

# SO YOU'RE A TOUGH GUY



BILLIE EILISH, SARTORIAL PROTECTION, AND HEGEMONIZING STREETWEAR

## So You're a Tough Guy: Billie Eilish, Sartorial Protection, and Hegemonizing Streetwear

By Iva Pivalica  
MA Fashion Student

May 4, 2021

At the start of Billie Eilish's career, fans speculated with fascination about her baggy clothing style. [In an ad for Calvin Klein](#) in 2019, however, Eilish provided an explanation regarding her loose-fitting attire that was quite harrowing. She revealed that it *prevented people from forming opinions about her body*. More specifically, she refers to protecting herself against sexual objectification, stating that, "Nobody can be like, 'oh, she's slim thick', 'she's not slim thick'...no one can say any of that because they don't know" (Calvin Klein, 2019, 0:13). In an industry widely known for profiting off the objectification and sexual abuse of women (as we've seen through the #MeToo Movement), Eilish is seeking to reclaim bodily autonomy and protection through her style.

Eilish's decision to reclaim power through dress is particularly impactful because clothing, in relation to women's bodies, has commonly been attributed as the cause of sexual objectification and harassment. Particularly, the "what were you wearing?" argument is a widely held fallacy that positions women as "asking for it" because of the type of clothing worn. Turney (2019) observes that "At no stage do our clothes 'ask' to be violated, for crimes to be committed against us, yet these narratives dominate our understanding of sexual assault in the media [and] in general conversation..." (p. 116). This misconception is inherently hegemonic because it socially disenfranchises women by universalizing patriarchal ideologies in everyday discourse. Specific types of clothing are then saturated in the ideology that they are an emblematic justification for violence.

*Figure 1. A screenshot taken of a post from Eilish's Instagram page posted on September 16, 2019. This photo demonstrates Eilish wearing a garment with a graffiti pattern graphic, which is prominent in street style. The caption reads "if only i dressed normal id be so much hotter yeah yeah come up with a better comment im tired of that one" responding to backlash from fans about her attire.*



Reclaiming power over these oppressive forces is warranted and admirable, especially because Eilish is seeking to imbue the relationship between her body and clothing in new truths that respond to this persecution. Eilish's resistance to oppression through style formation and mediation is on par with historic practices of subcultural resistance. However, the particular style that she has adopted in order to do so has been heavily debated. Eilish has distinctively been using streetwear in her pursuit to combat sexual objectification.

Originating from Black and Brown urban communities and cultures, streetwear functions as a response to social exclusion and racialization. Developing this unique style enables people of colour to form and mediate identities, gain a voice, and garner a sense of belonging and loyalty within the community. However, although streetwear is a prevalent and symbolic site of resistance, Lull (2018) asserts that hegemony is fragile and "...requires renewal and modification through the assertion and reassertion of power" (p. 36). Hegemony modifies in order to stabilize itself and to counteract

such resistance, which has led to disproportionate rates of criminalization and state violence for people of colour. Nguyen (2015) writes:

"Through such resemblances and revelations, some things close to some bodies imbue them with affective properties that legitimate forms of governance or violence. Such suspicious things feature richly in structures that control and create divisions between the nonhuman and the human and that render the ontologically other available for rape, conquest, detention, or death" (p. 792)

This leads me to ask the question: What are the social implications of claiming subjugated styles as a form of resistance at the expense of vulnerable communities? This article explores how clothing and style act as a source for hegemony to take shape, and will analyze how the concepts of "difference" and "hiding" through clothing are read as either commodifiable or punishable on different bodies.



Figure 2. A screenshot taken from a post on Eilish's Instagram page which was posted on April 7, 2019. Eilish is wearing a bandana, oversized clothing, chunky rings, ripped saggy jeans with patchwork of basketball graphics, and sneakers.

## THE ORIGINS OF STREETWEAR

Eilish evidently admires the aesthetic value of street culture. By looking at her Instagram posts, it is undeniable that every part of her style and brand adopts components of streetwear. Bandanas, bucket hats, hoop earrings, heavy jewellery, chains, long nails, and graffiti graphics, just to name a few, are present in her looks. Historically, all of these components enacted various purposes within urban populations. For example, sneaker culture has functioned as a crucial component of forming identity and credibility. Sneakers were invented for practicality and athleticism, however, this function quickly shifted as sneakers were commercialized and personified through the success of the professional athletes who wear them (Kawamura, 2018, para. 11). Therefore, sneakers function as a form of cultural collectivity, representation of affluence, and adornment, tying the components of street style looks together.

