

Case Study - Fashion & Bus Encounters in East Oakland: The Behavioral Design of Streetwear

(Project #1 – Interaction Design, Fall 2025, CSUEB)

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Introduction



Title & Abstract: Fashion Is Communication to the World

This project explores how clothing operates as a form of nonverbal communication that shapes human behavior and perception in public space. Through live field observations in Deep East Oakland and Lake Merritt, this study analyzes how fashion, geography, and social cues influence approachability, safety, and trust. The outcomes reveal that fashion is not just self-expression; it is interaction design for the body.

Context & Background

This intervention took place in **Oakland, California**, a city layered with cultural identity, street history, and visible class contrast. Two areas were chosen:

- **Deep East Oakland**, where social behavior is influenced by street culture, survival codes, and community familiarity.

The goal was to explore how *fashion changes meaning across environments*, how the same outfit communicates differently depending on where you are and who surrounds you.



Desired Behavior

To increase awareness of how **visual identity and fashion** influence communication and behavior in public space. The target audience includes urban designers, artists, and community members who navigate environments shaped by both *expression* and *stereotype*.

The desired behavior is to promote **open, safe, and stigma-free interaction** in public environments, regardless of one's clothing or neighborhood background.



Identified Pressures

Promoting pressures:

- Fashion as a signal of belonging and authenticity.
- Curiosity and friendliness in casual, mixed environments.
- Personal style as self-expression and social confidence.

Inhibiting pressures:

- Stereotypes and stigma tied to certain clothing styles (streetwear vs. “clean” looks).
- Fear or bias depending on neighborhood reputation.
- Safety and judgment concerns in public transportation or high-crime areas.



Intervention Design

The study used **self-led field experiments** across multiple public settings.
The researcher alternated between two outfits:

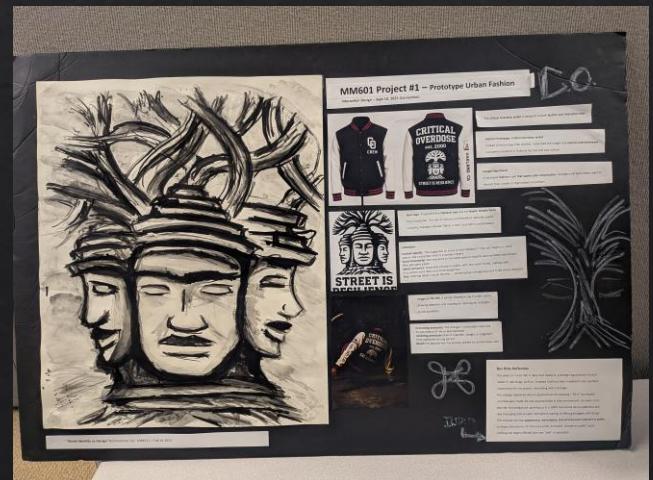
- **Casual attire** (simple, clean, neutral look).
- **Streetwear attire** (hoodie, Nike/Jordan sneakers = common local street style).

The experiment took place while waiting for buses, walking in public areas, and traveling between Deep East Oakland and Lake Merritt.

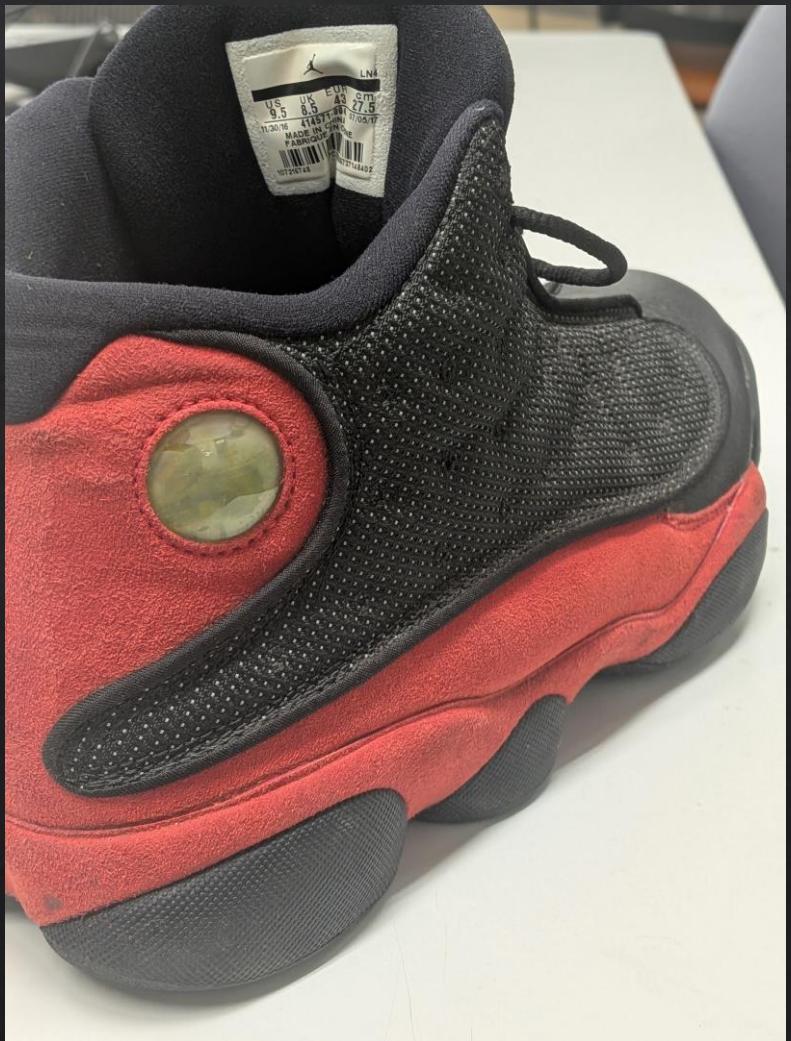
The rationale was to test how *fashion operates as a behavioral trigger* - how different styles influence eye contact, greetings, and verbal interactions with strangers.

