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The hoodie: consumer choice, fashion style and symbolic meaning

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ABSTRACT

The death of an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Florida in 2012 not only drew public attention to vigilante justice, but also generated public discussion and debate on various issues related to popular culture, race and identity. One item of clothing – the hoodie – attracted massive media interest in this regard. In this exploratory study, the hoodie was used as a vehicle to investigate and illuminate how meanings are produced and perceived. According to the findings of this study, the choice to wear a hoodie can be based solely on such comfort factors as warmth and breathability, but it may also be intended to manifest an individual's choice or taste. In addition, the study reveals that viewers' interpretations of an individual's appearance are not always accurate or aligned with the wearer's intentions. Without fully understanding the wearer's intention and considering situational and contextual factors, misunderstanding, stereotyping, stigmatizing or even demonizing of a person may occur.

KEYWORDS: fashion, symbolic meaning, identity, consumer choice, hoodie, product attributes

INTRODUCTION

In the early and mid-twentieth century, hooded garments (with brand name such as The Champion and Everlast) were primarily marketed to blue-collar workers and athletes for their utilitarian functions – i.e., providing warmth and comfort for their wearers (Hayes 2012). In the 1990s, hooded sweatshirts took a remarkable upturn in popularity with the emergence of skate/snowboard and urban culture, which spawned clothing brands including Volcom (1991), Rocawear (1999), Ecko (1993) and Elements Skateboards (1992). Due to the widespread popularity of the hoodie among young people, this clothing style became 'a generation's default wardrobe choice' (Braddock 2011). In addition, many rappers and hip-hop artists, including Eminem, Run DMC, LL Cool J, Ice-T, Wu-Tang, Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent, wore hooded sweatshirts to public events – making this garment an indispensable fashion staple. It also became a symbolic representation of youth culture's desire to dissociate from authority figures and the older generations (Prosper 2012).

The word 'hoodie' as a slang word meaning 'a hooded garment' officially entered *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *The Collins English Dictionary* in 2005 and 2007 respectively. Related words, such as 'hoodlum'¹ (Van Deburg 2004), 'hood'² (Forman 2002) and 'hoods'³ (Hamill 2011), have also appeared in different literatures with connotations particularly related to the field of criminology.

Recently, the 'hoodie' has attracted increasing media attention following the death of an unarmed African-American teenager named Trayvon Martin in Florida on 29 February 2012. This

incident not only drew public attention to vigilante justice, but also generated much public discussion and debate on various issues related to popular culture, race and identity, including clothing. Subsequently, in memory of Trayvon Martin, the 'Million Hoodie March' was held in Manhattan's Union Square on 21 March 2012 (CBS News 2012), which increased the sales of hoodies, and today, they still remain an important fashion staple for the young (Wyche 2012).

Some observers find the widespread popularity of the hoodie alarming. Geraldo Rivera (reporter, author, talk show host) provoked public outrage with some comments he made on the *Fox and Friends* talk show:

But I am urging the parents of black and Latino youngsters particularly to not let their children go out wearing hoodies. I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was. ... You have to recognize that this whole stylizing yourself as a gangster, you're gonna be a gangster wannabe? Well, people are gonna perceive you as a menace. ... I'll bet you money, if he didn't have that hoodie on, that nutty neighborhood watch guy wouldn't have responded in that violent and aggressive way. (*Media Matters* 2012)

Even prior to the death of Trayvon Martin, the 'hoodie' had raised many questions and concerns in the United Kingdom. For example, in 2005, the Bluewater shopping centre in Kent, England banned all hooded tops and baseball caps in order to crack down on intimidating and anti-social behaviours of young people (BBC News 2005). One year later, David Cameron, the leader of Britain's Conservative Party, attempted to counter the widespread negative image of those who wore hoodies by giving what came to be known as a 'hug a hoodie'⁴ speech – to address public concerns, but also to reposition his party on the issue of youth crime. He was quoted in *The Observer* in an article entitled 'Cameron softens crime image in "hug a hoodie" call' (Hinsliff 2006) as saying:

The hoodie is a response to a problem, not a problem in itself. We – the people in suits – often see hoodies as aggressive, the uniform of a rebel army of young gangsters. But hoodies are more defensive than offensive. They're a way to stay invisible in the street. In a dangerous environment the best thing to do is keep your head down, blend in.

However, five years later, David Cameron (now prime minister) and Boris Johnson (mayor of London) were forced to cut short their holidays and return to Britain to deal with an outbreak of violence at Tottenham in the east of London that followed the Mark Duggan shooting protest (BBC News, 2011; Dodd and Davis 2011). At that time, journalist Kevin Braddock raised a few new questions about the hoodie in *The Guardian* (2011):

The hoodie was everywhere during the UK riots. But how did a comfy, utilitarian item of clothing become the ultimate symbol of exclusion and menace? ... did Eminem – a devout hoodie-wearer – articulate the internalized rage and dispossession of western suburban teenagers by burying his head in a hoodie to keep the invading world outside?

