thought these guys were so corny, running around, being flashy. But after really seeing what it was about, I wanted in. Soon I was hired to work at Union and I was rolling with those cats, hitting up clubs. We were doing bottle service, partying with models. But we were all skaters. The brand was the coolest shit

you could be a part of, cause we were still street. (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 19, 2012)

Becoming the holy grail of New York City youth culture, the brand's underlying secret was a simple curation of the city's iconographic highlights—fashion, music, and celebrity ("Inside Supreme," [Part 2], 2012, para. 5). With Union also carrying a grand variety of both British and European brands, and Jebbia at the wheel with distibution and the introduction of new brands, Jebbia's taste was clearly distinguishing a bigger link between London and New York City.

The Information Age

Some of the older icons and veterans attribute the growth of streetwear to the Internet and the emergence of mega-blogs like Hypebeast, SlamxHype, and Highsnobiety. However, there has been some controversy in the streetwear community as to whether or not the information age has caused a steady decline in the aspect of exclusivity that was once the most important feature within the streetwear community.

Streetwear websites present extreme diversity, be it clothing, design, art, music, furniture, cooking, or women. On the one hand, the range of information is viewed on an educational plane; on the other hand, veterans argue that the Internet prevents the viewer from cultivating a true appreciation for product. Taste has developed into a chasm in which the idea of consumerism has overtaken the initial sensibility of exploration, witty messages, and intricate design and graphics that streetwear once denoted. The emergence of new brands, projects, and product on the rise is running alongside the drive to be up to date and informed.

However, this captivation with all that is new has taken away the tangible appreciation for product and its details. The industry and buying power of the Internet-educated consumer is moving at such a fast pace that the ownership of product lasts a mere season or two. New York

natives and streetwear enthusiasts Affan Arif and Chris Mendez mention that the love for product and apparel has disolved: “I still have tees that I got from [Su]Preme back in like 2004/5. I don’t use ‘em as much cause I’m not a die-hard fan but I still have ‘em.” Mendez explains the lineups at the shop on release day: “But some of the people we know, and a lot of the kids that we see waiting in line, just buy a tee or hat, then sell it within a few months so they can get the next line of gear.” Both Mendez and Arif, aged 25, have grown up in Queens, New York and spent the majority of their youth hanging around Manhattan’s SOHO and Lower East Side. “Theres too much out there,” comments Arif, “and it’s like there’s so much you want, and then they put something else that’s fucking cooler out, with a rapper or artist, so you sell what you have and try to get the next one. It’s just a giant cycle” (A. Arif, personal communication, January 6, 2012). Products are purchased online, worn, and sold on forums or resale sites in order to maintain stature and to keep up with up and coming brands and styles. Brynjolfsson, Smith, and Hu’s (2003) research shows that efficiency is gained from increased competition and information and significantly enhances consumer surplus; for instance, by leading to lower average selling prices, increased product variety made available through electronic markets can be a significantly larger source of consumer surplus gains (para. 1). In turn, the framework and empirical estimates that have quantified the economic impact of increased product variety present consumers with enough variety, price competition, and choice for them to easily buy and sell.

Conversely, the methodology to the reactive actions of the information age and buying power of consumers runs parallel to the original manner in which streetwear first began. The unique form of parallel import has evolved into a manner in which the consumer evolves into the educator and distributor, through buying and reselling. Cachon, Terwiesch, and Xu (2008)

indicate that the emergence of the Internet has led to a brutal competition in price between retailers. In this case it can be determined that the Internet has lowered the costs that customers incur while searching for goods and services. The result is consumers having an increased ability and more time to search, which produces comparative prices and ultimately severe price competitions among producers. The buying cycle that brought product and cultural aspects overseas to Europe has been transformed but is being emulated within smaller communities and subcategories in streetwear and cultural demographics. The consumer has become the educator and merchant, in a manner in which the cycle begins to repeat itself at a much faster pace.

Limitations

The respodents selected for this study were cultivated through research done on major streetwear websites and forums; Hypebeast, Highsnobiety, SlamxHype, and *Complex Magazine*. Initially there were only six candiates throughout Europe, but with each interview completed, respondents refered me to others who they felt were pivotal within their city and had played a significant role in the development of streetwear to date.

Due to conflicting schedules and a fast-moving industry, setting concrete meeting times created the biggest conflict. Consistently working around the schedule of the respondent, during a very limited amount of time within each country, was a challenge.

With the responses and information provided by the interviewees, there was a level of comfort that had to be set prior to the question period. Some of the stories described were quite personal, with references to some very unique stores. However, due to the academic nature of this research project, respondents did feel a sense of ease after being notified about the lack of circulation. The streetwear community can be quite reserved in divulging stories of the past, and trust must be gained prior to the interview. As interviews progressed, I understood that informal meetings were necessary in order to allow for a successful interview, where the respondent felt relaxed with discussing multiple aspects of the industry.

