

The Predicament and Self-redemption of Hip-hop Culture—Taking Supreme as an Example

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Abstract: *Hip-hop culture was born in black slums, a breeding ground for criminals. Therefore, hip-hop has been known to all from the beginning as an "uncivilized culture filled with anger at the current state of society." Since the 21st century, hip-hop, a culture that initially belonged to a minority group in the United States, has gained a broad audience worldwide as it has become popular. Meanwhile, many of hip-hop fans have begun to criticize hip-hop for losing its spirit due to its popularity. Hip-hop culture has the ability to deconstruct commercial elements and use them for its own purposes due to its inclusiveness of commercial elements. Therefore, the study of hip-hop culture requires us to be based on the framework of subculture research, but also to step out of the limitations of this framework and conduct targeted research according to its own characteristics.*

Keywords: *Hip-hop culture, Supreme, Subculture, Deconstructivism*

1. Introduction

Hip-hop culture was born in the 1960s in the black neighborhoods of the Bronx, New York, as a way for young black people living in the ghetto to release their inner anxieties and anger. After 60 years of development, hip-hop culture has already jumped out of the black community, expanding its cultural and commercial territory and becoming one of the most prevalent pop cultures in the world in the 21st century. From a commercial point of view, hip-hop culture is undoubtedly successful. However, its original spiritual core as a niche subculture has inevitably been compromised in the process, and many fundamentalist hip-hop fans have labeled it as "hip-hop is dead." Supreme, as one of the most recognizable hip-hop commercial brands today, resonates with the development of hip-hop culture as a whole in terms of its start-up and growth. In the course of Supreme's journey from New York's Lafayette Street to the rest of the world, the brand's spirit of rebellion and keeping it real has attracted countless young men and women in the throes of puberty. The move from underground to above ground also meant that the brand needed to make commercial compromises in order to reach out to the masses. However, the seemingly inevitable trend of subculture being incorporated by mass commercial culture should not be simply criticized as a dichotomy between the political nature of subculture and the commercial nature of mass culture in hip-hop culture.

Although there are numerous studies that have ventured into the landscape of hip-hop culture in the 21st century, there is limited research on the predicament and self-redemption of hip-hop culture in the 21st century and the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

Given that the expansion history of Supreme, the world's number one streetwear brand today, shares the same destiny with the global pandemic of hip-hop culture, this paper is trying to take Supreme as an entry point to answer two fundamental questions:

- 1) What is the dilemma of hip-hop culture as represented by Supreme in the 21st century?
- 2) How hip-hop culture represented by Supreme, is in response to this dilemma?

This paper will unpack this high-profile case, setting it within a broader literature and demonstrating how the case illustrates the predicament and self-redemption of hip-hop culture in the 21st century. It begins with a brief review of the history of hip-hop culture and Supreme to prove that Supreme is qualified enough to be used as a representative example to unfold the problem of hip-hop culture. Next, by analyzing why Supreme is stereotyped as promoting rebellious spirit, this paper points out that hip-hop culture in the 21st century is under a crisis of the threat of being subsumed by commercial culture. Then, taking Supreme as an entry, this article will discuss how hip-hop culture resists the fate of being

co-opted by mainstream commercial culture. In the end, the paper tries to make a conclusion and explores the future direction of hip-hop culture.

2. Supreme and Hip-hop: back at square

Supreme can be viewed as a miniature of hip-hop from two perspectives: brand spirit and trend line. Originated during the mid-1970s as an integrated series of live community-based practices, hip-hop culture is widely considered the by-product of the Civil Rights Movement. Growing up in the years of hope, a group of colored youth led by blacks soon realized that the barrier between them and the White society had never been tumbled. To express frustration with current structural inequality and to make their voice heard, African American youths and other minorities filled the streets, showing their attitude in terms of rap, dance, graffiti, dj, as well as sports.

On the authority of Rutherford, growing up in the street where the law of the jungle is the universal reason, the young black community gradually developed their way of body-using (11).^[1] *Supreme* is where these young hip-hoppers get access to clothes and other products designed for their lifestyle.

James Jebbia founded *Supreme* in 1994. Since the store was opened, Jebbia only put loose T-shirts and skateboard supplies on his shelf. As he claimed in an interview with *Vogue*, “I always really liked what was coming out of the hip-hop world. It was less commercial—it had more edge and more fxxk-you type stuff” (Robert).^[2] Even the kids he employed, often skateboarders themselves, were cool, opinionated—and constantly scowling at the uncool. Whether as the home for hip-hop youth in the downtown area, NYC, at the time, or its brand spirit of selling cool against mainstream society, *Supreme* can undoubtedly be seen as a typical representative of hip-hop culture in the commercial arena.