It is not uncommon to see headlines in today's press associating the hoodie with shoplifting, vandalism and/or violence, adding to its criminal connotation (e.g., *News Sentinel* 2012, NTV 2013). Despite the controversies, questions about the fashion symbolism surrounding the hoodie have generated and facilitated meaningful dialogue and debate among the media, policy makers, social advocates and the public.

This current study attempts to address some of these complex issues through investigating the following research questions.

- What are young consumers' perceptions toward hoodies?
- What determining factors or selective criteria lead shoppers to purchase hoodies?
- What information might be attached to or communicated through the hoodie?
- How is meaning constructed and developed by those who wear hoodies?
- To what extent do the interpretative meanings associated with hoodies connect to or disconnect from the situation or context in which it is used?

This study focuses on fashion symbolism, product choice and consumers' perception of the hoodie. The remainder of this article is organized in the following sections. The next section reviews the literature related to how meanings are created and perceived through clothing styles and usage situations. The next section explains the methodology employed to address the research questions. This is followed by a summary of the data collection and analysis. The conclusion and limitations can be found in the last section.

FASHION SYMBOLISM

Although there has been little empirical study examining the hoodie, some theoretical concepts can be drawn from numerous related areas including fashion symbolism (Morgado 2007; Pratt and Rafaeli 1997), product cue utilization (Rahman et al. 2010), appearance management (Freitas et al. 1997), and clothing and identity (Rahman et al. 2011). Many prior studies have demonstrated that clothing may be used as a non-verbal communicator, signifier (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993) or a system to transfer meaning – from a culture to a person or an object (Hirschman 1981; McCracken 1986), from a person or an object to the public (Rahman et al. 2012), and even from reality to an imaginative world (Rahman et al. 2011; 2012). Clearly, meaning of objects, including clothing is perpetually transformed, transmitted, negotiated and exchanged through people, objects, images, and communicative acts. In other words, symbolic meaning is constructed, shaped and reinforced through social interchanges. In today's society, consumers do not always purchase products merely for their material utility, but also for their symbolic meaning and ability to express an individual's ideology, (re)construct identity, or even elevate user's social status (Escalas and Beattman 2003). For example, an iPod Touch may symbolize youthfulness, playfulness, and/or independence – especially among the young. According to Elliot and Percy (2011), the symbolic meaning of products can be categorized into 'social symbolism' and 'self symbolism.' In other words, some meanings are commonly shared within or across cultures, but others are idiosyncratic or private to the individual.

Due to the ever-increasing flow of information and commodities, the meanings inherent in consumer goods can be transmitted across cultures at a much faster pace than ever before. This

allows a larger audience to engage in the process of constructing, developing, and negotiating the meaning of an object or image (Kaiser and Karyl 2005). The meaning of an object could vary during different time periods, and in different cultures and contexts, but people with similar enculturation experiences tend to have similar interpretations regarding specific objects. Thus, the symbolic meaning of clothing is neither absolute nor stagnant, but is always in transition. These meanings have been challenged, modified or re-constructed throughout history. Although a number of scholars have explored the meaning of clothing (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997), little research has focused on the relationships among fashion symbolism, clothing style and attributes, consumer identity, and situational context.

SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

As mentioned in the preceding section, many research studies indicate that the way people perceive and consume a product could vary across cultures, social groups and situations. The meaning of a product may change depending on how, when and where the products are used and presented. In many cases, consumers can ascribe different meanings to a product, or manipulate and re-contextualize the meaning depending on the user's intent and the usage appropriateness. In addition to socio-cultural and situational differences, in this study we proposed that the product typologies may also affect consumers' perception, emotional state, and product involvement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some apparel products play a relatively more significant role in object-self/-emotion relation than others. For example, wedding dresses may provide symbolic access to a wearer's emotional past (Friese, 2001) more readily than do many other clothing choices, such as socks and pyjamas. In a similar vein, some previous studies (e.g., Rahman et al., 2009) found that consumers are more likely to use publically consumed (or socially visible) products to build and communicate their identity than privately consumed products.

People often acquire symbolic products to construct and express their self concept. In other words, symbolic meanings can be manifested through consumption and the presentation of self; this consuming and creating process has been described as the "self-creation project" (Wattansuwan, 2005) or "symbolic project" (Thompson, 1995). For instance, wearers can change object meaning and their personal image by mixing and matching different clothing items, or can manipulate the symbolic image of clothing by wearing it differently or unconventionally. Wearing saggy pants and laceless sneakers may portray a rebellious image or manifest negative connotations because these types of clothing styles are modeled after male prison attire⁵ and are often associated with gangster culture. It is reasonable to suggest that the way people dress or coordinate their wardrobes may greatly affect observers' impressions, perceptions and interpretations – and in many cases, it is not a question of what garments are worn, but how they are worn.