Live Board Statement

Below: This is what I'm testing. It's got that East Oakland vibe! cool, street, swag. But it ain't just for the hood, I want everybody like seniors, workers, whoever rides the bus to look and ask, "Yo, what's Critical Overdose?" I'm using fashion as my font. Every line, every letter on this jacket is part of the message. It's not just clothes its communication. It's old school, live, and straight from the street, but it's also design. The point is to turn style into a conversation starter, something that makes people connect when they normally stay silent.



Experiment Design



Hypotheses:

1. Clothing style changes how often and how warmly strangers interact.
2. The *location* amplifies or suppresses that effect i.e., the same outfit communicates differently in East Oakland vibe & culture.

Methods:

- Naturalistic observation (self-documentation and journaling).
- Environments: Bus stops, walking routes, and social hubs.

Metrics:

- Frequency of greetings (“hello,” “sit here,” smiles).
- Duration and tone of conversation.
- Body language (eye contact, open vs. guarded).
- Spatial data visualized on a **map of Oakland** marking where interactions occurred.

Results

- Wearing **casual clothing** at Lake Merritt produced more open greetings, smiles, and positive engagement.
- Wearing **streetwear** in the same area led to fewer greetings and some avoidance.
- In **Deep East Oakland**, streetwear increased familiarity, more eye contact and verbal engagement.
- The **bus route** showed visible social shift interactions decreased the closer it got to Lake Merritt, showing how *space filters culture*.

Interpretation:

Fashion interacts with **place-based identity codes**. What reads as friendly and expressive in one area can be read as “threat” or “outsider” in another.



Images from [Native Maps City Prints | City Neighborhood Map Art](#)

Timeline (of interaction)

Sept 10: Stranger asked me for drugs → ignored others, approached me.

Sept 26 (night): Drunk stranger opened up about breakup → I felt fear, but conversation ended safely.

Sept 28: Stranger insulted me → turned into shared recognition of similar fashion styles.

Oct 4: A young photographer saw my outfit and wanted to snap a few images of me due to my fashion, we talk about photography.

Overall: Clothing signaled approachability. Seniors, professionals, and my mom were ignored.

Concept:

An interactive installation where visitors test how outfit changes affect public perception.

Participants can toggle between different looks on a screen or mirror, with live audience feedback showing comfort levels, assumptions, or greeting willingness.

Goal:

Make people aware that fashion communicates silently shaping safety, belonging, and emotional connection in real-world spaces

Design Research Sources

- **Streetwear as Identity Work: Negotiating Authenticity and Belonging”** – *Journal of Consumer Culture*

→ Explores how streetwear signals belonging, class, and self-expression.

Keywords: *subcultural capital, authenticity, urban identity*.

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“Fashioning the Street: Visual Style and Youth Culture” – *Sarah Thornton, 1995*

→ Core sociology reference for understanding streetwear in cultural and behavioral context.

- **“The Semiotics of Streetwear”** – *International Journal of Fashion Studies*

→ Breaks down how hoodies, sneakers, and graphic tees act as nonverbal signifiers of culture and resistance.

- **Stanford HCI / Interaction Design case studies on embodied behavior**

Example: “*Fashion as Interface*” or “*Designing Embodied Interactions*” (Dourish, 2001).

Street Photography by Bullimalinna Sot