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Streetwear as the material foundation of skate culture and collective identity

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Abstract This article examines streetwear as the primary material catalyst in the formation of skate culture as a distinct collective identity and subculture. Drawing on Dick Hebdige's subculture theory and Daniel Miller's material culture framework, the study argues that functional clothing including flat-soled shoes, baggy pants, and graphic tees was not merely aesthetic apparel but the ideological infrastructure through which a new community of practice was constituted. Through historical and archival analysis of skate media, brand histories, and documentary records from the 1970s to the 2000s, the article demonstrates that streetwear simultaneously served as functional tool, identity marker, community boundary, and expression of shared anti-mainstream values. As skate streetwear transitioned from a localized DIY subculture into a global commodity, its original cultural codes were paradoxically both diluted and diffused into mainstream youth culture worldwide. The study contributes to broader understandings of how everyday material objects catalyze the formation of entirely new subcultures.

Keywords: streetwear, skate culture, subculture, material culture, identity formation

INTRODUCTION

Skate culture is one of the most recognizable youth subcultures in modern history. Born on the streets and skate parks of California in the 1970s, it grew into a global movement with its own values, rituals, and visual identity. Yet the question of what elevated skateboarding from an activity to a full-blown subculture has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This article proposes that streetwear functional, anti-mainstream clothing worn by skaters was the primary material catalyst that accomplished precisely that transformation. Unlike fashion trends adopted from the top down by cultural elites, streetwear within skate culture emerged from the bottom up: from necessity, from community, and from a shared rejection of mainstream norms.

The central argument advanced here is that material objects, specifically clothing, do not merely reflect a subculture already formed they actively constitute it. By examining how skate-specific dress codes developed, circulated, and eventually globalized, this article illuminates a broader dynamic central to the study of popular culture ,the power of everyday objects to anchor collective identity. Two primary research questions guide the

inquiry. First, how did streetwear function as the material foundation of skate culture's formation as a new collective identity and subculture? Second, how did the transition of streetwear from a localized DIY subculture into a global commercial commodity reconfigure the meanings of its original cultural codes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic study of subcultures has its most durable intellectual foundation in the work produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Dick Hebdige's seminal monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) remains the touchstone text. Hebdige argued that subcultures use material objects particularly clothing to construct and communicate identity in opposition to the dominant culture. Style, in Hebdige's formulation, is never innocent: it is a form of "semiotic guerrilla warfare," a coded language through which marginalized groups speak back to the cultural order that excludes them. This framework is directly applicable to skate culture, where clothing was not merely aesthetic but profoundly ideological.

Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson's edited volume *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1975) extended this analysis, theorizing subcultures as structured responses to the social contradictions experienced by working-class and marginal youth. While the CCCS scholars focused primarily on British contexts mods, rockers, punks, and skinheads the analytical tools they developed translate productively to the American skate scene, which similarly arose from a community of young people navigating structural exclusion and cultural invisibility.

Historical accounts trace the origins of streetwear to the late 1970s and early 1980s in California, where skateboarders required durable, flexible clothing suited to the physical demands of the sport (Bluorng, 2025). Because mainstream fashion did not cater to their needs, skaters began designing and sourcing their own looks an early expression of the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos that would remain central to skate culture's self-understanding for decades. This bottom-up process of material production is documented across brand histories and journalistic accounts (WeChronicle, 2023; Ayerhs Magazine, 2024).The material thus becomes inseparable from the culture it helped construct, a point that has been heavily expanded by recent scholarship focusing on the intersection of modern street fashion, identity typography, and digital community-building networks.

Brands such as Vans, Stüssy, and later Supreme emerged directly from within these communities, further cementing the relationship between material goods and cultural belonging (Streetwear Studios, 2026). These were not external corporations selling products to skaters; they were born from skaters and for skaters, giving clothing an insider significance that outsiders could not easily replicate. As Streetwear Studios (2026) notes, the authenticity of these early brands resided precisely in their community origins a quality that would become increasingly contested as the brands achieved mainstream visibility.

Hip-hop culture's parallel development in New York produced a significant cross-pollination of streetwear styles. Both communities shared values of rebellion, anti-establishment sentiment, and exuberant self-expression, and both used clothing as a primary medium for those values (PBS, 2024). The convergence of skate and hip-hop streetwear in the late 1980s and 1990s further consolidated clothing's role as a cultural language shared across marginalized urban youth communities, amplifying the reach and symbolic density of both traditions.

