

THE POOR  
FETISH



For decades luxury fashion brands (Burberry, Armani, and Versace) and sportswear (Nike, Reebok and Fila) have become staples of poorer urban communities in the UK. However, their recent surge in popularity has shifted opinions associated with this working class aesthetic. These brands are an example of how gentrification has taken place in the fashion industry.

The problem is that the working class aesthetic and identity has been ripped from its original contexts and altered in a way that acceptable to the middle class. The working class aesthetic is stripped of its culture and meaning and given an economic value.

Growing up in Nottingham, brands were important to everyone I knew. From Nike Airmax 95 trainers to Gucci messenger bags ('pouches' we called them), everyone wanted to prove their worth. We would be envious of a life of luxury so to satisfy this we would imitate the lifestyle through clothing. Coming from a deprived area, clothing was a form of escape for us.

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We did not have cash for high end fashion labels however we made our own fashion standards to follow with what you could afford. As long as you had a tracksuit, a pouch and your Air Forces weren't creased, you were fine.

Tracksuits have always dominated most of my wardrobe. This caused me to be negatively stereotyped throughout my youth, whether I was called a

chav, roadman, delinquent or threatening, the stigma surrounding sportswear was clear. If you wore a tracksuit you were subjected to hoodie-phobic social hysteria. People crossing to the other side of the pavement when they saw you and your friends was just part of our reality. However, these stereotypes have recently been subverted, tracksuits and a pair of Airmax has become stylish not laughable. The same people sporting the working class aesthetic now are the ones who would not have been caught dead in a tracksuit a few years ago. Looking poorer than you are is cool now.

LOOKING  
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I particularly noticed this once I started university. For the first time in my life, I was now surrounded by a different demographic of people. It was a common occurrence to see students in Kappa, Fila, Champion, Diodora and Ellesse. Wearing vintage or retro sportswear has become a fashion statement for upper class students to go against their own privileged status. Class is not a costume. Whilst some students enjoy the creativity, status and comedy of the working class aesthetic, what are they actively doing for the working class by appropriating their identity. Whilst they get praise from friends for their outfits, urban city youths are denied freedom and opportunity for dressing in the very same outfits. A common social debate in today's society is cultural appropriation. This can

be defined as individuals from one culture mimicking aspects of another culture. Appropriation only adopts elements of a marginalised culture which are perceived as desirable, whilst ignoring elements which are fundamental to understanding that culture. Such as the oppression many of these cultures face. This is problematic because the appropriated culture is often discriminated for aspects of their culture, despite the same aspects being stolen by people who seek to popularise it.

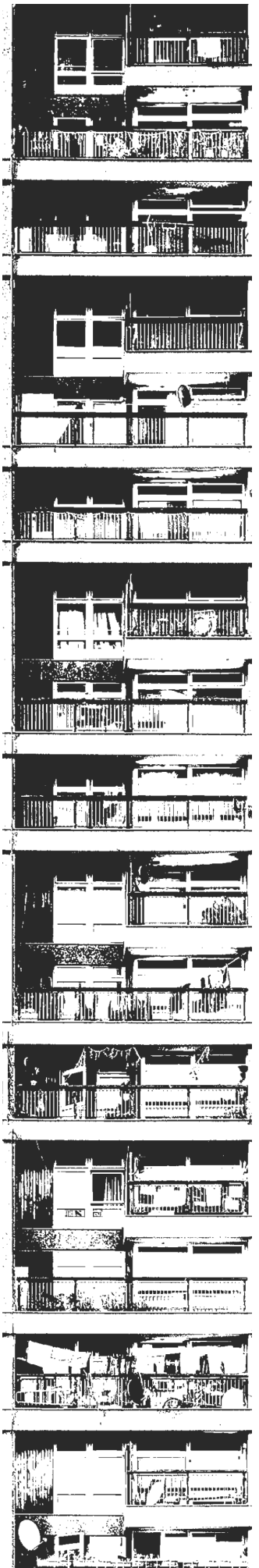
Class appropriation is the social counterpart. Elements of the lower class are stolen and adopted in middle and upper class culture, whilst ignoring the social and political issues. This furthers the class divide and disconnect between classes.

