

Streetwear: What is the Hype about?

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Abstract:

With the increasing prominence of streetwear fashion within the mainstream culture, limited research has explored the profound brand preferences among streetwear using a qualitative approach. This study investigates the various factors driving positive brand preferences among deeply engaged streetwear consumers. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by a theoretical framework consisting of elements of branding practices, identity constructs, influential figures, and self-congruence. Qualitative analysis identified five focal areas: 1. Self-Identity & Confidence, 2. Social Circles & Cultural Events, 3. Influential Figures, 4. Exclusivity & Target Audience 5. Brand Narrative Knowledge & Personal Values. The findings highlight the distinct preferences of streetwear consumers, with an emphasis on showcasing personal & social identity through clothing and maintaining a strong brand narrative. Furthermore, these insights can aid marketers in cultivating favourable brand perceptions and preferences within the realm of streetwear.

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1. Introduction

The integration of streetwear fashion into the mainstream market has propelled the industry to unexpected heights of popularity. It was estimated that in 2019 the streetwear market was valued at 185 billion dollars, roughly equaling estimates of 10% of the entire global clothing and footwear market (Leeb et al. 2019). A fashion style that was once considered niche, now captured the attention of a broader demographic and changed the overall perception of streetwear. The influx of new brands entering the market driven by the style's popularity, has led to an increasingly competitive environment. What implication does this growth has on the highly engaged consumers? The growth has introduced a large array of brands becoming available, consequently emphasising the importance of brand preferences among a vaster competitive field. This paper aims to investigate the profound underlying factors contributing towards influencing brand preferences among highly engaged streetwear consumers.

While there has been a moderate amount of research conducted on streetwear, only few studies adopted a qualitative approach. This study aims to bridge this gap by conducting semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to elaborate upon their experiences and preferences through open ended questions. The objective goal was to highlight their distinct brand and style preferences while giving them the opportunity to interpret their meanings, perspectives and experiences in the context of streetwear fashion. The aim of this study was to identify factors which could aid in building positive brand preferences among highly engaged streetwear consumers. My contribution consists of assembling a theoretical framework as the foundation of the topics used for the interviews. It includes identity constructs and branding practices which are rooted from my hypothesis of most relevant factors shaping brand preferences. Results of the interviews were later analysed under the framework concepts, identifying five themes related to shaping the participant's brand preferences.

2. Background

2.1 Streetwear Origins

The exact origins of streetwear have been difficult to pinpoint accurately, however, the most cited explanation stems from the influence of hip-hop, graffiti, surfing and skateboarding cultures established in the United States around the late 1980s (Rajendran, 2012). Many believe that the first major brand to cater to the niche of streetwear was Stüssy, a Californian surfing brand created by Shaun Stussy. By implementing an artistic DIY attitude to his designs, this allowed several subcultures from surf, skate and hip-hop communities to relate to his brand. Streetwear was seen as a form of self-expression, a way for the youth to differentiate themselves and share their beliefs and values. Stussy was an outlet for those

individuals seeking to express their identities and served as a large influence for many successful streetwear brands to follow, like Supreme (Lobo de Macedo, 2015).

2.2 Streetwear Brands

Supreme is arguably the most famous streetwear brand of all time and has been exemplary for the whole industry. The brand's success has been largely attributed to its limited supply drop tactics, collaborations with popular culture and its cult-like consumers (Moran, 2017). Other brands such as Off-White and Bape also gathered a mass following. Off-White, guided by the creative direction of Virgil Abloh, has transcended the brand into the mainstream sphere due to this innovative designs. His ability to effortlessly combine intricate elements of high fashion into streetwear was highly respected in the industry. His collaboration with Nike, marked an iconic collection of ten shoes ingrained with his Off-White signature style (Hendricks, 2023). Tomoaki Nagoa, more famously known as “Nigo” is the original mastermind behind the brand A Bathing Ape (abbreviated as “Bape”). He is a fashion designer, DJ and musician who managed to take his camouflaged themed clothing to the forefront of streetwear. Nigo’s cultural credentials matched with his strong ties to influential figures such as Pharrell and Hiroshi Fujiwara, aided his brand in gaining widespread acceptance (Paz, 2022).

2.3 Related Work

"Streetwear: The New Exclusivity" (2019) explored the product preferences and influence factors using a quantitative method by conducting a large surveys with streetwear consumers. The report shows insights on the streetwear consumer demographics, influences, brands and sources of inspiration. The top three most important factors for consumer were as follows: Product Quality (81.4%), Brand Legacy (62.9%) and Creative Director (48.5%). The study also revealed the top three credible figures as Musicians (64.8%), Industry Insiders (51.8%) and Contemporary Artist (44.5%).

Fashion choices can be seen as ways of displaying and emphasising a sense of identity, which can be personal or connecting to a group (Summa, 2021). Thus, subscribers of streetwear wear particular garments to communicate their identity in hopes of conforming to their desired social group. As outlined by the next two studies, constructs of group identity were discovered to hold significant relevance. Research conducted on a streetwear community in Jakarta called the “Hypevibe Community” has concluded that the dress style of streetwear consumers serves a purpose in identifying themselves as a part of the subculture that is the Hypevibe community (Nugraha, 2019).

A study carried out about social identity and brand preference among male self-proclaimed ‘sneakerheads’ have shown comparable results. “Findings regarding the unique nature of sneakerheads indicate a clear sense of group identity as it relates to motivations, behaviors and brand identity” (Matthews et al. 2021). Many respondents in this study have shared their

lack of engagement in the sneakerhead culture in their adolescence as a driver for their involvement today. Findings show that the possession of certain sneakers, allows them to express their identities in a visible outward way. The possession of such material goods allows the wearer to have his/her place solidified in the sneaker community while accomplishing their nostalgic desires. The succession and influence that Michael Jordan had in his professional career are deeply rooted in the brand identity of Air Jordan. For example, the famous “Flu Game” performance where Micheal Jordan played while suffering from the flu, have tremendously popularized the Air Jordan 12 “Bred” which is the shoe he wore that game. The “Flu Game” as a result a helped to establish a personal affinity with that shoe, making it one of the most collectable Jordan models. If a consumer has a personal association with the personality of the brand, it will result in brand identification (Kuenzel, S., & Halliday, 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

The following sections will provide an overview of the proposed framework which consists aspects of branding practices and theories of consumer psychology as documented in figure 1. This framework is designed to shed light on the intricate dynamics of brand-consumer relations, highlighting the internal business efforts like brand image, brand personality and use of influential figures along with psychological components shaping identity such as self concept and social identity. The assembly of the concepts are based on my hypothesised view of the most influential factors shaping brand preferences. Self congruity can be interpreted as the ideal state as it defines the alignment of the individual with the product, which is the most desirable outcome for organisations. If self congruity is achieved, it suggests the brand’s attributes seamlessly harmonize with the individual’s identity constructs.