I can understand why streetwear in particular seems appealing for Eilish to adopt in order to protect her own autonomy. Streetwear is understood as a critique of the mechanics of hegemony because it subverts from its logic and creates new definitions of how an individual or group is considered respectable, affluent, and authoritative. It invents new ways of understanding and enacting power through style.

## STREETWEAR & LUXURY BRANDS

By looking at the Instagram posts that specifically highlight Eilish's attire, it is evident that most of the streetwear garments she wears are from luxury and designer brands. Brands like Chanel, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton are particularly prevalent across Eilish's social media posts. This is important to note since the high-fashion industry has a long history of appropriating aesthetics at the expense of racialized communities. Streetwear is often marketed as innovative and trendy for higher-class consumers while completely disregarding the cultures that the style originates from. Gonzalez (2020) writes that many reputable news sources attribute the streetwear movement's success in high fashion to "...the brands Supreme and Stussy. While it's true Supreme and Stussy (as well as other high-fashion brands like Vetements and Louis Vuitton) have made a significant impact in further popularizing the term 'streetwear,' all of these articles omit that it was America's Black diaspora which pioneered streetwear's essence" (para. 11). Additionally, streetwear's "cool" and "tough" sensibilities stem from responses to social exclusion and criminalization, which is another example of characteristics that high-fashion brands market but don't attribute to the communities that they came from. Eilish's adoption of the style through an appropriative source like luxury and designer brands is just one of many examples of how streetwear is being hegemonized.



*Figure 3. A screenshot taken from a post on Eilish's Instagram page posted on January 9, 2019. Eilish is wearing an oversized Louis Vuitton tracksuit and sneakers, chain necklaces, and chunky rings.*



*Figure 4. A screenshot taken from Eilish's Instagram page of a post from October 26, 2018. Eilish is wearing an oversized hoodie, baggy Louis Vuitton basketball shorts, and sneakers.*

## STREETWEAR: COMMODIFIABLE OR PUNISHABLE?

Streetwear has enabled Eilish to experiment with her stylistic preference for baggy clothing. Experimenting with proportions can influence how she is perceived and how she moves through the world as a result. Baggy clothing like hoodies, sweatpants, and t-shirts, have the ability to provide a sense of comfort and security because of their shapelessness. Turney (2016) suggests that "This can be seen as a form of hiding, of fading into the background...not wanting to form a solid identity or be absorbed by the norms of social conformity" (p. 29). This is especially true in the case of Eilish's adoption of street style because it enables her to combat sexualization by departing from patriarchal Western standards.

The "what were you wearing?" argument, however, also targets people of colour, albeit because of the exact feature that Eilish benefits from — being hidden. Reflecting on the murder of Trayvon Martin, news coverage predominantly reported on the hoodie he was wearing as the catalyst that warranted violence against him because it was deemed as "threatening". Specifically, the Fox News commentator Geraldo Rivera suggested that hoodies are indicative of criminal behaviour and that Martin shouldn't have been wearing one in the first place (Bonilla & Rosa, 2018). This combination of race "...with an inability to recognise and identify wearers amidst a crowd...create and fuel an everyday terror..." (Turney, 2016, p. 26). While hiding the body through looser-fitting clothing protects Eilish from objectification, it simultaneously threatens the lives of people of colour because of the way that clothing is read differently in relation to certain bodies. There is a dichotomy present here between who gets to hide or disguise and who has to be instantly legible to the authoritative gaze. Similar to how tightly fitting clothing is read as emblematic of sexual harassment for women, baggy clothing is considered emblematic of state violence and bodily sanctioning for people of colour.

Eilish's use of streetwear has granted her the status of being *different* in the mainstream. It sets her apart from the typical white teenage pop star imagery that we commonly see. This difference is celebrated for two specific reasons:

- 1) Her apparent difference fuels her ability to be commodifiable.
- 2) Hegemony tolerates this shift in imagery because it is palatable enough to fit in with the pre-existing dominant ideologies in place.

Eilish is white, young, cisgender, and successful. She embodies the fantasy of abundance. Butsch (2018) states that incorporation makes "...an alternative or oppositional idea [into] a commodity, often using the idea to sell or advertise the product by presenting it as avant-garde or different from the mass" (p. 76). Additionally, dress styles are stripped of their original political content in order to be compatible with the values of consumption (Butsch, 2018).

