

Question 2. Within a given time period, select examples of what could be considered high and low cultural artefacts. Discuss these, taking into consideration the surrounding social, political and historical context.

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Over the years the lines between the high and low culture in fashion have slowly begun to become blurred, with each respective area borrowing ideas and style from the other, it is clear that the definition of high and low culture in fashion has changed and adapted to the ever-changing landscape that is fashion. I will be analysing the changes in fashion through the general period of 2000 - 2018. Throughout this essay, I will attempt to define high and low culture in relation to these changes in the aforementioned years. To do this I will argue; highlighting the apparent blending of different styles and the mix of cultures surrounding fashion today.

Typically the idea of high culture in fashion has been associated with designer brands and high-quality garments often with a matching high price tag. High culture in fashion is synonymous with high-fashion which was originally highly coveted especially for its exclusivity and extortionate price ranges. This often appealed to the masses since it often advertised a richer more extravagant lifestyle. However with the birth of 'millennials' and 'generation z' particularly, began to slow the popularity of high fashion designer brands, in favour of cost-effective street/skate wear alternatives. This led to the popularity boom of 'low culture', something that is more accurately named 'mass culture', this culture grew massive in a short period of time, especially with the growth of television and communications technology, teens were quick to idolise societal outcasts, who often sported casual apparel with grunge/outspoken graphics on t-shirts, or dressed down to formal events as a form of protest.

'Mass culture' grew wild and fast, with its main proprietors being skaters and hip-hop artists, who also happened to be idols in the eyes of teenagers of the time. This is where high-fashion looked to capitalise, however, the industry was having a difficult time relating to the younger generations. How the industry looked to capitalise on this market was by sponsoring prominent figures who were spearheading relevant cultures at the forefront of the 'mass culture' fashion movement. Hip-hop, skate and other subcultures became the instigators and merged to become the catalyst for

the explosion in merging of high and low culture in fashion, the birth of streetwear can be firstly attributed to 'Shawn Stussy' a fashion icon, designer, businessman and surfer; He made a huge splash in the fashion world by creating what is seen as the first streetwear brand [Stussy] which has made tremendous progress and is now considered a top-tier designer brand, with "annual revenues of \$50 million" (Deleon, 2015) a year as of 2014. He made more strides ahead of the competition when he began to blend 'mass culture' streetwear with 'high culture' designer fashion, at this point popularity of 'high culture clothing was at an all-time low and massive designer houses began to realise that they would have to capitalise on the cultures of streetwear and hip-hop in order to relate to the younger generations. Designer brands began to pour money into advertising and sponsoring music artists who were originally seen as the proprietors of 'low culture'. Inspiration was also drawn from these 'mass cultures' for the designs of some 'high culture' clothing, further inspiration was drawn from pop cultures and surrounding 'mass cultures' such as streetwear and skate culture. This begs the question: with the constant elevation and blending of 'mass cultures' into high culture, has the usage of the terms 'high' and 'low' culture become meaningless? I will be investigating this throughout this essay by first presenting a more in-depth historical dive into 'high' and 'low' culture (from 2000 - 20018) in their own respective sections. I will then follow that by presenting my argument as to why I believe, that although the words have not entirely become unrelated to the cultures, but are slowly headed in the direction where they no longer become synonymous with the stereotypes we have for them.



Christy Turlington for Louis Vuitton, Fall Collection 2000

The image above is an advertisement from the well-known designer brand: Louis Vuitton, the advertisement is from the year '2000' and is a prime example of designer houses' mentality in using celebrities for advertising and promotion, conversely they were averse to approaching celebrities of different disciplines [cultures], particularly hip-hop and skate culture. "Changes in clothing and the discourses surrounding clothing indicate shifts in social relationships and tensions between different social groups" (Crane, 2000), fashion is an ever-changing representative of social and political landscapes through the years. One particular change that forced the evolution of the fashion industry was the invention of television, personal computers and the boom of communications technology, this revolutionised methods of advertisement while increasing the accessibility of designer brands, however this conversely worked to increase the look of exclusivity of 'high culture' fashion, with people able to see it but not access it. Personal computers (PC/s) also played a vital role, opening a whole new marketplace [online]. As PCs became a staple of each home, another evolution in the fashion industry began to sprout, particularly with the ever-growing influence of 'low culture' (will also be referred to as 'mass culture' and 'pop/popular culture') started to detract popularity from iconic household name fashion houses (or designer brands). This became the basis for the evolution, with the younger generation [millennials] being more 'pop culture' inclined and a higher cost of living (a result of was a lower average disposable income).

In order to capitalise on the largest market available in the early 2000s, fashion houses would have to adapt and adopt certain design elements inspired by 'mass culture'. However designer brands were slow to change and this brought a wave of new street-wear (derivative of skate and hip-hop culture) inspired designer brands, the early 2000s to 2010 saw the birth of hundreds of such designer brands, 'Staple', 'Undeclared', 'Diamond Supply Co.', 'Billionaire Boys Club/Ice Cream', 'The Hundreds', 'A Bathing Ape' and 'Stussy' are just a few of the unquantifiable number of designer brands started in that period, of those made only a few managed to stay popular to this day and develop with their market, 'Billionaire Boys Club/Ice Cream', 'A Bathing Ape' and 'Stussy'

are prime examples of this. Examples of old school, slow to evolve fashion houses are ‘Gucci’ (founded 1921, Italy), ‘Louis Vuitton’ (founded 1854, Paris), ‘Chanel’ (founded 1910, Paris) and ‘Versace’ (founded 1978, Italy); What all of the staple fashion houses have in common is that although fashion is ever-changing, they had never experienced such a drastic change in the definition of luxury.