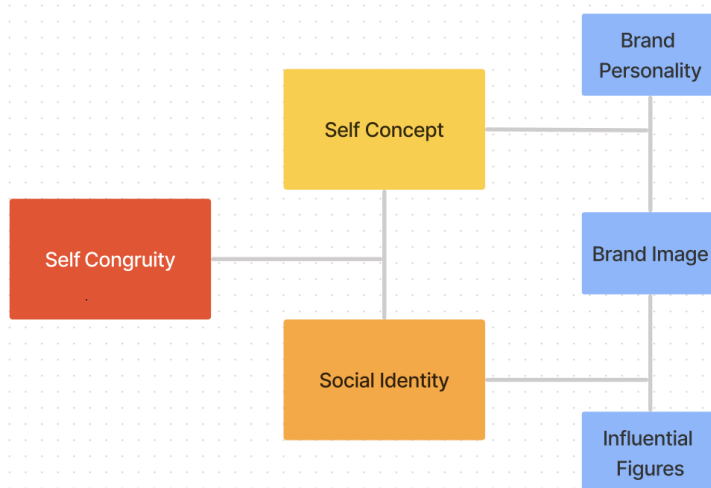


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Self-Congruity

Self-congruity pertains to the alignment between the attributes of a product that expresses its value (product-user image) and how the audience perceives their own self-concept (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Self-congruity occurs when the consumer perceives a correspondence or alignment between the symbolic image of a product and their own self-image. In other words, there is a sense of harmony or fit between the consumer's identity and the image projected by the product, leading to consumer and product congruity (Sirgy et al. 1991). Self-congruity theory suggests that consumers tend to purchase products or brands that align with their self-concept, as this connection enhances their sense of self-expression and fulfilment (Klipfel et al, 2014). Self-congruity is a crucial factor for marketers to grasp, as it enables them to understand how the consumer's self-concept can impact their purchase decisions. Marketers can try to ensure congruity through various promotional opportunities, in an effort to foster a stronger connection with their target audience. Since its initial introduction, the self-congruity theory encountered hurdles in achieving broad recognition and researchers struggled to establish its importance over an extended duration (Klipfel et al, 2014). Over time, the theory has gained widespread acceptance and in 2012 Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. performed a meta-analysis on self-congruity theory, revealing compelling evidence of a strong self-congruity effect. The findings strongly support the notion of the self-congruity construct serving as a valid and sturdy basis for current and emerging research on consumer identity and symbolic consumption (Klipfel et al, 2014). Based on Sirgy's work authors Klipfel et al. (2014) summarized the importance of self-concept in the self-congruity theory as follows:

1. "Self-concept holds intrinsic value to individuals guiding their actions towards safeguarding and enhancing their self-identity."
2. "The utilization and display of goods communicate symbolic meaning to both the individual and others."
3. "Consumer behaviour is driven by the desire to reinforce self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols."

Similar to how self-concept is a multidimensional model as earlier described by Carl Rogers, Sirgy (1985) suggests self-congruity has similar counterparts. The most relevant counterparts to this study are *actual-congruity*, *ideal congruity*, *social congruity* and *ideal social congruity*. Actual congruity pertains to the alignment between the product (user) image and the consumer's actual self-image, whereas ideal congruity is the match between the product image and the consumer's ideal self-image. Social congruity refers to the consistency between the product image and the individual's social identity, while ideal congruity signifies the alignment with the individual's desired social image. (M. Sirgy et al, 1991). Self-image/product-image congruity pertains to whether one's actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, or ideal social self-image matches or mismatches with the personality image projected by a particular product (Abdallat, 2012).

The study titled "Using Self-Congruity and Ideal Congruity to Predict Purchase Motivation" by Sirgy (1985) delved into the relationship between self-congruity, ideal congruity and purchase motivation. The results of this study showed support for this relationship by using the theories of self-esteem and self-consistency to explain this relationship. The self-esteem motive is a reference to an individual's need to act in ways contributory to achieving goals which maintain and/or increase positive self-regard. While the self-consistency motive refers to an individual's need to act in ways that are coherent and consistent with their own self-perception. Sirgy proposed various congruity conditions which are as follows:

High Self Congruity/High Ideal Congruity:

Consumers are driven to favour products that resonate with their self-image and align with their ideal personality attributes. This in turn, satisfies their inherent needs for self-esteem and self-consistency. For instance, when a product's image reflects traits such as social outgoingness and dominance and these characteristics are valued highly by the individual (high ideal congruity). Choosing to purchase that product allows them to uphold an ideal self-image while reinforcing the consistency of their self-perception. This alignment significantly boosts the consumer's motivation to make the decision to buy the product.

High Self Congruity/Low Ideal Congruity:

If consumers would encounter a conflict related to the product because of its utilization it might hinder their self-esteem need while simultaneously fulfilling their self-consistency need. An illustration of this scenario would be as follows "These clothes present an image of a person who is conservative" (product image) coupled with "I look conservative" (high self-congruity) and "I don't like being conservative" (low ideal congruity). In this context, individuals might be disinclined to maintain a state perceived negatively due to the potential decrease in self-esteem. However, acting in harmony with their conservative actual self-image to satisfy self-consistency need. As a result, this motivational state can trigger inner conflict for the individual.

Low Self Congruity/High Ideal Congruity:

In this instance, the scenario is reversed, however, the motivational outcome remains the same. Here, consumers will also grapple with a conflict between their self-esteem and self-consistency motives. Consuming the product would fulfil the individual's self-esteem requirement, while also undermining their self-consistency need. An example of such a situation would involve a sports car associated with an image of "social outgoingness and sexiness" (product image). This could align with the consumer's ideal self-image ("I like to be socially outgoing and sexy"), thus, creating high ideal congruity. However, the individual might not inherently possess this self-image ("I am neither socially outgoing nor sexy"), leading to low self-congruity. Consequently, purchasing this sports car would enable the consumer to achieve their desired ideal self-image of being socially outgoing and sexy (addressing the self-esteem motive). As a result, this could also challenge the self-image of not embodying social outgoingness and sexiness (conflicting with the self-consistency

motive). This decision creates a motivational state marked by the conflict between approach and avoidance.

Low Self-Congruity/Low Ideal Congruity:

This condition would optimally motivate the consumer to avoid the product. If the individual did consume the product, it would in turn frustrate his or her self-esteem and self-consistency motives. Illustratively, consider a scenario in which a consumer encounters a dress projecting a conservative appearance (product image). However, if her self-perception does not align with conservatism (low self-congruity), and this image doesn't resonate with her desired self (low ideal congruity). In this instance, she would not to buy the dress.

Sirgy (1982) determined the collective findings to strongly corroborate the conjecture that both ideal congruity and self-congruity play a substantial role in shaping purchase motivation with their influences exhibiting an additive effect. For individuals with low self-esteem, ideal congruity might outweigh self-congruity. Conversely, high self-esteem individuals could be equally affected by both congruities. This stems from the idea that low self-esteem individuals may lean towards products matching their ideal self-image, irrespective of their actual self-image. Regarding self-consistency, high self-consistency individuals may be more inclined to embrace products aligning with their actual self-image, prioritizing self-congruity to reduce the dissonance between behaviour and self-perception. For streetwear, the notion of self congruity can be considered as the most desirable factor to achieve for consumers. It can suggest feelings of resonance with the overall identity of the brand and the identity of the consumer.

3.2 Self-Concept

The notion of self-concept remains a topic of continual scholarly debate with multiple definitions being proposed. Despite the varying perspectives on its precise meaning, there is a general consensus that self-concept pertains to how an individual perceives, evaluates and thinks about themselves. Baumeister (1999) depicts self-concept as “the individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is”. Mcleod (2023) based on the work of Carl Rogers, proposes the self-concept to have 3 various components, which are as follows:

- **Ideal-Self:** This is the person you want to be. This person has the attributes or qualities you desire or are working towards. It’s who you envision yourself to be if you were exactly as you wanted.
- **Self-Image:** Refers to how you see yourself at this moment in time. Attributes like physical characteristics, personality traits and social roles all play a role in your self-image.
- **Self-Esteem:** This is how much you like, accept and value yourself all contribute to your self-concept. Self-esteem can be affected by a number of factors, including how others see you and how you think you compare to others and your role in society.

Clothing, beyond its functional aspect, exerts a profound influence on shaping our self-concept. The way individuals perceive and interpret clothing can lead to alterations in their self-concept, particularly when clothing aligns with their self-image or ideal self (Apparel Designing and Construction, 2012). Brands play a crucial role in reinforcing identity, allowing consumers to project their self or ideal image (Thakur & Kaur, 2014). For instance, individuals seeking sophistication and elegance may express these qualities through clothing from brands like Prada and Gucci, which are associated with such traits. Self-concept plays a vital role in consumer-brand relationships and the alignment between an individual's self-concept and their clothing choices becomes a significant factor in their preferences (Thakur & Kaur, 2014). Our self-concept reflects the things we as individuals identify with, meaning if a person chooses to not wear a particular item of clothing, it is likely due to the misalignment of the clothing with the individual's self-concept. Authors J. Vingilyte et al. (2022) explored the relationship between personal clothing style and self-concept from an individual and subjective standpoint. The findings unveiled that personal clothing style embodies the true self, represents the ideal self and expresses the creative self. Moreover, participants perceived personal clothing as a means to actualize desired self-conceptions and signal their creativity. This study provides valuable insights into the role of clothing in shaping identity and consequently, the self-concept.