The lower class despite facing financial issues created their own identity through clothing however they were unable to do so without being judged and discriminated by people from more privileged backgrounds. This discrimination created the derogatory term 'Chav' which stood for council house and violent.

COUNCIL HOUSE  
AND VIOLENT

The working class hatred heavily gained traction and continued to further degrade them. This birthed the working class stereotype consisting of tracksuits, gold jewellery and designer statement pieces. The media started to portray this narrative which caused high end brands to be associated with the 'chav' image and give the brand negative affiliations.

# THE POOR GET FISH











The most notorious example is Burberry. Its signature beige check pattern was predominantly worn by the lower class and became so popular counterfeit products were sold on market stalls across Britain. Tabloid jokes further reinforced Burberry's associations with chav culture. Before long one of Britain's most prestigious fashion brands was facing a crippling identity crisis and needed to action in order to regain its loss of sales. In 2004, Burberry removed the tartan check baseball caps which were the staple of chav culture. Furthermore, they decided to only place the iconic check design in the lining of most of its clothing. Fast forward to today, Burberry successfully regained its customer base however this is because the working class aesthetic is desirable now. They have even brought back the infamous baseball cap with a price tag of £250.

Besides from Burberry, other brands have managed to commodify working class culture due to the rise in popularity of streetwear.

## COMMODIFY WORKING CLASS CULTURE

There has been an upsurge for vintage streetwear and the fashion trend has received a lot of positive attention. Kappa, Fila, Champion – these brands are an example of how gentrification has taken place in fashion. The price for these brands has been increased drastically, making it harder for the poor to dress in what is firstly theirs. The working class do not share the same privilege with the current streetwear trend. Kappa tracksuits and

Nike Airmax are fashionable if you are white and upper middle class but chavvy if you are anything else. The imitation of aesthetic from the working class just comes off as condescending and encourages further discrimination against those of lower class.

The counterargument is that the working class appropriation could be considered appreciation. The fashion industry drawing inspiration from working class culture proves that as a culture we have created a strong and desirable identity. Youths from less affluent areas are still creative and confident with their own ideas and do not need the approval of the industry to validate them. Some brands have funded and supported urban movements and given the urban youth a voice and outlet to express themselves. An example of this is Adidas which has aligned itself with anti-establishment culture and supported the grime movement. Making documentaries, collaborating with urban youth and gifting clothing.

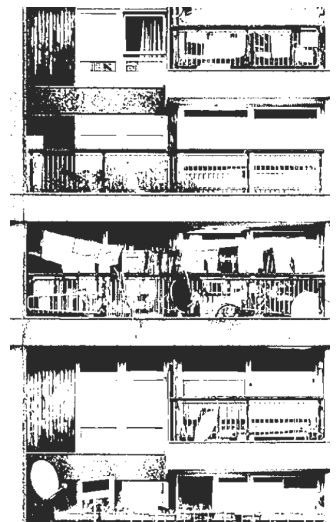
Another counterargument is sometimes behind the idea is young creatives who were from underprivileged backgrounds who want to reflect their personal experiences in their industry and want to inject authenticity into their work. However, in this process do they fall in the trap of fetishization? Does it matter if working class designers create it if upper class are still the target audience?

This is an ongoing conflict I face as a designer from an underclass background. I have first-hand experience of class discrimination and feel strongly against the class appropriation in fashion and design industry.

However, as a designer I would love to incorporate my background and experiences into my work. I am proud of my background and heritage and want my work and ideas to feel authentic to who I am. But in the process will I also fall into the trap of contributing to class appropriation and glamourisation of poverty. This confliction is still something I am still trying to solve as a designer.

To conclude the fashion industry will continue to reinvent itself and will continue to do so. People should be able to dress and wear as they please, but more attention needs to go into understanding the privilege of this. Of course, people should be allowed to wear whatever they want, but more attention needs to be put into understanding the privilege of this. Those of the upper class need to see that being able to dress in the same clothes as those who are not as respected in our society is a liberty. They are not oppressed and restricted by the same social and political implications and therefore have a duty of responsibility to be less ignorant.

Images:  
Sambo, Terence (2017, April 29). South East Boys. Retrieved from <https://pausemag.co.uk/2017/04/pause-editorial-south-east-boys/>





# THE POOR GET RICH