“Originally, streetwear was a way to describe comfortable clothing, predominantly worn by people following skateboarding and surf culture in Los Angeles.” (Block, 2017), it graduated from fad to subculture, despite its original niche market appeal it was still considered ‘low culture’. Shawn Stussy (the proprietor and designer of ‘Stussy’) is often credited with being the creator of the entire streetwear movement. He [Shawn Stussy] began by making surfboards then later simple t-shirts with his brands now iconic logo. Matt Nation who runs ‘ProvideShop.com’ and has over 15 years experience with streetwear brands in the UK and the U.S. said “streetwear is a byproduct of wider subcultural movements like hip-hop and skateboarding, so what we now call streetwear has been evolving since the 1970s. As all great fashions eventually make their way to the masses, it was bound to have its moment in the spotlight.”, one brand that catapulted itself into the limelight of streetwear was ‘Supreme’, with the opening of their first NYC based shop, the brand quickly developed a cult following and international popularity amongst the youth. Streetwear is highly influenced by ‘mass culture’; its popularity skyrocketed as time passed with the style seeming more logical with each passing day, it provided a pleasant alternative for wearing a suit everywhere or out on Friday nights, as well as the comfort factor, streetwear caught on like wildfire.

It wasn’t until around 2013 when Virgil Abloh created the now infamous high-end streetwear brand ‘Off-White’ did the world begin to take notice of streetwear and its versatility, as well as its potential to be blended with fashion that was symbiotic with the word ‘high-end’ at the time. Abloh realised this and made strides to centre his brand around this theme, he planted himself deep in the

niche opportunity he had discovered and has made his brand a staple of the fashion world while distinguishing his name as an ingenious creative and visionary. This has landed him the prestigious role of creative director at the timeless 'Louis Vuitton' fashion house. Abloh has been able to unify the initially distinguished line between the high and low culture in fashion, all of which is in line with his brand's [OFF-WHITE] ethos, praised for bridging the gap between street and luxury fashion.

"Is clothing not virtually a visual language...?" (Davis, 1992), this is hardly demonstrated however clothing does share numerous similarities with language, and much like language clothing is ever changing with its own "distinctive grammar, syntax and vocabulary" (Davis, 1992). The basis for this quote is entirely relevant today, fashion has defined itself as a language that can be moulded in numerous different ways and is often associated with every culture. However, the question is, why since 2000 to today, did fashion evolve in such a way as to favour streetwear? And comfort wear? I believe you have to look at the origins of streetwear, then analyse the social landscape around that era. The early 1980s (or late 1979) streetwear was essentially born, a spark of ingenuity that 'Shawn Stussy' unwittingly had, over the following years he and his later business partner 'Frank Sinatra' (no relation to the musician) [1984], worked hard to cultivate the world renowned brand that is now known as 'Stussy'. Stussy was "a kid who was raised on an anti-establishment diet, surrounded by beach-dwelling hippies" (Unknown, 2016), this was the period of time when sub-cultures had begun to rise in popularity, with everybody looking to be part of their own section of society, so what made the hippie culture stand out the most? The mindset of experimentation was the general mood throughout the western world, which also happened to be the main ethos of the hippie movement. The second was anti-establishment behaviour, their clothing often reflected this, with the majority of hippies opting for comfort and practicality in fashion, rather than formal attire sported by what was seen as 'dead-end' office workers.

The turn of the century [the early 2000s] saw a new mindset begin to change the fate of the fashion world, the growth of the younger generations led to a push for more comfortable wear and eyes quickly became fixated on streetwear as the solution. I believe street-wear became as popular as it is because of the younger generations of the time, with many tired of conforming to stereotypical ideologies and rules, they were quick to look for an outlet with subcultures, and street-wear quickly rose to its now dominating position because of its assistance from other subcultures turned cultures, such as hip-hop culture, skate culture and surf culture, it is seen taking much inspiration from these cultures and numerous other subcultures.

Fashion houses, although initially slow to jump on the bandwagon, they eventually joined in on what was once thought to be a fad [street-wear]. I understand that it was primarily a business move, as an attempt to stay relevant and popular amongst the largest age group of most populations in the western world. However, this saw the unfortunate and eventual decline of many once large designer brands. In terms of the highest of culture in fashion, that has remained relatively unchanged, with the richest in society still prone to dressing in a classic formal style. At the rate at which street-wear is growing it should be just a few years before street-wear has a monopoly influence throughout the fashion world. Its 'staying power' as a style in fashion has been relatively unchallenged and looks to stay that way for years to come, according to experts in the future of fashion analytics.

Unfortunately, we can never know for sure what the future holds, somebody right now could be laying the foundations for the next majorly influential change in fashion, unconsciously, it could even be you.

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