In 2020, Netflix released the now-famous documentary, "The Last Dance", detailing the riveting career of the great Michael Jordan. The critically acclaimed docuseries received tremendous success and skyrocketed anything to do with the Air Jordan brand. After the first two episodes aired, the famous reselling platform, StockX, recorded a traffic increase of 63%, resulting in a sales increase of 90% (Cantarini, 2020). The nostalgic effect of the documentary reintroduced the Air Jordan brand to the mainstream audience once again since he retired. For many viewers of the docuseries, it was their first time hearing about the extent of Micheal Jordan's athletic dominance and winning mentality, which made it easy for them to develop an affinity with the Jordan brand. The rise in popularity of Jordan sneakers was extremely apparent on the streets and online. In early 2021, StockX published their Snapshot Report corresponding to the year 2020, revealing that the Jordan brand was the top brand of their site (StockX, 2021).

With this incredible resurgence of Air Jordans, one model in particular received a lot of criticism from the sneakerhead community which was the Air Jordan 1 mid. To the untrained eye, the disparities between the Mid and High models may seem minimal or even indistinguishable. The main differences besides the colourways, were a lower-cut silhouette and a different tongue design. Although these design choices didn't stray too far from the original design, it was enough to cause controversy among the jump man purists. The initial release of the Jordan 1 Mid occurred in 2001, a period when Micheal Jordan had already secured his championships and only 2 years prior to this permanent retirement. For the sneakerheads, the mid model lacked nostalgia and was made with poorer materials which

together hindered any sense of exclusivity (Thomas, 2021). Mids were also the easiest Jordans to attain without the hurdles of the other more hyped models. With the recent popularity of the documentary and the rise of the mids, it seemed like the Jordan 1 mids was the shoe of the casual Jordan fan, who more than likely purchased them after seeing “The Last Dance”. In fact, the shoe was so popular, that it was the most purchased shoe silhouette in 2020 (StockX, 2021).

Sneakerheads are a passionate community with a profound love for sneakers and their history. Some enthusiasts find it challenging to connect with the Jordan 1 Mid due to the aforementioned reasons. These factors (lack of history, low exclusivity & poor materials) make it difficult for sneaker enthusiasts to develop a genuine affinity for the Mids. Since clothing frequently mirrors an individual’s identity, the sneakers chosen by enthusiasts tend to carry large importance as they symbolize their passion for sneakers. Unfortunately, the Jordan 1 Mid fails to evoke the intense enthusiasm, failing to establish congruence between the individual’s self-concept and the shoe. In essence, when a garment conflicts with an individual’s self-concept, there is a strong likelihood of complete rejection. The absence of congruence between the clothing piece and the person’s sense of identity renders it highly unlikely for them to fully embrace it. Self-congruity theory postulates that clothing styles correspond to the person’s self-concept (Sirgy, 1982), so if Jordan 1 Mids are not representative of the individual’s self concept, this means the shoe doesn’t capture the personal identity of the individual.

3.3 Social Identity

According to Deaux (1993), social identity refers to the distinguishable attributes of an individual that are based on the group membership he or she takes part in. Examples of such groups would be based on factors like (but not limited to): Ethnicity and Religion (Jewish, American), Political Affiliation (Feminist, Republican), Occupation (Doctors, Artist) etc. The Social Identity Theory introduces the idea of the ingroup (social group we take part in) and the outgroup (social groups we are not part of). There is a strong tendency for the ingroup members to have favourable views of their ingroup, which can be seen as a form of bias or favouritism. This provides a significant source of self-esteem and pride for ingroup members. (Worley, 2021). Social Identity gives us as individuals a sense of belongingness, that we are welcomed by like-minded people. The proposed notion of the Social Identity noted by Worley (2021), groups social identity into 3 mental processes: *Social Categorization, Social Identification and Social Comparison*.

Social Categorization: Supports the natural tendency we have as humans tend to group things together. Whether we are talking about objects like chairs, tables, or sofas we tend to lump them together into a category like furniture. In terms of categorizing social groups, examples would include doctors, lawyers, trade unionists and more modern examples like gamers, foodies and influencers etc. In the context of streetwear, the aforementioned example of sneakerheads disliking Jordan 1 mids can be interpreted as they don't want to be associated as a new fan of Jordan's.

Social Identification: After people are put into groups, they start thinking of themselves as being members of these groups. They self-evaluate their group position and adopt salient aspects of the group's normative behaviour. For streetwear consumers, this could be going to events in line with the culture of streetwear, like rap music concerts or going to sneaker market events. Wearing certain brands in line with the social groups's aesthetic and discussing streetwear all demonstrate the group's normative behaviour.

Social Comparison: Involves comparing the in-groups with relevant outgroups. The aim of the comparison is to either seek positive aspects of the in-group and or seek negative actions of the out-group with the purpose of enhancing one's self-image. Participation in such activity can positively maintain the social identity of the individual, as its largely based on favourable intergroup comparison. Examples of an ingroup vs an outgroup would be Catholics vs Protestants, Liverpool fans vs Manchester fans etc. In the context of streetwear, seeking negative actions of the out-group can be seen with long time streetwear consumers viewing newer entrants negatively. Typically, this is because of the market saturation that comes with the so called "mainstream consumers" entering the marketplace resulting in resale prices rising and in some cases diminishing the perception of the brand. An example of this, can be seen in the aforementioned Jordan 1 Mid example, where some long time sneaker heads felt the need to share their distaste with the mids. Doing so suggests behaviour representative of the social categorization in an effort to further enhance the social identity of the individual.

3.4 Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to a collection of human attributes associated with a particular brand (Aaker, 1997). To establish a brand personality, companies employ various strategies such as brand anthropomorphism, personification and the creation of user imagery to make a distinct and lasting brand personality (Aaker, 1997). User imagery according to Aaker (1997) is the image transferred to a brand of individuals considered to be as the typical users of the brand. For example, brands such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton often use famous actors to project user imagery that is full of trendy and important individuals that fit with their luxurious brand personalities. Brands can exercise such human traits through the use of social media presence and various marketing strategies to promote their personality. A crucial element in developing a brand personality is to elicit an emotional response in a targeted consumer segment by inciting positive actions towards the brand (E. Tarver, 2021).

The notion of brand personality bears a striking resemblance to the literary device known as personification, commonly employed in creative writing. Personification involves attributing human qualities or characteristics to non-human entities, aiming to intensify the audience's emotional connection with the subject matter. Its purpose is to evoke empathy, provide understanding and immerse the reader in vivid imagery. Marketers often use this technique to humanize the brand towards their audience, fostering a more immersive and engaging communication to the consumer. These techniques fall under the umbrella of brand anthropomorphism, which is the perception of a brand as an entity with analogical human-like features such as mental and emotional states that are perceived to be distinctively human (Golossenko et al, 2020). Prior research supported cases of consumers attaching like human characteristics to their products (Aggarwal et al, 2007). Marketers can try to elicit such characteristics in line with their brand personality. Brand anthropomorphism on social media enhances consumer-brand relationships (Kim et al, 2020).