PRODUCT APPEARANCE, STYLE AND DESIGN FEATURES

Visual appearance of a product is the first element that connects with consumers, and is a key determinant of purchasing decision and satisfaction (Bloch et al., 2003; Hollins and Pugh, 1990). Many studies (e.g., Dawar and Parker, 1994) suggest that consumers may form an impression

about the utilitarian values, psychological benefits and perceived quality of a product on the basis of its visual appearance. In other words, the product appearance can provide multiple, or a bundle of, symbolic meanings and values to both users and viewers. As Wattanasuwan (2005, p. 181) asserted, “[T]he creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional.” For consumers, for example, yoga pants may carry one or more symbolic meanings (e.g., wearers may feel more health-conscious, sporty/athletic, and/or trendy and fashionable). Indeed, physical appearance of clothing is a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing both cognitive and affective dimensions. Consumers often evaluate and select a clothing product based on both cognitive cues (e.g., workmanship and fabric quality) and affective cues (e.g., style, design and fashionability) (Forsythe, 1991; Rahman et al., 2010) in order to satisfy their needs and aspirations. As Zajonc (1980, p. 157) asserted, “Affective judgments implicate the self ... Cognitive judgments deal with qualities that reside in the stimulus.”

Product appearance and style are closely related despite the existence of various definitions of the word ‘style’ in fashion scholarship. Style can be defined as the combination of design features (e.g., silhouette, construction and fabric) within a garment that produces a distinctive appearance (Kunz 1998; Lillethun 2007). Miller et al. (2005) defined style as a garment’s silhouette and structure. The perceived value of a product is often based on design features/atomistic judgment (Durgee 1988) and overall appearance/holistic judgment (Jones 1991; Katz 1950). In other words, a consumer’s perception of an article of clothing is greatly affected by its specific features as well as its overall presentation. As Csíkszentmihályi (1975) talks about ‘the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement.’ As such, the unity of all design elements within a garment can generate either a positive/favourable or negative/unfavourable experience to the consumer and the viewer. For example, if one is dressed in a certain style and perceive themselves as being fashionable, this may lead to a positive psychological benefit such as self-esteem/-gratification.

With this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that a variety of design styles for a garment may generate and provide different information, functional and aesthetic values, and symbolic meanings to different users and viewers. According to a study of denim jeans conducted by Rahman et al. (2010), more than 50 per cent of Chinese respondents perceived a pair of denim jeans as inauthentic or atypical if a coin pocket was removed. In a similar vein, that study also showed that a person wearing wide-leg denim jeans with over-sized pockets may be perceived as casual, informal and sporty by onlookers, whereas someone wearing straight leg gabardine pants with side-seam pockets may be perceived as dressy, formal and upright. In this respect, the design features of the hoodie may serve as an indicator or cue to the wearer’s identity. Thus, it is important to reiterate that differences in a product’s design features (e.g., cargo pocket vs. side-seam pocket) may change the perceptions and impressions of the viewer about the user (Creusen and Schoormans 2005).

CLOTHING STYLE, USAGE SITUATIONS AND MEANING

Different clothing styles generate different functional benefits, psychological values, aesthetic pleasures, and associative meanings in different situations. People select certain clothing styles not only to express themselves and construct their identities, but also to fit into certain socio-cultural

contexts, or to meet specific needs according to the changing situations and circumstances (Rahman 2015). Many papers in the impression-formation literature (e.g., Peluchette et al. 2006; Rafaeli et al. 1997) report that appropriate attire yields positive or favourable interpretation inferences. For example, several studies (Johnson and Roach-Higgins, 1987; Silverman, 2001; Workman, 1984) revealed that how one dresses for a job interview could affect the interviewer's perception and decision-making processes. According to a recent study conducted by Chang et al. (2015), Taiwanese customers tended to dress more elegantly when they dined at a high-end restaurant than a mid-end restaurant. This may imply that the appropriateness of use could enhance the wearer's physical and psychological comfort in public (Hsu and Burns 2002). Thus, clothing styles and the situation in which they are used can play a vital role in the process of developing, constructing and negotiating object meanings. If a person dresses contrary to the social norm, this may draw much attention and possibly lead to public criticism. In 2012, for example, when Mark Zuckerberg (CEO of Facebook) wore his black hoodie to Facebook investor meetings, his clothing choice generated considerable criticism from journalists and analysts. Michael Pachter (analyst at Wedbush Securities) said, "[Mark Zuckerberg is] actually showing investors he doesn't care that much; he's going to be him. ... I think that's a mark of immaturity" (*The Telegraph*, 2012). In order to understand the relationships between clothing and situation, it is imperative to understand the consumers' perceptions and behaviour. As Belk (1974) asserted, any consumer behaviour study that ignores the situational factors is unlikely to provide reliable result.

The perceived meanings assigned to clothing in certain situational contexts are constructed through consumers' experiences and knowledge. Consumers often select clothing styles they consider desirable and appropriate for different situations to reflect their personality, taste and identity. However, in addition to considering their own interpretations, wearers often make choices that are most appropriate to a particular social setting, and in some cases, they dress in specific styles that are accepted by others, but that might contradict their own self-gratification/-expression. For example, individuals may have a tendency to choose dark-coloured denim jeans rather than light-coloured or distressed jeans for semi-formal dining, although they may personally prefer the latter.