Setting predetermined questions was a hurdle during the initial interviews, in which some responses were close ended and sometimes led to slow circulation. As a solution, conversations were kept very open and informal, with guidelines rather than predetermined questions. The altered introduction of the interviews began with a very open-ended question regarding career, age, and history, and then followed the conversation. The interviews became very

conversational, in order to maintain a level of comfort that allowed for openness and key information.

The limitations that were inherent within the initial question posed as a hurdle during the course of interviews. The influence of New York streetwear did not seem to be as prominent as anticipated and so the topic had evolved into a focus of streetwear as a whole, and some of the issues that the industry subculture (lifetsyle) faces with the dawn and growth of the information age.

Conclusion

With environment, experience, practice, location, time frame, and age being variables with the information and opinions provided by respondents, the term streetwear was never defined in the same manner twice. With minimal reference to articles of clothing and garments themselves, more often than not there was a link between the wearer and state of mind. Streetwear represented a movement, a message that was provocative and witty. Articles of clothing underneath the streetwear and Supreme umbrella emphasize a deep orientation that encompasses the everyday social events and actions with the symbolic importance. More than the objects themselves, the symbolic interactionist theory has shown that streetwear consumers is a presentation of identity between those within the subculture as well as the manner in which rules are followed and understood, seen in the case of Supreme NY.

Eddie Prendergast, of "a number of names*" London, described as the so-called Godfather of British streetwear, has been credited for his strategic introduction of the *Major League Baseball* fitted cap (see Figure 7), North Face puffer jacket (Figure 8), Red Wing moc-toe boot (Figure 9), and Carhartt Workwear brand (Figure 10) to the European market. His travels to New York between the 1980s and late 1990s occurred during a time when the hip-hop movement was beginning to radiate, along with the style and culture that accompanied it. With the birth of the information age still on the horizon, the key to discovering fresh and emerging styles, clothing, music, artwork, and subcultures was through travel and chance.

The dawn of the Internet and the decrement of travel amongst the present youth has lead to the ability to discover new product and trends primarily online, through major websites like Hypebeast & Highsnobiety. "There was no such thing as streetwear," mentions Prendergast during an interview at his office in London:

> the term was then coined, but changed over time. It started off as something exclusive, but as things grew and times changed, it became something inclusive. Especially with the introduction of the Internet, it became a monster. We used to be able to find commonalities in one another, through the brands we wore. Now it seems as though you are always trying to one-up other streetwear kids. (E. Prendergast, personal communication, January 15, 2012)

The factors accompanying streetwear also proposed an idea of surprise and of a message, one that was politically charged, going against the grain and facilitating a new train of thought. This new mentality came during the early 1990s when there was a chasm between generations and there was a boom within music and the skateboard scene.

Along with these movements, Prendergast saw an opening for acquiring items that were in demand in the UK that were being sold in New York for a much lower price. The Adidas Superstar sneaker, once made popular by hip hop trio Run-DMC, were being imported into the UK by Prendergast and being sold at a 400% mark-up. The concept of parallel import was being taken advantage of, and New York City products were being made popular within the UK market simply because they were products that were exclusive to the United States and had lost their charm over time. The drop in prices opened a window of opportunity for parallel import. The Internet had no role to play with retail and apparel; travel was the only means of discovering where to buy items like these.

Chris Gibbs described his early memories of joining into the culture. “It was about unity, and being able to recognize a t-shirt graphic and relate to the message. Streewear, much like most things...can’t be boxed in to just one thing. It never has been and it never will be”. (C. Gibbs, personal communication, March 19, 2012)

Greg Hervieux of Parisian sneaker boutique and lifestyle website BlackRainbow describes streetwear as a movement that was about "fighting the power" and dreaming of a new product and outcome. His long relationship with the industry was a result of a trip to New York where he acquired his first record from West Coast rap group N.W.A. With their politically charged messages, Hervieux opened his mind to the possibilities of bringing a message back to Paris and showing his friends where the street scene can go:

> New York taught me about taking chances. All of the graffiti I saw on the subways, the way people were wearing their clothes, all baggy. But it was the t-shirts that really struck me. Brands like P-n-B and Zoo-York. Their messages were about the thoughts in the minds of the youth in New York, and that was different to me. "Fuck the Police!" Take a chance! What do you have to lose? You're a kid, you learn and grow. That is what New York taught me, and that is the kind of attitude I wanted to bring back to France. (G. Hervieux, personal communication, February 17, 2012)

Hervieux was also keen to describe the some of the mentalities that brands were folowing that had influenced the manner in which streetwear had moved towards: "Why do something like someone else?" (G. Hervieux, personal communication, February 17, 2012).