Aaker (1997) has deconstructed brand personality into five universal leading characteristics which are excitement, competence, sincerity, sophistication, and ruggedness. These dimensions play a crucial role in solidifying the brand's positioning and shaping its perception among consumers. To illustrate this point, let's consider the brand Carhartt, since 1889 they have been providing durable clothing for the hard-working class. Given Carhartt's rich brand history and reputation, the most appropriate personality that aligns with its identity is ruggedness. This association becomes evident when examining Carhartt's online "About" section, where statements such as "Born from the railroad", "Build for any rugged task" and "Build to last" are proudly exemplify the brand's ruggedness personality. This personality type is associated with robust and resilient products that are dependable and specifically designed for demanding labour. While some of these personality types may appear to describe the product attributes, it's important to distinguish the difference. Product attributes primarily serve a utilitarian purpose for consumers, whereas brand personality can serve symbolic or self-expressive functions (Keller, 1993)

Several studies examining the brand personality concept have shown promising results, particularly on individuals who are considered to be entity theorists. These individuals, generally hold a view that their personality consists of fixed dispositions that cannot be changed or improved (Preißinger et al. 2018). A study conducted by the authors Park & Roedder (2010) showcased encouraging outcomes among entity theorists. In the first experiment, entity theorists perceived themselves to be better looking, more feminine and more glamorous after using a Victoria's Secret shopping bag. The second experiment also showed similar results, where entity theorists felt more intelligent, more leader-like and more hardworking after using an MIT pen. The authors of this study concluded that incremental theorists were unaffected, while the entity theorists used the brands with appealing personalities as a means to signal their positive qualities, thereby enhancing their self-concept in line with the brand's personality.

Streetwear brands can project their brand personality in several ways, whether it be through their design elements, collaborations, social media presence etc. A recent collaboration between the brands Carhartt and Awake New York was a noteworthy expression of their brand personalities. Carhartt's rugged brand personality is a perfect match to collaborate with Awake New York which embodies a sincere personality type. The match between rugged and sincere personality types creates a sense of authenticity and commitment to the beliefs and values of the brand. One aspect of this collaboration that supports this notion, is the choice for Awake to use rapper Rakim as one of the models. Rakim is a legendary rapper from New York, who has been a prominent figure in Hip Hop since 1987 since his album with Eric B. was released, titled "Paid in Full". His influence on the overall culture of Hip Hop, in both music and fashion, was cited by many successful artists of today such as Nas, Jay-Z, Eminem and Kanye West. Awake could have chosen an artist with more relevance to the current state of Hip Hop, however, their choice supports their sincere personality and staying true to their core values.

3.5 Brand Image

Brand image refers to the overall perception of a brand and its products by customers, stakeholders and other market players. It represents the brand's portrayal, which is established through various efforts such as advertising, packaging, product quality and customer interactions etc (Aaker, 1991). Philip Kotler, who is widely recognized as the pioneer of modern marketing, defines brand image as the "set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person holds about a brand". While the primary impressions of brand image are typically being formed through the brand's internal efforts, external factors such as media coverage, competition landscape and cultural associations can significantly influence brand perception (Kotler et al., 2002) External factors that are rooted in controversy can have a significant impact on the consumer's perception of the brand. In such instances, the brand's board of directors typically issues a statement addressing the situation, often resulting in the termination of the relationship with the involved individual or party. The most recent example of brand image controversy took place with Adidas parting ways with Kanye West, after his racist anti-semitic comments. If Adidas had not disassociated themselves from the rapper, it could have resulted in their consumers believing that Adidas tolerates racist remarks. Scandals of such nature tend to be detrimental to creating a positive brand image, especially when it associates the brand with hate speech.

A positive brand image is a crucial component in branding and marketing, particularly within the realm of brand differentiation and building a strong emotional connection with targeted consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Creating a positive brand image begins with the company creating a strong brand identity first. Brand Identity are the visible elements of a brand like colour, design and logo that identify and distinguish the brand in the minds of the consumers (E. Tarver, 2020). A well-defined brand identity enables brands to communicate their unique qualities and stand apart from the competition. To put it in simple terms, brand image refers to how consumers perceive a brand, while brand identity is how the brand visually and

strategically presents itself to consumers. Both concepts are essential parts of what makes a strong brand presence. An organization can enhance their brand loyalty by ensuring there's congruence between brand identity and brand image. Congruence between brand identity and brand image refers to the visual and messaging elements that are communicated effectively to its audience, to a point when the consumer understands and appreciates the brand signalling (S. Nandan, 2005). Supreme's highly distinctive and recognizable brand identity results in one of the most iconic brand images within the streetwear industry. Their use of the simplistic yet powerful box logo designs along with their unique product drop model, has cemented the brand as a cool, edgy, and exclusive streetwear brand. Supreme is known for its limited product drops, where the products for that specific collection will only be released once. Limited-time products have a planned phase-out schedule at the time of launch, this technique limits product availability and creates a perceived sense of scarcity among consumers (M. Ishihara, et al, 2021).

A limited-time product can be achieved by restricting supply quantity or by explicitly announcing the limited quantity during the product launch. Supreme's effective implementation of this drop model has become standard practice for many streetwear brands such as Palace, Anti-Social Social Club and many more. This model creates a sense of urgency to make a purchase while giving the product more exclusive value for the lucky consumers who are able to make a purchase. Traditionally speaking, increasing sales involves reducing barriers that hinder customers from buying a product. In the case of Supreme, the drop model creates a highly engaged customer base, who are highly receptive to the brand's signalling. For instance, consumers aspiring to purchase Supreme products must acquire a certain level of brand knowledge, such as being aware of the time and location of product drops before they can make a purchase. An organization can enhance their brand loyalty by ensuring there's congruence between brand identity and brand image (S. Nandan, 2004).

3.6 Influential Figures

According to the Oxford Dictionary, if an individual is considered to have influence, it means they have an effect on the way someone behaves or thinks. Its also described as a person whose actions and opinions strongly influence the course of events ("Influential person," Vocabulary, n.d.). That influence typically derives from having credibility that is gained from a certain level of knowledge and experience. In the context of fashion, an influential figure is someone who is highly respected within the culture of fashion or neighbouring cultures like Music, Film, Sports etc. Their respect may stem from their personal love of fashion, impact in their respective fields or by having expertise in fashion itself. Influential figure's of such nature are major industry stakeholders as they typically promote new brands and often introduce new trends to the forefront of fashion. Examples of such figures are as follows:

-Ian Connor, who is Kanye West's former fashion consultant, owner and creator of the streetwear brand "Revenge" and a celebrity stylist of the likes of Wiz Khalifa & Kylie Jenner.

-Travis Scott, rap superstar, streetwear fashion icon and a frequent Air Jordan collaborator.

-Virgil Abloh, the former creative director of Louis Vuitton, DJ, and of course the mastermind behind the extremely popular brand, OFF WHITE (formerly known as PYREX).

-Pharrell Williams, musical legend, 11-time Grammy award winner, creative director of Louis Vuitton and co-founder of Billionaire Boys Club and Ice Cream Clothing.

Incorporating influential figures in streetwear follows a comparable approach to the conventional celebrity endorsement seen in various industries. Essentially, this practice involves organisations strategically selecting suitable public figures who align with and ideally enhance the company's brand image. In today's competitive market, companies and brands use celebrity endorsements to connect with potential customers and enhance market awareness (Lim, 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated that utilizing celebrities in advertisements yields significant benefits, primarily in terms of creating exposure and capturing customer attention (S. Emmadi, 2017). Celebrity endorsements increase the level of attention paid to an advertisement. By leveraging the familiar faces of public figures, streetwear brands effectively captivate their audience, thus holding their attention (S. Emmadi, 2017).

Celebrities may be credible sources if they have expertise in a particular area, such as an athlete endorsing shoes (Ratnesh & Chiaken, 1991). The use of celebrity endorsers can also act as "a seal of approval" when the celebrity figure has expertise in the field. In 1991, Gatorade, which makes isotonic sports drinks, produced a widely acclaimed commercial featuring Michael Jordan (D. Rovell, 2016). Initially, Gatorade considered using music from Disney's "The Jungle Book," but the cost was too high, which as a result forced them to be more creative. Instead, they devised the "Be Like Mike" lyrics and collaborated with jingle specialists to create the iconic global commercial song. The ad showcased Michael Jordan's career highlights in contrast with clips of him playing basketball with young kids. This campaign became an indelible part of Gatorade's history and brand, aligning the corporate brand image of Gatorade with Michael Jordan's highly influential persona. The advertisement exuded motivation and positivity, encouraging viewers to pursue success through hard work, akin to Jordan's achievements.