RESEARCH METHOD

Many apparel studies are quantitative survey-based studies that primarily rely on respondents' memories (e.g., Swinker and Hines 2006; Rahman et al. 2010; Rahman 2011). Studies have clearly shown that quantitative surveys and questionnaires cannot capture the richness of consumers' affections, psychological states, and socio-cultural changes (Strauss and Corbin 1990), and they would not shed much light on consumer perception and interactivity in regard to our current research topic of hoodies. Therefore, qualitative research methods were adopted for this study, as they allow for a more in-depth investigation on the reasons for and circumstances of consumer thought, perception, emotion and behaviour (Montemurro and Gillen 2013). Through an interview format, researchers can extensively explore any unexpected or unknown personal thoughts and phenomena.

Subject recruitment

In total, 21 males between the ages of 18 and 37 who met our sampling criterion of self-identifying as adult males were recruited for this study. Due to their age, it was anticipated that these individuals would have current or recent experience with purchasing and/or wearing hoodies.

There were several reasons why these younger adults were solicited. Firstly, the hoodie is a fashion staple in many young consumers' wardrobes (Braddock, 2011). Secondly, this demographic is relatively more brand sensitive and trend conscious than their older counterparts (Beaudoin and Lachance, 2006; Martin and Bush, 2005). Thirdly, symbolic factors and emotional responses of clothing have been shown to be a major focus for younger consumers, whereas older ones pay more attention to practical benefits and satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2002).

This study was designed to investigate how male consumers perceive and evaluate hoodies rather than focusing on a specific ethnic or social group (e.g., African-Canadian, hip-hop artists/fans/subcultural members) because hoodies are a ubiquitous commodity and many of them are not merely designed for a particular group.

Data-collection and analysis

In-depth interviews were deemed to be appropriate for our purposes as they would allow us to gain critical and comprehensive information about how informants interpreted, perceived and selected hoodies. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and field notes describing interviewers' observations were typed as soon as each interview was completed. The duration of each interview ranged from 20 to 50 minutes.

Two stages of data collection were incorporated in order to gain a deeper understanding of the hoodie and the informants' perceptions, preferences and consumption experiences with them, and to learn more about how meaning may be created through the hoodies' various design features. In Stage One, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to illuminate the informants' underlying motivations for buying and wearing hoodies. Interview questions included the following: 'Do you like wearing a hoodie?' 'Why?' 'How often do you wear a hoodie?' 'Do you wear it on a regular basis?' 'What type of hoodie do you like or dislike?' 'What kinds of product attributes (e.g., colour, silhouette and comfort) are important to you when you shop for a hoodie?' 'What roles do the design elements play in the process of their evaluation and selection?' and 'How do you know if the money spent is the best value?' In Stage Two, informants were asked about their thoughts as well as the meanings of the hoodie through two individual hoodie-related incidents – the UK riots in 2011, and the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Open-ended questions were used throughout the interviews in order to gain an understanding of interviewees' thoughts, motivations, feelings, opinions, and attitudes regarding hoodies. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to understand how informants ascribe meaning to their experiences within certain environments (Smith et al. 1999). As Mischel (1977, p. 15) explains, 'One cannot understand what people do when one attempts to bypass completely any phenomenological understanding of what the thing means to them.' Next, I followed the analytical process outlined by Smith et al. (1999) and Moustakas (1994): Interview transcriptions were reviewed and analyzed in conjunction with audio recordings, and during the process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, the researcher made notes of any observations and reflections to capture the significant qualities of the interviews. Important statements and responses were identified and categorized into themes, and irrelevant statements were removed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Among the 21 males who participated in this study, of which the mean age was 24.5, ten informants were full-time students and the others were employees at various companies (as shown in Table 1). Nineteen informants reported that they liked hoodies, and three of them said that they wore them almost every day. Many informants wore the hoodie all year round except when the weather was hot. On average, the informants said they possessed about four to five hoodies.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education Level / Major	Annual Income (Canadian \$)	Body Type
Ian	22	Employed	-	-	Tall & Muscular
Charles	24	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	N/A	Tall & Muscular
Peter	28	Employed Support Analyst	Bachelor Degree in IT Management	\$55,000	Average
John	34	Full-time Student	Graduate Student	\$20,000	Tall & Athletic
Ryan	20	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	N/A	Short & Slim
Sean	-	-	-	-	-
Howard	24	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	\$20,000	Muscular
James	22	Employed Advertising and Marketing	Bachelor Degree in Image Art	-	Tall & Slim
Anthony	19	Employed Bicycle Mechanic	College Diploma	\$20,000	Athletic
Jonathan	30	Employed Freelance	High School Diploma	\$30,000	Slim
Isaac	29	Employed Film Maker	Graduate Degree in Film	-	Muscular & Athletic
Goerge	27	Full-time Student	Graduate Student	\$15,000	Chubby
Logan	20	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	\$10,000	Athletic
Benjamin	37	Employed IT Professional	Grade 8	\$60,000	Average
Jack	34	Employed Senior Accounting Manager	Bachelor Degree in Economics	\$50,000	Slightly Over-Weight
Michael	31	Employed Shop Owner and Manager	College Diploma	\$35,000	Athletic & Slightly Over-Weight
William	19	Full-time Student	High School	\$35,000	Slim
Henry	19	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	N/A	Muscular & Athletic
Samuel	28	Employed Entrepreneur	Bachelor Degree in Film Direction	\$60,000	Slim
Tyler	22	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	N/A	Tall & Average
Mark	18	Full-time Student	Undergraduate Student	N/A	Slim & Athletic