After observing the manner in which streetwear has developed over the past three decades the ideology of social interacsionism can be said to run paralel to the contextual understanding of the subcultural genre. Supreme New York has constructed a cult-like following with the basis that the products presented are understood through a culturally common lens that is streetwear, as a commonality for those who are within the community. The practice of communication ascribes deep subjective meaning on an interactive basis that streetwear clothing is a symbol of identity.

Although streetwear would seem like a term with a definitive visual appearance, research within this study has shown otherwise. With New York City and the growth of hip-hop music being an attractive factor for patrons from Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, the term has undergone multiple versions and interpretations. Streetwear maybe interpreted by some as profession-less clothing with influences from hip-hop music and skateboarding, but it is clear that more than resulting apparel the term is an embodiement for a state of mind that regards youth identity and culture as a driving force in breaking and reforging societal norms and the status quo. The term maybe not have a concrete definition, but based on results of this study streetwear shows that apparel within each of the cities is context dependent and is pushed forward by the reformation of clothing, as well as the arts, according to the impressions of the those from the outside.

Future Directions

A wealth of information was derived from the interviews, providing a wide range of potential research areas. With topics regarding the sociological state, the economy, media coverage, ethnicity, and geographic location of each city all being discussed, the extent of this study remained limited to the original aims, that is the definition of the term streetwear. This limits were essential due to time availability and financial funding. The discussion of the information age, Internet marketing, and online shopping was a keen topic of interest, which provided some clarity on the evolution of the subculture and apparel industry. The complexity and thorough overviews of hip-hop music, skateboard culture, art, and clothing brands, the study of streetwear and its evolution offering potential areas for future study. More extensive travel, funding, time, and networking could also lead to a larger sample size for interviews.

Investigating the economics behind internet shopping within streetwear consumers, future directions within the information age, and the development of marketting within the industry are also topics that might be researched further in future studies. The infusion of hip-hop and skateboard seen within the emergence of West Coast rap group Odd-Future-Wolf-Gang-Kill-Them-All (mentioned in the Supreme NY subsection) also illicites an interest to study the resulting subsulture between black-urban and white-skateboard culture.

Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1. Bread & Butter fashion fair, Berlin, Germany, January 2012.

Figure 2. Outside Supreme during the early 90s.

Figure 3. Supreme "X Comme des Garçons" spread in *Sense* magazine.

Figure 4. *Grind* magazine: Supreme 2011 fall/winter editorial.

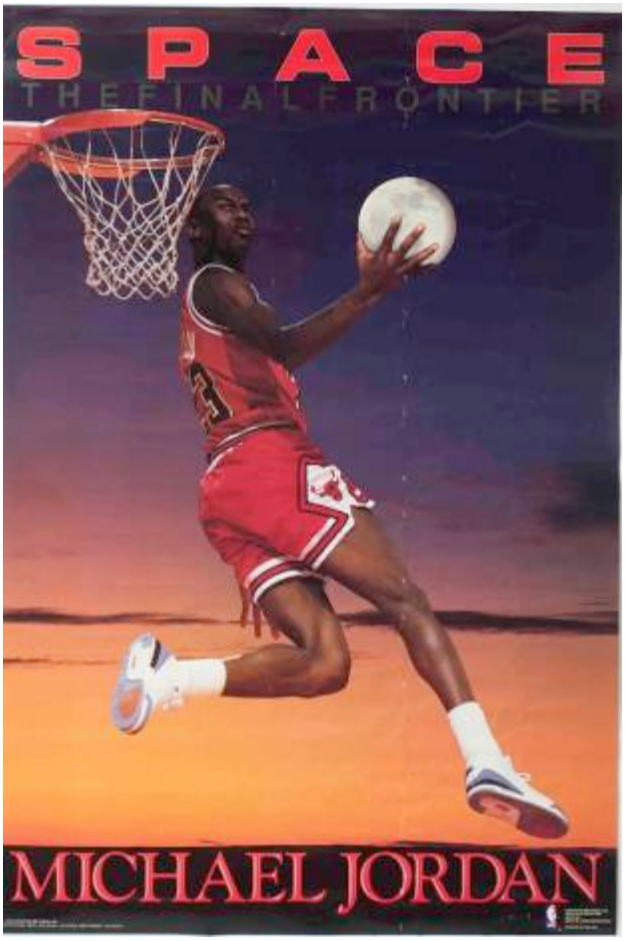

Figure 5. Jordan ad, 1990s.

Figure 6. Hip-hop style in Tokyo.

Figure 7. Jay-Z in popular and infamous New York Yankees fitted baseball cap by New Era.

Figure 8. Supreme x North Face puffer jacket.

Figure 9. Red Wing moc-toe boot.

Figure 10. Carhartt street, fall/winter 2010.

Figure 11. Odd Future front man Tyler the Creator with *GQ*'s Glenn O'Brien in recent Supreme photo spread in *GQ*.

Figure 12. Supreme x George Condo.

Figure 13. Kanye West's *Dark Twisted Fantasy* album cover by George Condo.

Appendix B: Sources of Figures

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