Apart from that, *Supreme* sits in the precise footprint of the hip-hop culture. Historically, the trend line of hip-hop culture and *Supreme* can be concluded in this way: born for minority---registers its name as an iconic culture---being sentenced to death. Since hip-hop culture is consists of strenuous activities, as stated by Irvine and Taysom, it was commonly characterized as an activity that challenges the social norms and the consumerist logic of urban space (25).^[3] However, hip-hop is starting to turn a corner in the 20-plus years. Hip-hop’s boldness to the sensational topic and ability to capture the ear and eyes of teenagers allowed it to raise awareness among the general public. But along with the applause, there was some criticism of hip-hop, with some believing that hip-hop was tainted, and they even sloganize that hip-hop is dead.

For the same reason, *Supreme* used to sell goods only to street boys who were idle and pinched. But as the brand expanded globally, *Supreme's* business model became a tool for some to show off their identity. In 2021, *Supreme* was bought by VF Group, the world's largest ready-to-wear company, for US\$2.1 billion, which to many diehard *Supreme* fans was equal to the death of the brand's spirit. Based on the above, it is justified to take *Supreme* as an example of the hip-hop culture in contemporary times, both in terms of brand ethos and trends.

3. Rebellion in deconstruction: a re-interpretation of Supreme’s success

The dilemma of hip-hop culture in the 21st century can be broadly summarized as the threat of being subsumed by commercial culture. Albert. K. Cohen, a prominent American criminologist, once probed into the problem of sub-culture in his *Delinquency Boys: The Culture of Gang* that each individual's behavior is an attempt to solve the various types of issues they encounter in society, and a central problem faced by adolescents of lower-class origin is the distress caused by status frustration (11).^[5] In the United States in the 1950s, middle-class values aimed at material success and personal fulfillment were already dominant in all corners of society, which ultimately excluded young people from the lower classes to the margins of mainstream society. The deviant value systems, namely subcultures, then appeared to respond to these exclusions by providing lower-class adolescents with status to which they could adapt. Eventually, subcultures, which were alien to the middle-class values, became the conceptual backbone of the marginalized groups.

Based on the above analysis of the background and history of hip-hop culture in the United States, it is readily apparent that hip-hop culture was born among the black community and became a cultural link for hip-hop adherents to gain self-identity. In this sense, hip-hop culture is undoubtedly a member of the subculture. Given that hip-hop culture belongs to the subculture family, it is inevitably in danger of being incorporated into the mass commercial culture for subculture groups today.

The process of Supreme producing clothing centered around its 'red box logo, transcending its skateboarding roots, and being fueled by the brand's ability to create desire demonstrates the two primary paths of "commercial incorporation" and "ideological incorporation" proposed by the Birmingham School (Hall and Tony)^[6]

Firstly, it is the dominant culture that "defines" and "labels" the subcultural style. Up to June 16, 2022, by screening the news related to the brand through Google, the world's largest search engine, using the keyword Supreme, the keywords mainly were rebellion/delinquent/ revolt/cool. With the reinforcement of stereotypes by those in control of public opinion, Supreme is solidified as a rebellion against mainstream culture from the public's point of view.

Suppose this ideological incorporation is the basis for mass commercial culture to complete the incorporation of subculture. In that case, the subsequent incorporation of subculture from commercial capitalism completely deprives subculture of its cultural roots. According to the Birmingham School (Hall and Tony), mass commercial culture is interested in subcultural styles as a tool for attracting attention in a consumer society (1976).^[6] Subcultures are processed into commodities for mass sale and proliferation in the marketplace. Finally, the style of subculture is redefined in favor of the ruling class. In the market and everyday life, subcultures are stripped of their initial generative contexts and their unique power of resistance, making them demons, mundane, or fashionable merchandise.

Supreme used to be a brand for a small handful of skateboarding hip-hop kids. In the words of founder Jebbia, Supreme sold cool itself, and Supreme's motto was "sell-out" (at the time meant hot seller and rebelling). Although the profitability of Supreme was limited, almost all consumers of its products were people who shared the same values and pursuits with Supreme. As a result, the brand was regarded as a representative of the rebellion by the business world. Nevertheless, as the world's largest ready-to-wear company acquired Supreme in 2021 for a considerable sum of money, Supreme's "sell-out" spirit has changed to a literal "sell-out."

After the acquisition, Supreme continued to collaborate with luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Tiffany, and Burberry, while maintaining its former limited-run operation, leading to an insane price increase. The street kids are no longer the principal consumers of Supreme because their economic power does not match the brand's positioning today. On the contrary, the top consumers of Supreme today are people with a high level of affordability. The popularity of Supreme on social media networks such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have been accompanied by the promotion of social media influencers and the tag of 'cool kids.' For most of them, the history and spirituality behind the brand are not necessary, but rather the fact that using the brand's products suggests them a carefully dressed authority. The dominant culture 'defines' and 'labels' subcultural styles, resulting in the Supreme being coded as a characteristic style and becoming a commodity that everyone can consume to show that they are different, while the original brand ethos is dissolved in the process. In this way, Supreme's dilemma seems to be the inescapable fate of subcultures in an era of overwhelmingly dominant mass commercial culture.