Table 1: The demographic profile of informants.

Reasons for wearing hoodies

Four themes emerged from our informants' responses regarding the reasons why they liked to wear hoodies. These encompassed function, convenience, appropriateness, and lifestyle. As indicated in Table 2, thirteen informants said that comfort (function, convenience) were the most important

factors. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the thermal effects (e.g., warmth and breathability), sensory characteristics (e.g., tactile feeling) and mobility (e.g., ease of movement) play a vital role in hoodie selection and use. This finding is consistent with prior studies of other apparel products including sleepwear (Labhard and Morris 1994), pyjamas (Rahman et al. 2008) and denim jeans (Wu and DeLong 2006). Other than comfort, appropriateness and life style (situational context, activities or circumstances) also play a significant role in hoodie choice. For example, some informants particularly preferred wearing a hoodie in variety of situations such as sports or other athletic activities, on rainy days/cold weather, and going to the cottage.

As shown in Table 2, many respondents viewed hoodies as casual, outdoor or athletic attire for different activities. From the following excerpt and many similar responses, it is evident that hoodies can provide both physiological and psychological comfort to the wearers.

I like [the] hoodie ... it's casual but yet I don't feel like a bum. You don't feel like just throwing something on your body ... how to explain it? I feel like you can go out wearing your hoodie and you're not dressed up but you feel okay about yourself. [John]

Psychological comfort is often linked the satisfaction of the wearer's psychosocial needs including emotional, aesthetic and cognitive dimensions (Yoo, 2003). According to John's response, it seems that hoodie can provide psychological comfort because he felt "okay" and didn't feel like a "bum" about himself.

Themes	Attributes / Frequency
Functions	Comfortable: 13 'Keep me warm': 4 Protect from the snow and rain: 4
Convenience	Easy to put on and to coordinate with existing wardrobe: 3
Appropriate for various activities	Sports/athletic events: 4 Run errands: 2 Going to the cottage: 2
Fit personal lifestyle	Casual lifestyle (relaxing, laid-back, carefree): 4

Table 2: Reasons for wearing hoodies.

Colour choice

In terms of colour, the vast majority of the informants reported that they preferred darker rather than lighter colours. They reported that dark colours are calm and subtle, easy to match with other garments, and do not show dirt or soil easily. Responses from informants included:

Black ... blue, but still it would be a dark blue. I wouldn't wear light coloured hoodies because, as a guy, I am too messy ... Yeah, light hoodies, you have to wash them every two days. [George]

The reason why I like darker colours is because I don't like to stand out when I wear my hoodie ... I just want to be relaxed and comfortable ... I don't need to be in the spotlight. [Charles]

There is something about hoodies that associate in my mind with darker colours. I don't see it necessarily as a fashion statement. Also in my opinion a hoodie has this kind of grungy kid look, so darker colours kind of subdue this feeling. To be specific, I like black, grey and dark blue. [Peter]

Colour preferences and perceptions are often learned from prior experience through various socialization agents such as friends and the media. Evidence indicates that individuals develop their colour choice for certain products through associative meaning – e.g., white for wedding dresses, blue for denim jeans, and black for evening attire (Rahman 2015; Stanton et al. 1994). In addition, darker colours are subtle and calm – they don't draw much attention. Clearly, some consumers want to 'blend in' or conform to the norm rather than making a fashion statement. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that from the young male consumer's perspective, darker colours are generally more acceptable or appropriate for hoodies.

Style and silhouette – function over fashion

When the informants were asked about their preferences for different types of fit/garment silhouettes, the 'fitted style' was the most frequently cited, followed by 'semi-fitted,' 'loose-fitted' and 'oversized style.' Twelve informants indicated that body type plays a more important role in hoodie evaluation and selection than fashion trends. As one of the informants (Anthony) said, 'It's more important to fit my body. I'm not looking to impress anybody with fashion when I wear a hoodie.'

On a similar note, eleven informants preferred plain or solid hoodies without any designs or applique motifs on the bodice. One of the informants (John) felt that 'applique design is more for the younger kids.'