The literature on material culture provides an additional and complementary analytical lens. Daniel Miller's *Stuff* (2010) argues that objects are never merely passive things; they are active agents in social life, mediating relationships, communicating values, and constituting identities. When applied to streetwear, this perspective reveals that skate clothing was not just worn it performed social functions, communicated values, and created belonging. The material thus becomes inseparable from the culture it helped construct, a point that has been insufficiently attended to in the existing literature on skate culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on two primary theoretical frameworks that together illuminate the material and symbolic dimensions of skate culture's formation.

Subculture Theory (Birmingham School)

Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige's foundational work on subcultures posits that marginalized youth groups use style including clothing as a form of symbolic resistance against dominant culture. For Hebdige, subcultures appropriate and recode the objects of mainstream culture, investing them with oppositional meanings. Skate culture fits this model precisely: skaters used clothing to signal membership in their community, to reject mainstream fashion norms, and to assert a distinct collective identity. The dress code of skate culture constituted a visual language legible to insiders and deliberately opaque, or at least incongruous, to outsiders.

Material Culture Theory

Drawing from Daniel Miller's work on material culture, this framework treats objects not as passive things but as active agents in social life. Streetwear items Vans shoes, baggy pants, graphic tees emblazoned with skate brand logos were not merely worn; they performed social functions, communicated values, and created belonging. Miller's insight that "things make people" as much as people make things is especially productive here. The material clothing of skate culture actively shaped the community it served, making the distinction between "authentic" skaters and peripheral participants possible and visible. The two frameworks are complementary: subculture theory explains why skate style was oppositional and meaningful, while material culture theory explains how clothing functioned as an active social agent in constituting that subculture.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach, consistent with the interpretive and humanistic traditions of cultural studies. Qualitative methodology is appropriate here because the object of inquiry the meanings invested in material objects by a specific community is not amenable to quantitative measurement but requires interpretive analysis attentive to context, history, and symbolic significance.

Three complementary methods are deployed. First, *historical and archival analysis* traces the development of skate specific clothing from the 1970s through the 2000s, drawing on primary sources including brand histories, documentary footage, and journalistic accounts to establish a chronological map of material-culture formation within the community. Second, *textual and visual analysis* examines skate magazines principally *Thrasher* and *Transworld Skateboarding* as well as photographs and brand visuals, to

identify recurring clothing codes and track their cultural meanings over time. These publications served as the primary circulatory infrastructure of skate culture and thus constitute a rich archive of its material symbolic world. Third, *cultural studies analysis* applies Hebdige's subculture theory and Miller's material culture framework to interpret how clothing functioned as identity marker and community boundary.

Data is sourced from published academic texts, documented brand histories, journalistic accounts, and visual archives spanning 1970 to 2010. This temporal range encompasses the formative period of skate culture through its initial mainstreaming, allowing for analysis of both the subcultural moment of formation and the subsequent processes of commodification and globalization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. From Function to Symbol: The Making of Skate Dress

What began as purely practical clothing acquired, over time, a dense symbolic value that far exceeded its functional origins. The flat-soled Vans shoe was initially designed to maximize grip on a skateboard deck; the loose, low-slung pant permitted the range of motion required for tricks. These were solutions to embodied problems, not fashion statements. Yet because they were adopted uniformly and visibly across the skate community, they became the visual language of belonging. To wear Vans or a Thrasher hoodie was to communicate membership in the community before a single word was spoken a material declaration of identity legible to anyone who shared the cultural codes.

This process what Hebdige (1979) calls "bricolage," the creative appropriation and recoding of existing objects is central to subculture formation. Skaters did not invent new materials from scratch; they selected, combined, and invested existing items with new cultural meanings specific to their community. The transformation of the ordinary into the subcultural is precisely the mechanism by which a group of individuals becomes a community with a shared identity.