One distinct commonality among influential figures in streetwear when compared to celebrity endorsements is the sense of authenticity their involvement brings to the brand. Whenever we look at most celebrity endorsements, it's quite apparent to the audience that the nature of the relationship between the celebrity and the brand is transactional. For example, Jennifer Aniston got an endorsement deal with Emirate Airlines, for 5 million dollars in 2015, including TV campaigns and adverts (Ahmedi, 2019). Given the fact Jennifer Aniston is a famous actress and doesn't seem to have prior involvement with the aviation industry, this collaboration can be interpreted as a business deal rather than a genuine authentic

relationship. Of course, for the most part, such details of the partnerships are not revealed to the public meaning we can only assume the nature of the relationship.

On the contrary, the collaboration between Supreme and musician Tyler, The Creator is an authentic example where the influential figure's natural alignment with the brand created a perception of a non-transactional relationship. Tyler's genuine support and frequent public appearances in Supreme clothing enhanced the brand's reputation and appeal without the use of an conventional celebrity endorsement deal. During the rise of Odd Future (Tyler's Music Collective Group) as internet sensations, social media and sharing platforms became powerful promotional tools. In 2011, they acted as early internet influencers and significantly boosted Supreme's market presence. Odd Future's influence extended to artists like Jaden Smith, who discovered Supreme through Tyler, The Creator. Dazed Magazine also credited Tyler as the catalyst for Supreme's dedicated following. While not the sole factor, Odd Future played a crucial role in Supreme's growth and revitalization. Odd Future's frequent visits to the Supreme store fostered an organic relationship between the two, shaping their intersection into a natural partnership. (N. Matthies, 2020). Relationships of such nature, usually tend to be perceived more positively and authentic.

To illustrate just how influential such figures can be, let's focus on the London-based rapper, Central Cee. During the 2022 British fashion awards, Central Cee attended the ceremony in an outfit that became instantly viral. Most attendees to such events take this opportunity to dress up in their elegant formal wear, however, Central Cee had other plans in mind. He came in wearing black Chanel trainers, Nike Tech Fleece Joggers, his famous Kalenji hat and the star of the show, a 60-euro Forclaz hiking jacket from the sporting goods store, Decathlon. His unconventional appearance for an event like this led the event security to mistake him for a fan, resulting in an initial entry refusal (Lockcharms, 2022).

One day after Central Cee's red carpet appearance, the Forclaz jacket sold out in all sizes within a day. Rappers selling out clothing pieces they wear is no new concept but what's unique about this example is the garment itself. Decathlon isn't exactly known as a fashion house when it comes to clothing, they offer functional active wear suitable for sports and outdoor activities, yet despite this, fans of Central Cee bought everything they could, boosting the sales of Decathlon. This highlights the significant influence that individuals like Central Cee can exert, effectively conferring a seal of approval on the product leading to a large surge in sales. Still to this day, the jacket is being resold for almost twice the retail value with the titles like "Forclaz Decathlon Central Cee Jacket – SOLD OUT ONLINE" on ebay.

4. Methodology & Research Design

Given the unspoken nature of streetwear fashion, an exploratory approach was conducted to uncover additional insights which may not be available in past quantitative research. The previously mentioned theoretical framework was used as a guide to facilitate the topics and flow of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews provide a valuable opportunity for gaining detailed insights into the participant's experiences and motivation in the world of streetwear. With over four hours of audio, participants shared rich and detailed data that extends beyond quantitative statistics. This data collection method offered nuanced insights into emotional and cultural connections consumers have with clothing, while providing contextual information to further explain their decisions. This method allowed the interviewees to share their personal stories, their journey with streetwear and how their sense of identity is connected with their clothing choices. Each framework concept consisted of 2-3 questions aiming to uncover the relevancy of each framework concept. A grounded theory approach was used to discover any constructs or theories to comprehend the experiences of the participants in order to gain a better understanding of the various brand preferences highlighted throughout.

The formation of interview questions were closely related to each concept within the theoretical framework. For example, sections 1 and 2 consist of brand image and brand personality, asking questions such as *"What words do you associate with these brands?"* giving an insight on what perceptions they have formed of renowned streetwear brands. For brand personality, questions like *"How would you describe this brand if it were a person?"* allowed participants to share their positive and negative views, uncovering topics such as brand decline and brand controversy etc. Answers of the interviews were used as the primary data collection points, identifying recurring themes and personal preferences outlined by the respondents. If relevant, certain answers were then compared to the theories within the framework and used in comparison. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio recorded with granted permission of each participant. Five participants were selected with ages ranging from 21 to 30 years old. The selection of each person was mainly based on their knowledge and or involvement with streetwear and being an enthusiast for a minimum of 5 years. All relevant participant information are situated in figure 2.

Participant	Age	Occupation & Streetwear Involvement (Duration)
Andrew	30	Reseller & Long time enthusiast (+10 years)
Quinten	25	DJ & Stylist (+5 years)
Teun	22	Brand Owner & Brand representative (+5 years)
Jaya	21	Personal Shopper & Past retail employee of a high end streetwear store (+5 years)
Brand	22	Retail assistant of a high end streetwear store & Streetwear collector (+5 years)

Figure 2. Participant overview

I utilized a thematic analysis approach to analyze the gathered data. Due to intensive amount of data collected of more than 4 hours of conversation, organizing the information into thematic segments was appropriate. Interviews were first transcribed into word documents and then read through looking for patters in meaning of the data. Due to my own streetwear knowledge, I was able to make send of the data and identify relevant themes.

5. Results

Qualitative analysis revealed five topical areas identified from the interviews: (1) *Self Identity & Confidence* (2) *Social Networks & Cultural Events* (3) *Influential Figures* (4) *Exclusivity & Target Audience* and (5) *Brand Narrative Knowledge & Personal Criteria*. The results suggests correspondence to the framework as follows:(1) Implies the importance of identity constructs of the self concept. (2) Describes the close-knit streetwear community in line with concepts of social identity. (3) Frequent mentions of individuals such as Virgil Abloh marks the importance of influential figures. (4) Highlights the significance of aligning the brand image and personality with the product user image (5) Demonstrates the high brand knowledge of streetwear consumers and their personal brand and style preferences.

5.1 Self-Identity & Confidence:

The participants emphasized that their clothing choices are closely linked to their self-concept and confidence levels. The participants shared that certain brands and fresh clothing styles uplifted their confidence and boosting their self-esteem. The participants talked about their personal style in the context of being on a journey to find what works for them. Andrew explains how the brand Rick Owens gives him the most confidence and what he personally relates with the brand.

A: “Definitely Rich Owens gives me the most confidence for sure...When Rick Owens did the collaboration with Adidas in 2014, that’s when I really found confidence in my style, like I found my superhero cape. ”

His response to the collaboration between Rick Owens and Adidas boosting his confidence, making him feel like he had found his "superhero cape" suggests a strong alignment between his self-concept and the brand's attributes. Andrew's self-concept (confidence, style) aligns well with the collaboration's attributes. Examples of such alignment could satisfy the consumer's need for self-esteem (feeling confident and stylish) and self-consistency motives (matching their self-concept with their choices). An example of such a positive impact on self-perception corresponds closely to the concept outlined by Sirgy (1985) of High Self Congruity/High Ideal Congruity.

A: "Rick Owens's designs are so incredible and so thoughtful, but they also suit me so well. You know they're really suited to my body type, they're loose, they're flowy, they are layered and you know, 'Prince of Darkness', with the black on black but also the footwear. He [Rick Owens] is a high-end designer but all of his footwear derives from sneaker inspiration. You know the Ramon being like the Converse, and then the Geo basket being like a Puma, and the low-top minimal sneaker being like an Adidas Stan Smith. It was so relatable and so close to what I was already doing, but it was just enough of a transition to move me into a more mature style and also made me more confident in myself, just because it was something that I felt like it belonged to me."