In terms of the choice between zip-up or pullover hoodies, six informants preferred zip-up, five preferred pullovers, and the remainder did not have a particular preference. Interestingly enough, the choice of zip-up or pullover hoodies was often related to function and practicality. For example,

I prefer the zip-up one because it's easier ... pullover is kind of ... especially when you take it off in public, it pulls your under layers up. [Howard]

I like the zip-up ones more than the pullover ... well, the zip-up ones you can open them if it gets a little warmer. [Isaac]

I like zip-up ones because I don't have to pull them over my head and mess up my hair ... When I pull a sweater over my head my hair get static electricity and sticking out in all directions. [Jack]

However, some informants gave function as a reason for their preference for pullover hoodies. For example,

The zipper can be a little bit cumbersome, it bunches up weirdly...it kind of gets in the way when I'm doing all the bending and moving around and I can feel it

there; whereas a pullover is just free all the way around. Also, if I'm not wearing anything under the hoodie, I go for a pullover for sure ... because the metal zipper is quite cold and it can irritate the skin as well. [Charles]

I like pullover hoodies because they have deeper pockets in the middle for your iPod, so when you are warming up, you can listen to music. You can fit both your hands in them as opposed to ones with the zipper with two small pockets on the sides - your hands don't really fit in them. [Mark]

Most of the consumers I interviewed in Stage One did not cite an intention to build identity, or affiliation with any specific social groups as their reason for buying a hoodie. On the contrary, the majority of the informants were more concerned with the utilitarian values of hoodies such as comfort, function, usage appropriateness and practicality over any other factor. Interestingly, although they didn't use hoodie for group association, they were concerned or cared about their outward appearance in the public. For example, several informants said that they wore zip-up hoodie because they didn't want to mess up.

Meanings and perceptions of hoodies

Prior to the Stage Two interview, informants were asked about their understanding of the recent incidents that had been associated with the hoodie in the media, such as the UK riots and the Trayvon Martin incident in Florida. Most informants were aware of at least one incident, while just a few did not know anything about either incident. For informants who were not familiar with these events, interviewers provided background information based on local print media such as *The Guardian* (Braddock 2011) and *USA Today* (Oldenburg 2012)

Perceptions of hoodie – visibility and invisibility

Several informants admitted that sometimes they put up the hood to confine themselves in their own world/private space, but they stressed that they did not use the hood for the purpose of hiding their identity. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that certain people might perceive someone wearing a hoodie with the hood up to be dangerous, aggressive or violent. For example, Peter said:

It is just an interpretation of somebody who chooses to wear it. I don't see it [as] particularly intrusive, but it could be used that way. I guess a hoodie covers your face and protects you from being seen by people from the sides, but I don't see it to be intentional. ... When I want to feel safe and separate myself from the world, I also put up the hood ... The message would be 'leave me alone' like you wanna be within yourself when you wear it up. My perceptions of hoodie haven't really changed after you mentioned those incidents.

Many informants stated that a hoodie might be stereotyped as a symbol of furtive menace and lawlessness, and some individuals might use these clothing items to hide their identity or for the purpose of committing a crime. Informants did not deny the fact that some people may actually wear a hoodie for criminal purposes. However, they did not want to stereotype or judge a person based on his/her attire, or categorize the hoodie as "gangster" style. For example, one of the informants expressed his opinions of the hoodie like this:

I think it is not about the hoodie, but the crimes that people commit. They could be wearing a hoodie, they could be wearing a t-shirt; they could be wearing a suit. ... but it doesn't matter what the person is wearing, the criminal act is a criminal act. They could be wearing sunglasses rather than a hoodie, it doesn't matter. I don't perceive a hoodie as something that only gang members wear; I perceive it as casual clothes. [Jack]

Here is another excerpt from the interviews regarding stereotype or stigmatism:

A hoodie could be an extreme sports thing ... like skaters and bikers. But then we get that stigma with people selling drugs on the corner that they [are] only wearing hoodies ... and that's an unfortunate stereotype, but it does exist in our society. [Michael]

Multiple meanings of hoodie

Overall, the majority of our informants did not associate hoodies with negative connotations such as violence, crime, gangsterism or vandalism. On the contrary, many of them associated hoodies with young people, college students, outdoor activities, relaxation, and sports. On the university campus, hoodies signify an individual as a student rather than a gangster or a suspect. The situational usage context plays a significant role in viewers' perceptions of the hoodie. This result is supported by the Stage One findings (see Table 2).

What are my perceptions of a hoodie? ... Okay I think of sports, I think of training, I think of sitting around a camp fire, being outdoors, um, you know, the weekend just hanging out, fishing, outdoors stuff, camping, ... coziness, comfort, warmth and wintertime. [John]

Well in the public eye, there is the whole gangster hoodie thing ... so I'm sure some people think hoodies are juvenile delinquents and gangsters that are up to no good. But I also think there is a perception that they are associated with sports and being active, being fit and healthy. Um, but I think they can also be associated with being lazy and a slob, you know hiding away in your hoodie. [John]

However, a few informants had different opinion. For example:

It's funny ... because I remember going out as a teenager on Halloween and being in my black hoodie and putting it up over my head throwing eggs at houses and stuff and shooting up fireworks and getting into trouble, so it does remind me of being a bad ass when a little bit of the hood is up. [John]

Oversized / baggy hoodies

Interestingly enough, I found that the size of hoodies definitely affected viewer perceptions toward them. For example, the slim-cut or fitted hoodies were associated mostly with athletic activities, whereas oversized hoodies were linked to the "thug" life style.