However, for racialized bodies, the concept of *difference* reproduces a fear of the other because they embody the threat of loss. Ahmed (2004) states that this is done through the perpetual restaging of racialized bodies within a fantasy of violation. Therefore, attempting to reclaim power for people of colour within the system of cultural production is particularly threatening to hegemony because it disrupts authority and withdraws benefits from the dominant group. Hegemony is then modified by imagining and deeming certain bodies as criminal, leading to disproportionate rates of state violence and incarceration. Sola-Santiago (2017) states that this is crucial to recognize due to the following:

"In an era when white supremacy lives within the mainstream conversation and African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately targeted by police, it's clear that clothing and the culture behind it affect how people are perceived. A hoodie marked Trayvon Martin a criminal, even when he was unarmed. Chastity Jones' dreadlocks were a sign she was unemployable. The fashion industry is still blind to the social and racial codes associated with these types of clothing" (para. 15).

---

## CONCLUSION

It's crucial to recognize how clothing functions differently in relation to certain bodies. In this particular case, it allows us to reflect on the power dynamics that exist between disenfranchised communities and the social and cultural implications of groups attempting to reclaim power at the expense of more vulnerable ones. Although Eilish's protest is warranted, it's being done in a manner that leaves the political context of streetwear unacknowledged. Hall (2018) states that "The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated" (p. 91). By not giving credit or actively trying to uplift the community that her aesthetic originated from, Eilish continues to perpetuate the same hegemonic ideas about race in the mainstream. Many Black fans such as Taylor (2020) have observed:

"...I can't help but see her style and be reminded of the type of styles that were popularized and pioneered by black people in the '80s and '90s" (para. 2). Additionally, "...it also sucks as a black person to see this aesthetic sell when a white person does it, yet in real life, these are the behaviors black people are persecuted for" (Taylor, 2020, para. 9).

Of course, as an individual and young artist, Eilish is not solely responsible for the hegemonizing of streetwear. However, using her privilege and cultural influence in order to uplift and empower a more vulnerable community, she has the ability to rearticulate and combat dominantly held truths about the relationship between people of colour and streetwear.

## REFERENCES

---

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text*, 79(2), 117-139.
- Bonilla, Y., & Rosa, J. (2018). #Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States. In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (5th ed., pp. 578-585). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Butsch, R. (2018). Reconsidering Resistance and Incorporation. In G. Dines, J. H. Humez, B. Yousman, & L. B. Yousman (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (5th ed., pp. 71-80). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Calvin Klein. (2019, July 1). *Billie Eilish – Calvin Klein commercial* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5rWmK7W2zc>
- Eilish, B. (2018, October 26). [Screenshot]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpYsKNjFq04/>
- Eilish, B. (2019, January 9). [Screenshot]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsaKUF5FaHf/>
- Eilish, B. (2019, September 16). [Screenshot]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2db7LRFLJ/>
- Eilish, B. (2019, April 7). [Screenshot]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bv8otVmFzyY/>
- Gonzalez, Z. (2020, August 29). Streetwear and Its Roots in Black Culture. *Lithium Magazine*. <https://lithiummagazine.com/2020/08/29/streetwear-and-its-roots-in-black-culture/>
- Hall, S. (2018). The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media. In G. Dines, J. H. Humez, B. Yousman, & L. B. Yousman (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (5th ed., pp. 90-92). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Kawamura, Y. (2018). Sneakers as a Subculture: Emerging from Underground to Upperground. In *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262941.ch-003>
- Lull, J., & Yousman, L. B. (2018). Hegemony. In G. Dines, J. H. Humez, & B. Yousman (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (5th ed., pp. 34-36). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Nguyen, M. T. (2015). The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force. *Signs*, 40(4), 791-816.
- Sola-Santiago, F. (2017, December 15). *Mask On: How Fashion Erased the Politics of Streetwear in 2017*. Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. Retrieved April 21, 2021.
- Taylor, Z. (2020, February 7). WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT BILLIE EILISH [OPINION]. Vox Atl. Retrieved May 3, 2021, from <https://voxtl.org/billie-eilish-cultural-appropriation/>
- Turney, J. (2016). Material evidence: Sexual assault, provocative clothing and fashion. In *Fashion Crimes: Dressing for Deviance* (pp. 115-128). Bloomsbury. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781788315654.0016>
- Turney, J. (2019). The horror of the hoodie: Clothing the criminal. In *Fashion Crimes: Dressing for Deviance* (pp. 23-32). Bloomsbury. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781788315654.0008>