Andrew's acknowledgement of Rich Owen's referencing iconic shoe silhouettes like the Converse or Adidas Stan Smith introduces a concept of familiarity while paying respect to a shoe culture he already took part in. Design choices of such nature, if executed correctly, can embed a cultural affinity to the consumer's perception of the brand. Andrew continued to speak about Rick Owens's self-referential style and how he interprets a parallel of his own personal experiences for growth and wisdom. Seeing clothing as a channel for self-discovery and affirmation.

A: "Rick Owens's avant-garde style was really me for a long time because it was self-referential and that really matched some of my beliefs. So first and foremost, I am the centre of my own universe meaning 'If Andrew doesn't love himself enough, then how can he love the people around him?' Right? and so you find a lot of reference to this and Rick Owens especially his work is very self-referential. If you look at a collection from 1998 all the way up until 2008 and then to 2018. There is a thread that ties over 20 years' worth of collections together because he is constantly looking back at his old work, reprising and reintroducing it and I try to do this as often as I can myself. I try to think about the things that I have gone through, the things that I have survived, the things I've persevered through, the things that I've championed, the things that I failed at, and remember what those lessons taught me so that I can perform better the next time so that I can discover a new kernel of wisdom the next experience and build on myself."

Jaya recounted the time Supreme initially sparked his interest in fashion, making him feel distinct by investing thought and effort into his clothing choices.

J: "Initially when I first had an interest in fashion, Supreme was my introduction. It made me feel different because I felt like there was an element of thought into my clothing and I was really putting more effort in than most people that I knew. Then that all changed because it's all very subjective. I feel like any brand can make you feel different but for me personally, I would say Supreme because it introduced me to fashion, it introduced me into that world, so it

made me feel more conscious about what I was wearing and wanting to put more thought into it.”

Similarly to Andrew, Jaya also elaborated on his discovery of a brand called “Entire Studios” and how he felt like he discovered his personal style within the brand.

J: “Another example I have is a brand called Entire Studios which I started wearing last year. It really made me feel like I'd elevated my style because of this jacket and I felt like I hit the nail on the coffin [in terms of finding his personal style]”

5.2 Social Circles & Cultural Events:

For some consumers, fashion serves as a powerful means of connecting with others who share similar interests. Events like music festivals or sneaker events provide opportunities to form social circles and establish shared identities. Brand, Teun and Andrew both shared how a lot of their close friends were met through being at various events within the realm of streetwear.

B: “Yes, I met a lot of people [at cultural events]. I met some of my close friends at Sneakerness”

T: “Yeah, indeed [events] like Rolling Loud [rap music festival], everyone I know there in my social circle of making music and clothing was there”

A: “I can confidently say, that the most important pillars of my support system have been brought into my life by my interest in clothing”

Jaya also added about meeting his friends through fashion and how his social circle might change his perspective on certain brands or clothing items that he may not have liked prior.

J: “Definitely, I'd say fashion has connected me with a lot of people that I'm friends with today. Actually, almost all of them, except for my friends in school...Fashion has made me connect better with people, because it's you know, a mutual interest like things to talk about, discuss and to agree or disagree with”

J: “...And also influence you. If your social circle is into fashion then something you conventionally might have thought to be ugly, you can be influenced on, you can get other perspectives on these subjects just by discussing them”.

The statements by Brand, Teun, and Jaya support the notions outlined by Worley (2021) social identity theory, particularly how individuals define themselves based on group memberships. Social Categorization involves grouping individuals with similar interests, as seen in Brand and Teun forming friendships at events such as Rolling Loud and Sneakerness. Social Identification, in terms of normative behaviour, can be reflected in Jaya's example of changing perspectives of certain items or brands due to his social circle having discussions about fashion. These experiences showcase how fashion can shape social identities and foster new connections with people.

Andrew also highlighted how his clothing serves as a nonverbal way of connecting with other like-minded individuals. What’s interesting about this perspective is how his personal style aims to be able to tell you (the person looking at him) that he might have something in common without speaking a single word. Whether the shirt he's wearing is a collab of two brands that you really enjoy or the footwear he's wearing is by a designer you really like etc.

A: “My number 1 goal with my style is that I wanna tell you that we may have things in common without opening my mouth.....like an unspoken conversation you try to get right”

A: “I wake up, put garments on my body that communicate to somebody else that ‘hey, we might have something in common’”.

5.3 Influential Figures:

Public figures, particularly musicians and celebrities, hold significant sway over the participants' style preferences, inspiring their clothing choices and introducing them to new brands. All participants of the study have listed various creatives to be influential to them in some capacity. Andrew, however, noted his hesitance with the word influence and how he wishes people made an effort to be informed as opposed to being influenced. Therefore his choice of picking Virgil Abloh and Jacob Keller was based on their shared ability to inform people. Below is a table of the influential figures mentioned by the participants. See figure 3 for an overview of the influential figures.

Participants	Influential Figures	Occupation (Respectively)
<i>Andrew</i>	<i>Virgil Abloh & Jacob Keller</i>	<i>Fashion designer & YouTuber/Influencer.</i>
<i>Quinten</i>	<i>Ian Connor, Bloody Osiris & Lancey Foux</i>	<i>Fashion designer, stylist & music artist.</i>
<i>Teun</i>	<i>Ronnie Flex & ADF Samski</i>	<i>Music rtists.</i>
<i>Jaya</i>	<i>Lil Yachty & Hoyeon Jung</i>	<i>Music artist & Actress</i>
<i>Brand</i>	<i>Kanye West & ASAP Rocky</i>	<i>Fashion designer/Music artists & music artist.</i>

Figure 3. Influential Figures overview

Quinten later explained the evolutionary nature of his style and how the influential figures he looks up to have similar choices matching his style at that given timeline

Q: “When I was on a certain wave [clothing style] for example, 2015, me and my friends were heavy on the camo cargo jeans with the Jordan 1s and vintage tee and then we moved onto, to Supreme and Gosha [Rubchinskiy] and then we moved onto RAF [Simmons] and everything and going to Rick [Owens]..... All of those people who I look up to, same with Lancey Foux, if look through his Instagram, he was on the exactly same wave. So without even knowing each other, if you’re in that type of circle or space with that type of energy, you

will flow on the same boat they are on.....I think it's funny that all those people I look up to are always in the same category like they are on the same timing”

Despite the participants citing their figures of influence, it's important to note the significance of their friend groups influencing them also.

A: “Some brands that I’ve been exposed to via Instagram is because of my friends DM’d them to me....I’m more passive in my discovery... one of my best friends, I don’t know how he does it but he goes on these rabbit holes and finds the craziest things on the internet like he put me onto Yung Lean [Swedish rapper] in 2015..... he’s the one who put me onto Rick Owens, Yohji Yamamoto”

Andrew continued to list examples of his friends putting him onto other brands like Corteiz but also his importance of in-person interactions like going to the Concrete boutique store in Amsterdam and talking to the employees who then informed him about new brands he hasn’t heard of before. Brand has said that his social group open can influence his preferences too.

B: “Of course, it's not my first thought like ‘Oh, he's wearing it so I want to wear’ but if you see all your friends buying Supreme at a certain time then I was also buying Supreme. Right now, I kind of found my own style but if they showed me this cool new brand and I also really like it then, yeah, I will be buying it too. So there are quite a lot of brands that we all wear because someone [from the group] started wearing it”

Brand further explained how his introduction to streetwear was influenced by a friend from his high school and how that motivated him to get informed about Supreme.