In the public eye ... when you are in an oversized hoodie and it conceals your face ... because it is oversized ... it can lead to some insecurities in some people. They don't feel secure when people are hiding their face. [Henry]

But if someone is wearing a baggy hoodie and has a certain swagger to them and it's dark at night, and they're mumbling to themselves, the hoodie would just add to it. [Isaac]

It sounds really judgemental ... when I see slim cut hoodies I think of a more athletic kind of thing. When I see big baggy hoodies, you know I think of people who are going to be doing shitty things sometimes. ... I said, I used to wear big baggy hoodies because that was the style of the time and I got like pulled over a lot for it because you know cops or ordinary people – they pre-judge you. And plus it goes with that whole quote-unquote thug lifestyle. [Michael]

According to these interview contents, it is evident that the visual design of the hoodie (e.g., oversized silhouette) can be viewed as an important attribute that determines consumers' and viewers' responses – positive/negative or favourable/unfavourable. In other word, a product's appearance communicates messages and symbolic meanings, such as playful, boring, friendly, aggressive, expensive, rude, or childish.

Usage situation and media influence

The perceptions of hoodies involve a complex interplay of many factors, including the clothing style/silhouette and the usage situation. It is evident that the fluid and changing meaning of the hoodie may depend upon its style and the social context in which it is worn. As Askins (2009: 10) asserts, 'Emotions are contextual, embodied, and socially constructed [...] emotions are relational across relational spaces.' In a similar vein, other researchers (DeLong et al. 1986; Rahman, 2015) also point out that the way people categorize clothing is influenced by situational and contextual factors.

I feel like if the hood is up and it is not raining ... it could be considered a little bit sketchy. [Ryan]

When I see a person at night wearing a hood up, I would be more afraid than if the hood was down. The message would be 'get out.' Maybe the person is depressed or in a bad mood. [Samuel]

Apart from the clothing style and usage situation, the news media may also play a role in how meaning of the hoodie is generated.

For some reason every time I watch the news and they show a picture of the criminal and he always got on a hoodie with the hood up. [Benjamin]

Unfortunately, all the people that you see in the media are like, you know, suspect wanted ... wearing a black hoodie, and typically they are always wearing hoodies. It's unfortunate, but it happens. [Michael]

According to the perspective of the informants in this study, the news media may play an influential role in viewers' perceptions and impressions of hoodies. Indeed, it is not difficult to notice that there is a massive media coverage of crimes and criminal acts associated with certain styles if we glance at the news headlines. As some articles (Marsh and Melville, 2009; McLean, 2005; *The Guardian*, 2008) point out the moral panic over hooded teenagers is obvious. Thus, it would be worthwhile to further investigate how negative messages or connotations of wearing oversized hoodies or wearing the hood up resonates and registers with those who have such negative perceptions.

CONCLUSION

Consumers often interpret and judge the visual cues of a product based on their knowledge and past experience. Individuals may choose to wear a hoodie solely due to the comfort factor (e.g., fabric weight and thermal properties), rather than thinking of it as a product that manifests an individual's ideologies, values and beliefs. Among the sample I studied, symbolic and aesthetic values were deemed to play a relatively less significant role than the product's utilitarian values. Thus, it is not surprising that many informants preferred basic or plain hoodies (without appliques/graphics) to satisfy their functional needs.

Although a majority of the informants in this study did not perceive or associate the hoodie with gangster style or give it other negative connotations, some informants still avoided wearing oversized hoodies, and did not wear the hood of the garment up in certain situations. The reasons could have to do with not wanting to be perceived or to be associated with values and beliefs attached to certain lifestyles or subcultures. According to the current findings, the garment silhouette (slim-fitted/oversized) of the hoodie had a more influential role on the formation of symbolic meanings than other product attributes (such as zipped/pull-over style, colour, fabric, pockets, etc.). Clearly, the meaning of the concept of the 'hoodie' is a complex multifaceted one, and any generalizations about the perceptions of hoodies are not necessarily accurate.

Although certain type of hoodies may mis-contextualize and/or be associated with negative connotation, it would be unjust to determine the lifestyle of a person merely based on observable cues or the physical appearance of a garment. A viewer's interpretations of another individual's appearance/attire are not always accurate or in line with the wearer's intentions. Although clothing may provide some information about the wearer, it does not tell a meaningful life story just by itself. Some clothing items may provide more reliable or valid information about a wearer's identity than others – e.g., police uniforms or office attire. With a similar perspective, Hethorn (1994) found that body language, gang hand sign and specific tattoos are considered as more reliable indicators of gang membership than are clothing items such as the hoodie.