B. Dress Code as Boundary-Making

Skate culture used clothing to distinguish insiders from outsiders a key indicator of subculture formation. The material functioned as a social boundary, determining who was "authentic" and who was merely imitating the style without sharing the values. This boundary-making function operated on multiple levels simultaneously. At the level of recognition, clothing allowed skaters to identify one another across diverse social contexts. At the level of legitimacy, the manner of wearing clothes the degree of wear, the specific brands chosen, the combination of items communicated the depth and duration of one's commitment to the community.

This analysis resonates with Miller's (2010) contention that objects actively shape the social relations of the people who use them. Skate clothing did not merely mark a boundary that already existed; it produced that boundary, making the distinction between insider and outsider materially visible and socially consequential. The emergence of a recognizable skate aesthetic thus both reflected and constituted the community's sense of itself as a distinct social group.

C. DIY Ethos and Anti Mainstream Values

Because mainstream fashion excluded or ignored skaters, the community produced its own material culture. This DIY foundation reinforced and expressed a set of core values independence, rebellion, anti-commercialism, and authentic self-expression that remained central to skate culture's self understanding even as it later went global. The act

of producing one's own clothing, or of patronizing brands understood to be genuinely from within the community, was itself an ideological statement.

Brands such as Stüssy, Vans, and eventually Supreme were valorized not merely for their aesthetic qualities but for their perceived authenticity their origin within the community rather than their imposition upon it. As WeChronicle (2023) documents, the cultural authority of early skate brands derived precisely from their subcultural rootedness. This alignment of material production with subcultural values produced a distinctive economy of authenticity in

which the meaning of a garment was inseparable from the story of where it came from and who made it.

D. From Subculture to Global Pop Culture: The Paradox of Commodification The global spread of skate streetwear through brands such as Supreme, Palace, and Anti-Hero represents the central paradox of subculture: as it gained mainstream visibility, the material that once marked exclusivity became a commodity available to anyone with sufficient purchasing power. Hebdige (1979) anticipated precisely this dynamic, noting that the subcultural cycle inevitably ends with the dominant culture's recuperation of oppositional style its reabsorption into the mainstream through the mechanisms of mass fashion and commercial diffusion.

Yet the process is not simply one of optation and loss. As Bluorng (2025) and Streetwear Studios (2026) both note, the cultural codes and values that originated within the skate community continue to animate global fashion and youth identity even in their commodified forms. The irony is generative the mainstreaming of skate streetwear has paradoxically extended the reach of skate values independence, irreverence, anti-establishment sentiment to communities and individuals who have never set foot on a skateboard. The material has become, in effect, a global cultural transmission mechanism for a local set of subcultural values.

E. Images and Tables

Table 1. Core Themes of Skate Streetwear Evolution

Theme	Subcultural Functionn	Primary Source Context	Key Symbolic Markers
Functional Origins	Solved embodied physical problems for skateboarders	California scene in the late 1970s and 1980s	Flat soled Vans shoes, loose low-slung baggy pants
Boundary-Making	Distinguished "authentic" insiders from mainstream outsiders	Media circulation via *Thrasher* and *Transworld*	Specific brand choices, degree of physical wear on clothes

DIY Values Global Commodification	Expressed independence, rebellion, and anti-commercialism Paradoxically diffused subcultural codes into mass youth culture	Community-born labels (Stüssy, early Supreme) Commercial transition from 1990s to the present	Graphic tees, localized underground distribution High-demand global streetwear brands

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that streetwear was not merely a fashion choice within skate culture it was the material infrastructure through which a new collective identity was built. Clothing served simultaneously as functional tool, identity marker, community boundary, and expression of shared values. The skate community did not adopt an existing fashion; it created one out of necessity, and in doing so, created a culture.

By examining streetwear as the foundational material of skate culture, this study contributes to broader understandings of how everyday objects can catalyze the formation of entirely new subcultures a dynamic that is central to the study of popular culture in the modern world. The analytical framework developed here, combining Hebdige's subculture theory with Miller's material culture approach, offers a productive model for future studies of the relationship between dress, identity, and community formation.

The findings also raise important questions about authenticity and commodification that extend beyond skate culture. As an increasing number of subcultures find their material expressions absorbed into mainstream commercial culture, understanding how original meanings are preserved, transformed, or lost in that process remains one of the central challenges for cultural scholars. Skate streetwear born of necessity, invested with ideology, and exported globally offers an unusually clear window onto that complex and ongoing dynamic.

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