B: “A friend in high school introduced me to Supreme. He was going on holiday and he asked me to buy an item for him with his credit card. Then I started taking it really seriously like studying the brand and buying every week and yeah”

5.4 Exclusivity & Target Audience:

The concept of exclusivity emerged as a recurrent theme with participants valuing brands offering a blend of exclusivity and authenticity. Some participants find a sense of belonging and personal value in exclusive brands, while others valued exclusivity based on the difficulty of attaining certain pieces. Quinten talked about how he doesn't like it when he sees people wearing the same outfit and how that makes him want to change outfits, implying his personal desire to dress differently from others.

Q: “I’m the sort of guy who hates it when I walk around and see someone with the same stuff on as me, I always wanna go home and change”

Quinten later recounted his first taste of disappointment in trying to purchase Supreme and how his friend showed him the way to do it.

Q: “I was on the site, clicking then the sites crashed..minutes later everything was sold out....later on I had a friend who was deeply in Supreme, he had everything you can imagine and he showed and helped me how to actually get it”

Q: "And that's how I got invested in Supreme because it was like some exclusive club of skater boys or streetwear lovers....the whole aesthetic of Supreme was dope with photo tees of Mike Tyson, Kermit the Frog and everything. It was a whole era of the like skater boys, sneakerheads and Hip hop heads all coming together for one brand"

Over-saturation of certain brands can have a diminishing effect on the exclusivity aspect of certain brands. Andrew explained his reasonings behind oversaturation as potentially making it harder to make a connection with people

A: "Things can become saturated and when that happens, it's not as fun, and if it's overly saturated then the connection between me and another person is potentially harder to make because they might not be as informed about it as I am.....the oversaturation of things does make it less appealing"

The shift in target audience seems to be an undesired consequence of brand saturation for the engaged consumers. This change in the target audience can make it more difficult for consumers to identify with the brand, as it can depict a new product user image that is contrary to the consumer's initial introduction. Highly engaged streetwear consumers are knowledgeable about the clothing they wear, they research the brands with lots of detail which they tend to share with each other. As previously outlined by Jaya and Andrew, they use fashion as means of bonding together and if a certain amount of knowledge is not possessed by the so-called "saturated consumers", that bond will be harder to make. Over saturation of a brand can result in eventual brand decline as outlined by Quinten of a brand called "VLONE". At first it was a highly successful streetwear brand with plenty of cultural ties to the rap group "ASAP", who as a collective were highly respected not only in the music sphere but also in fashion.

Q: "I like brands that do things for fashionable people and not just for kids because for me, whats so detrimental to a brand is when there's too many kids rocking it....then the feeling of it is done"

Q: "Same with VLONE, it was on top.... when ASAP Rocky [rapper] was on top it was hard to get, you had to go to a pop up which wasn't in Europe. [proceeds to list more] they had a collaboration with Playboi Carti [rapper], Off White, you name it. Only cool people rocked it, people who were into sneakers or into streetwear like rocking Palace back in the day and now you see 20 kids, who got their credit card from their moms, rocking a full VLONE fit... It's done! Because if Rocky and Carti wouldn't wear it anymore then the people who admired them also wouldn't rock it [at that point].... and we know, as the main circle, we know when it's done."

Quinten also once again reiterated how people don't care about being educated into brands and how some of them are unaware and uneducated about the brands they wear.

Q: "I have a lot of friends who are believers, they believe in God, they are Muslim and they want the Rick Owens just because everybody has them [but don't realize] he's the most demonic guy [Rick Owens] out there...and that's why brands can die because people don't look further into the brand"

5.5 Brand Narrative Knowledge & Personal Criteria:

Participants evaluated clothing and brands through a personal criteria, analyzing whether a piece aligns with their style and criteria. The narrative, cultural ties and collaborations associated with a brand play a role in influencing the perceptions of brands and clothing items. Similar to the last section, themes about being educated in the brand reoccurred but more in the context of knowing the brand narrative and the creators behind it. Brand shares his thoughts on the importance of brand narrative being an a unique selling point.

B: "A lot of people that start brands nowadays just don't have a story behind it or don't have anything special with it. They just want a T-shirt with a print on it which is something you've seen a thousand times. So whenever someone asked me like 'Would you start a brand?' or 'What do you think of this brand?' etc, with most of them I'm like what's the storytelling behind it?..... A lot of people think that they will be the next big brand but they have no identity"

Quinten added his thoughts on the current state of the brand "Bape" since its legendary creator, Nigo, left the brand in 2014

Q: "The way it's going right now is pretty bad because the whole aesthetic of the Nigo, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy era and crazy Marvel collaborations with the Bapestas [shoe model] is kinda worn off...Not many people get the WHY it's popular and they don't give them the appreciation. They just want a shark hoodie because famous rappers are wearing them"

Q: "Its nothing to do with the Japanese street culture or skateboarding anymore, yet they [Bape] try to force this narrative despite not even having a skateboarding team like other brands like BBC [Billionaire Boys Club] etc....They are just milking the early work of Nigo but in a bad way in my opinion"

Designers such as Nigo and the aforementioned Virgil Abloh serve as prominent figures within the brand narratives of Bape and Off White. Their expertise, experience and achievements in the field of fashion are highly respected, thus attaching such individuals to streetwear companies, enhances the narrative of the brand. Its noteworthy to mention that a brand's decline, as pointed out by Quinten, often coincides with the departure of such figures from the company. This can lead to audience apprehension going forward and in some cases, ending the brand's connection with the consumer. Throughout the interviews, numerous of the participants discussed their values and personal criterias that can influence their brand preferences which are summarized in a table below, see figure 4.

Participants	Personal Style	Brands Likes	Brands Dislikes	Personal Values
Andrew	<i>Avant Garde style, inspired by Rick Owens</i>	<i>Rick Owens, Jordan, Billionaire Boys Club & Chrome hearts</i>	<i>Hugo Boss, Zara & Stella McCartney</i>	<i>Marriage of what looks good and feels good.</i>
Quinten	<i>Very out of the box and worn with confidence</i>	<i>Supreme, ERL, Commes Des Garcon, Nike & ALYX 1017</i>	<i>Black Banana, Luminere, OBEY & Gallery Dept</i>	<i>Unique and rare clothing items.</i>
Jaya	<i>Vintage, high-end, streetwear style and combining all of the above</i>	<i>Acne Studios, Supreme, Adidas, Evisu, Vivienne Westwood & Palace</i>	<i>Sp5der, Juicy, Black Banana, Anti Social Social Club</i>	<i>Versality & seeing innovation in clothing.</i>
Teun	<i>Chill style with a mix between comfort and casual</i>	<i>Nike, Pirri & Bape</i>	<i>Rick Owens & Raf Simmons</i>	<i>Sometimes doesn't see the value in highly expensive clothing but emphasised its based per example.</i>
Brand	<i>Basic style but focused on the specific fitment of clothes (Baggy pants etc)</i>	<i>Yeezy, Acne Studios, A Cold Wall & Entire Studios</i>	<i>Black Banana</i>	<i>Clothing items that are deemed as 'timeless pieces'</i>

Figure 4. Overview of Personal Criteria

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Reflection on Results

Based on the results obtained by the participants, positive brand preferences seem to be closely related to exhibiting personal and social identity and having a strong brand narrative. Section 5.1 outlines the importance of showcasing the individual's self-concept through clothing. For some participants like Andrew, clothing is an important constituent of his personal identity but also acts as a method of unspoken communication to signal his love of fashion. Self-congruence between the individual's identity and the attributes of a brand that results in feelings of confidence seem to formulate the most favorable preferences as mentioned in the interviews. Achieving such feelings of confidence can also relate to the individuals perception of their own self-esteem.

Sections 5.4 and 5.5 are also consistent with notions of brand image and brand personality needing to exhibit an exclusive association with the brand. Such association should also be reflected in the target audience and influential figures to mirror the brand's identity to avoid brand decline. Section 5.3 about influential figures, tackles the importance of attaching a respected figure to enhance the brand narrative. Influential figures can be seen in some cases as the ideal product user, meaning that they should align with the brand in aspects like the brand image and brand personality. Section 5.2 underlines the social significance of the streetwear culture and also how friends in social circles influence new brands and styles to each other. This finding shows significant importance because if brands can entice an individual of a social group, that individual can subsequently introduce the brand to more like minded streetwear consumers in their social circle.