However, in the face of the onslaught of aggressive commercial culture, hip-hop culture did not just sit back and wait for death. Unlike most subcultures that choose a "hard" approach to confrontation, hip-hop culture opts for a more "covert" strategy due to its unique cultural heritage and mode of expression.

Perhaps in the evolution of Supreme, we can get a glimpse of the tactics adopted by hip-hop culture in fighting the incorporation of commercial pop culture. Early in the 1990s, when Supreme was founded in NYC, its target client and way of doing business ran counter to the prevailing profit-making trend. As mentioned above, Supreme does not care to sell its products to adherents of a vulgar commercial culture. Even the products they sell, such as baggy sweatshirt jackets and T-shirts with shocking declarations, are seen as "uncouth" in the eyes of the public. This was seen by the public and many hip-hop fans as a perfect head-to-head with commercial culture, as it perfectly matched their expectations of hip-hop.

As the commercial culture grew, hip-hop culture began to shift its strategy to a "soft" approach to confrontation. The most typical example is the accessories line of Supreme, which, season after season, features tongue-in-cheek products that serve pretty much no purpose. For FW16 (fall and winter of 2016), Supreme has unveiled what is probably its most controversial item yet—A Box Logo-branded brick. Once the product was launched, the ardent fans of Supreme were so enthusiastic about the brick that it was in short supply, causing an uproar in the fashion world. The brand was therefore believed to have degenerated to the point where it would do anything to make a profit.

Nonetheless, most of the above disappointments with Supreme stop on the surface of brand releasing useless goods for profit only and do not look deeper into the intentions behind the series of initiatives. When viewed from the perspective of countering commercial culture, selling such a brick as a commodity

at a premium price is actually a great way for Supreme to mock (and validate) claims that people will buy anything with a Box Logo. Following to this viewpoint, the series of initiatives made by Supreme after its rise to fame seems to cater to the psychology of consumers, such as poor product quality, lack of aesthetics, lack of after-sales service, and so on, both exploiting and mocking consumerism at the same time.

It is a more subtle and dissipative form of rebellion that can date back to the birth of hip-hop culture. The contrast with rock may help us further understand this particular trait of hip-hop. Hip-hop and rock both come from the "underground," which can be understood as a state of independence, resistance and non-commercialization before entering the mainstream. Nevertheless, there is a more specific reference to the "underground" for hip-hop, where it originated—the ghetto or the streets. The "underground" is to some extent more significant to hip-hop than to rock because the "underground" is where hip-hoppers try to escape, where they grow up and become famous, and where their creativity comes from. Thus, the relationship between hip-hop's underground pedigree and self-marketing with the underground as a gimmick is out of the either-or framing. The connection mentioned above can be summed up as the irony of Hip-Hop.

Different from rock culture, which is upset or even depressed by the shift to "above ground," hip-hop culture seems to have entered the mainstream with a sense of openness and self-congratulation. According to the opinion of Watkins, black youth participation in commercial culture is not a surrender to the forces of capitalism but rather a key element in their attempt to counter some of its worst influences (570).^[7] Many youths do not see their association with the pop culture industry as a form of selling themselves out. Furthermore, this commercial success also built confidence in young black men who, until then, may have been overshadowed by crime-prone, lazy, and ignorant prejudices. Hip-hop is a culture that is constantly growing, expanding and inclusive. "It has a flexibility that no other culture can match, and can readily adapt itself to a variety of situations in moderation" (George 190).^[4] Hip-hop can criticize mainstream culture in the most radical terms and may also run into the mainstream itself.

Yet there is still a question mark over the effectiveness of hip-hop's seemingly conciliatory resistance to the incorporation of commercial culture. While hip-hop, represented by Supreme, is attempting to perpetuate the political defiance of hip-hop culture in this way, its ironic purpose is almost obscured by the trappings of commercialization.

4. Conclusion

In the age when commercial culture is dominant, the "irony of hip-hop" is often intercepted by the commercial culture at a superficial level, resulting in the public being drawn to the provocative appearance of commercialized hip-hop culture without having time to think about the connotations that hip-hop culture wants to express under this commercialized veneer. Thus, it seems that even this hipster attitude of hip-hop fails in the face of such a solid and monolithic commercial culture. Hip-hop culture has a natural advantage due to its particular characteristics, compared to other subcultures who are facing the dilemma of "being tamed by commercial culture or remaining in their own way". In other words, the more it is integrated into the public and commercialized, the more weapons hip-hop culture has. In order to dispel the simplistic and preconceived notion that "hip-hop = anger and rebellion," it should be made clear that hip-hop should utilize commercial resources while elaborating on its spiritual core, avoid becoming corrupted by consumerism, and show the public a more diverse hip-hop culture through its works.

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