Even as far back as early 90s, Feinberg et al. (1992) found that it is almost impossible to reflect all aspects of an individual through their clothing. In many cases, meaning cannot be communicated accurately if an image is incomplete and the signs are unclear, unless there is mutual agreement and understanding. Lennon and Davis (1989) also found that the meaning of clothing might be more related to the situational context than the personality of the wearer. Indeed, the symbolic meanings of clothing can be easily manipulated by the wearer and changed by the usage situation. Without fully understanding the wearer's intention and the socio-cultural context,

misunderstanding, stereotyping, stigmatizing or even demonizing of a person may occur. The results of the current study reinforce and support the findings of these earlier studies (Feinberg et al. 1992; Lennon and Davis 1989).

Final notes – clothing and music

Clothing and music are visibly intertwined in many ways, and they can be used as a signifier to reflect our culture and lifestyle. Hebdige (1979) asserted in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that the Punks demonstrated their opposition to mainstream culture and values through both verbal expression (music) and non-verbal representation (dress). According to Rentfrow and Gosling (2003), music is a better communicator of the identity of young people than is clothing, movies or hobbies. However, some rap songs have been blamed for and linked to profanity, violence, delinquency, substance abuse, vandalism and crime (e.g., BBC News 2005; Chen et al. 2006; Frosch 2007; Wingood et al. 2003). Rap lyrics have been used as evidence in criminal trials (Nielson and Render 2014). Scholars, cultural critics and commentators who have critically reviewed several rap songs assert that they impose a criminal mindset onto their listeners (BBC News 2005; Sacco and Kennedy 2002). However, the results in this area have been inconclusive, as other researchers (e.g., Tatum 1999) did not find a convincing link between rap music and deviant behaviour. Regardless of the impact, it is evident that some rap lyrics are written to reflect our world: the reality and social phenomenon (e.g., “thug” and gangster lifestyle). The following lyrics of *Black Hoodie Rap* by Onyx could be one of the examples that illustrates this perspective.

*Goin' to jail for criminals like going to school, you come out a little better at
crimes you do
And when I die, don't dress me up in the suit
It's AIs, dark denim, black hoodies, on
Black hoodie rap, black hoodie rap
Black hoodie rap, black, black hoodie rap
This is black hoodie rap, black hoodie rap
Black hoodie rap, hoodie, hoodie, hoodie rap*

While the current research is not focused on music and clothing, this could be an interesting topic (i.e., the relationships among music, clothing and perceived identity) for further investigation, particularly as new meanings continually develop, evolve and (re)construct through the music and fashion industries.

LIMITATION

It is important to understand how hoodies may be used to shape today's consumer identity and behaviour. Likewise, it is also critical to gain insight on how meanings are created, transmitted and received. While this study provides insights and information of benefit to the field of fashion design and culture, as with most studies there are numerous limitations to the current research. Firstly, information from other age groups and geographic locations would substantiate and extend the current findings. Secondly, female consumers should also be studied because the hoodie may be perceived quite differently among women than it is by men. Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, music could play an important part in the formation of individual identity, socio-cultural meaning and values; therefore, it could be beneficial to investigate the complex relationships among music,

clothing and perceived identity. Fourth, a broad representation of consumers or specific ethnic/subcultural groups merits consideration for future research. Fifth, as consumer response toward product design and specific features likely varies across diverse consumer markets, a similar study conducted within different consumer categories (e.g., students, artists, athletes).could strengthen the validity and extend the concept of the current study.

END NOTES

1. According to online Oxford Dictionaries, the definition of 'hoodlum' is 'a person who engages in crime and violence; a hooligan or gangster.' This word was first used in the nineteenth century but the origin is unknown.
2. The word 'hood' is derived from 'neighborhood' (Forman 2002; p. 5). As Forman (p. 26) describes, 'The hood accommodates the general spatial image of the ghetto, but the term also allows greater flexibility when used by members of the hip-hop generation to describe and delineate locality – literally, one's neighborhood and the space to which one relates as a local home environment.'
3. The term 'Hoods' is applied to young people who persistently offend (e.g., car theft for joyriding, burglary, violence, and other forms of anti-social behaviour) in West Belfast, Ireland (Hamill 2011).
4. Although David Cameron's speech has been known as 'hug a hoodie.' he never actually used those words when he addressed the public.
5. As stated in Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman's article (2008, p. 100), "In the *JFK* documentary, 1980s rap group Run DMC is shown promoting their albums by wearing sneakers with no laces. Their no laces image emulated: 'prison fashion. But in prison it's not a fashion. They issue you no shoe laces so that can't do something desperate with them ... But, out on the street, guys go to prison, now that they're back home and they decide that like the way it looks and they like the way it feels so guess what even though they're now free, they're not gonna put shoe laces back on their sneakers.' (Adler in *JFK*, 2005)"

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