6.3 Theoretical Framework Implications

The theoretical framework proposed in this study can provide a deeper comprehension of the fundamental concepts behind the results. Concepts to do with branding practices like brand image, brand personality and influential figures relate to directly to to result sections 5.3 to 5.5. The outlined concepts seem to be interplaying with each other, meaning for example if a brand employs an influential figure, that in turn can enhance other factors like brand image and brand personality. In terms of building a strong brand narrative, exclusivity and target audience, concepts in the framework outlined theories and instances how certain brands achieved favourable outcomes just like the example of Supreme fostering an organic relationship in congruence with their brand image with a figure like Tyler, the creator.

Results 5.1 and 5.2 strongly relate to the identity constructs outlined in the framework. Self-congruity theory states that clothing styles correspond to the person's self-concept (Sirgy 1982), meaning that streetwear brands need to try to emulate their brand identity with the self concept of their target audience to reach congruence. Ofcourse, resonating with the identity of a consumer segment can be quite difficult task due to the subjective preferences of streetwear consumers. To address this, I recommend focusing on the social identity of the consumer instead. The social identity of individuals in a group social circle can be easier to predict than the self concept of each consumer. By understanding the normative behaviours outlined by Worley (2021) brands can create content and or products that speaks directly to the values and preferences of the target social groups.

6.2 Practical Implications for Streetwear Brands

In this section, the interview findings are positioned into actionable insights for streetwear brands. These insights can offer practical guidance for the following areas: refining brand strategies, fostering community engagement, leveraging influential figures, implementing consumer research and aligning marketing efforts with the brand narrative. Streetwear brands can attempt to implement these insights in an effort to enhance their identity, resonate with their audience and build lasting connections in the dynamic landscape of streetwear fashion.

(1) Self Identity & Confidence: Investing in comprehensive consumer research and crafting detailed customer personas can provide brands with deeper insights into their audience's self concept. This understanding is extremely useful for creating a connection between the consumer's personal identity and the brand, with the goal of attaining harmony leading to self-congruity. Encouraging customer participation in such research through incentives like exclusive pre-sale access can foster a sense of engagement and exclusivity while rewarding them with added value.

(2) Social Circles & Events: Brands should prioritize hosting community events that bring their audience together. By organizing parties, competitions, and other gatherings, brands can enhance the feeling of belonging and contribute to positive brand experiences among consumers. Creating a strong community within their target audience can lead to word to

mouth recommendations. Brand and style suggestions made by friends of the participants indicate to hold significant sway on their preferences, investing in strategies to build a community presence can promote positive brand preferences.

(3)*Influential Figures*: Cultivating authentic relationships with influential figures can greatly impact a brand's image. Identifying individuals whose values and personality align with the brand's can lead to more genuine endorsements. These figures can serve as powerful allies in spreading the brand's message and resonating with the target audience. Creating organic relationships like the aforementioned partnership between Tyler, the Creator and Supreme will further enhance the brand's authenticity. Selecting such figures should be carefully considered due to the unpredictable nature of certain individuals which may cause unwanted controversy.

(4)*Exclusivity & Target Audience*: Drawing inspiration from tactics used by brands like Supreme, scarcity strategies can foster a sense of exclusivity and demand. Brand decline of the aforementioned "VLONE" demonstrated how a shift in audience can be detrimental to some consumers. Maintaining a consistent image that resonates with the target audience should be of large importance, ensuring that the brand's products align with the preferences and aspirations of its consumers.

(5) *Brand Narrative Knowledge & Personal Criteria*: Aligning all brand communication and marketing efforts with the brand's narrative is crucial to maintain a coherent image. Acknowledging the subjectivity of consumer preferences, brands should consider conducting more thorough customer research to gain a deeper insight into their personal criteria. Findings from the conducted research like style preferences could be then embedded into the designs of the clothing. For example, interviewee *Brand* shared his desire for his clothing to fit a particular way, streetwear brands could use such insights to develop an oversized fit design to their jeans to cater to such preferences.

6.3 Study Limitations

This study's findings contribute to building a better understanding of brand preferences among highly engaged streetwear consumers, however, the limited sample size of 5 participants may restrict the broader applicability of the results. Streetwear enthusiasts are a distinct group of consumers with many different values and criterias, meaning that the results of this study remain relevant to mostly streetwear consumers. Additional quantitative data to support the qualitative approach would have provided more comprehensive data to compare interview results while also yielding a larger group of participants. In terms of future studies, Park and Roedder (2010) indicate that individuals with entity theorist tendencies may respond uniquely positive to certain brands. Conducting similar experiments such as the one with Victoria Secret's bag but using streetwear items to measure what feelings are fostered through the streetwear items would be quite insightful.

7. Conclusion

The current study sought to explore the intricate details surrounding brand preferences of highly engaged streetwear consumers. A theoretical framework was applied covering concepts of branding practices, themes of identity, influential figures, and self-congruence. The qualitative approach from the semi-structured interviews suggested that brand preferences go beyond merely clothing choices but revealed an intertwining relationship with self identity, confidence, social circles and personal values. Participants shared how specific examples and styles boosted their confidence and esteem, while also reflecting on a journey to find their personal style. High knowledge regarding brand information such as narrative and origins revealed participants to have high brand engagement and also revealed that a shift in target audience can effect their preferences negatively. The results also signified the importance clothing has in terms of connecting with like-minded individuals. Whether that be at cultural events or taking part in related activities, it was clear that highly engaged consumer's close social circles are based on their interest in fashion.

Marketers can leverage the insights gained in this study in an effort to craft more effective promotional strategies. Understanding the link causing brand alignment and self identity like in the example of Andrew and Rick Owens, can aid in creating congruence between the brand and the individual. Social circles showed to have significant influence on brand preferences and examples of friends introducing each other to certain brands were reflected in the interviews. Positioning marketing strategies towards community events encouraging streetwear consumers to get together for one common reason like hosting scavenger hunts or parties can significantly enhance brand perception and build friendships among consumers. It was apparent that the streetwear industry and highly engaged consumers hold great value to cultural significance, particularly to Hip Hop culture due to influential figures like Kanye West or Travis Scott. Overall, the study outlined personal styles, brand likes & dislikes and personal values among highly consumers which can be used for establishing positive branding outcomes.

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Appendix

Section 1. Brand Image

Brands: Off-White, Bape & Adidas

1. What words do you associate with these brands? (2-3 per brand)
2. What impressions do you get about each brand? (short answer)
3. Have you had any experiences with the above brands?

Section 2. Brand Personality

3 brand social media pages: Balenciaga, Heron Preston, Stussy

1. If you had to describe these brands using human characteristics how would you describe their personality? (How you would describe them as a person)
2. Have you ever worn clothing from a brand that changed the way you feel about yourself? I.e. Gives you more confidence

Section 3. Self-Congruity & Self Concept

What type of clothing style represents you the most?

1. What brands do you identify with the most? Pick 3-5
2. Why did you select these brands?
3. What brands would you not wear?
4. What are the reasons why you wouldn't wear the selected brands?

Section 4. Social Identity

1. Are you a part of any social circle that is based on any of your personal interests?
Fashion, music, sports etc.
2. Have you met someone/became a part of the circle as a result of you partaking in an activity related to your interest? Met at a sneaker convention etc?
3. Is there anything uniquely identifying about your social group? How do they dress, what music do they listen to or the type of events do they attend?
4. Do you think you would be more inclined to purchase from a brand that aligns with the style of your social circle's behaviours and lifestyle?

Section 5. Influential Figures

1. Is there any public figures who you look up to style-wise?
2. Have they ever inspired you in terms of style?
3. Have they ever endorsed or introduced you to a new brand?

4. For the streetwear industry, what type of influential figure is most effective to promote clothing?