

“Get a Life”

*Venturing Into Hypebeast Culture & Exploring the
Psychology Behind Name Brands*

Ava Andrews

Going Undercover

“Ain’t no sheep” is my family’s motto. The phrase was conceived seven years ago amidst a suffocatingly crowded ferry. The staff’s shouts over the clamor were punctuated by their pointing as they commanded us to shuffle one way or the other towards the exit. I muttered the phrase under my breath, and my parents’ eyes lit up. It stuck ever since. My family openly opposes any activity that involves waiting in claustrophobic, endless lines or being corralled or herded. We act of our own volition. We don’t follow, we lead. If I could have fast forwarded to this unusually balmy fall day and seen myself standing in line for clothing, I would be in disbelief. But here I was, surrounded by people who wait in line for a living. A sheep amongst the herd.

I left my apartment on Mulberry Street in downtown Manhattan wrapped in my nearly floor-length black coat, equipped with three podcasts and the Notes app open and ready on my phone. When I rounded the corner and caught sight of the stanchions that stretched to contain the growing crowd, I felt an unexpected surge of excitement. It was time to go undercover as a hypebeast¹.

I joined the Kith² line at 7:38 a.m. expecting quiet mutterings of confusion and unfriendliness. I was entering new territory and joining an unfamiliar community, but no one gave any discernible reaction. Everyone here seemed to feel anything but tired, despite the early hour. On the contrary, I could feel the energy and anticipation. People struck up conversations with each other, referencing products by model number and comparing notes on what they would buy today. We had formed two lines side-by-side within the larger line, and the two men in front of me were deep in conversation about the industry. The man on the left, Javier, was wearing a black, hip-length Canada Goose jacket and grey jeans.



Kith's Instagram

1 Hypebeast: a person who follows a trend to be cool or in-style through buying limited clothing or shoes.

2 Kith is a retail brand focused on providing a “multifunctional lifestyle brand for men, women, and kids, as well as a progressive retail establishment.” It was founded in 2011 by Ronnie Fieg.

He sported a camouflage backpack and a black beanie with “Supreme”³ printed across the front. The man next to him, Bryan, was wearing a copper-colored corduroy jacket with a maroon Adidas gym bag slung over the shoulder and billowy black sweatpants. He had a wispy, dark beard and beady eyes that matched. They had just met each other earlier that day, but had already launched into discussing how waiting in line was an activity becoming too oversaturated and commonplace. They conversed about a seller infamous for offering fake items and how to recognize him. They recommended places to go to resell their items, as well as the futility of store credits. They marveled at how Ronnie Fieg (the founder of Kith) had grown ASICS into a desirable brand in a matter of years. These two weren’t the only ones wrapped up in passionate conversation, but most of the other people in line were as well. I had to remind myself that the boisterous New York City streets existed just across that black belt that served as a border, separating the outside world from us, but also encasing this subculture in a cocoon of its own.

The security guard eventually came around with neon yellow bands. He was a burly guy, dressed in all black sneakers, pants, a bomber jacket, and a cap. His only distinctive features were his bushy brown beard, the white Kith logo stamped across his cap, and the large vaping device he carried concealed in one of his meaty hands at all times. I recognized him immediately as Charles, the security guard who had prevented me from interviewing people in line a month prior and threatened to throw anyone out of the line if they spoke to me. He had handed me his glossy card and instructed me to email him for permission. Unsurprisingly, I received no response. When he reached my place, he stretched to tag me with a wristband, validating my spot in line. No recognition flickered across his face. I smiled a small smile. My cover was still intact.

There were a few pedestrians who openly deplored the queue, walking down and back taking videos or unabashedly counting the number of people waiting. One lanky man

3 Opening in 1994 and founded by James Jebbia, Supreme began as a New York-based retail store and quickly became the epicenter of skater culture and downtown life.



#51 in line



In line at Kith

dressed in a long black leather jacket and an orange beanie returned numerous times, prowling the storefront and taking countless photos of the scene. As he turned to finally leave, his documentation complete, one of the security guards turned and yelled at him, “Got enough photos?” The man kept walking until someone else piped up, “Get a life!” At that, he shook his head and retorted, “I’m not the one standing on the sidewalk waiting for clothes!” Indignant, he pivoted on his heel and strode off, followed by a slew of disapproving grunts and rolling eyes.

I was #51 to go into the store once it opened at 10 a.m. With three and a half hours to go, I opened my phone and did a little more research. Today’s drop⁴ was “The Colorist” collection in collaboration with New Balance. Kith’s Instagram had been featuring the collection for days with the goal of injecting more color into its portfolio. On offer were two block-color tracksuits, two dip-dyed hoodies, two sweaters, and two types of shoes, each pair made of ten different types of suede and only 1,700 pairs made in total. I decided I would try to purchase the pink-toes shoe that retailed for \$260 after overhearing quite a few people’s excited chatter about them. Just then a young

man came sprinting around the corner. The pristine tags on his jeans made it difficult for him to move and his sneakers were clearly protesting the run they were not made for. He wore a beige puffy coat with unintelligible writing scrawled all across the front and the back. Red marks made to look like blood stained the material while black zip ties accentuated the sleeves. As he got closer, I could make out a drawing of the devil outlined in charcoal. He made a beeline for Charles and clasped his hands together, all but getting down on his knees, and whined, “My train was delayed an hour. There was nothing I



The pink-toed Kith shoes

could do.” He had secured his place at 5 a.m. that morning and had been told to come back at 7:30 a.m. It was now 7:46. Charles took a look at his watch and shook his head, unfeeling. His only response was “Not my problem. I don’t work for the MTA.” The man shuffled to the back of the line, his shoelaces dragging on the ground.

This is not the only time that Charles had to stoically prevent the sheepish shoppers from sneaking back into line. One customer had parked his car right in front of the store.

4 Drop: The release of an item for sale in stores and online, usually in very limited quantities. The product offered would have been heavily advertised before the drop date.

When a policeman sauntered up to the vehicle and began writing a ticket, the owner was forced to run out of line to move it. Without needing to be asked, the whole line moved up to fill his place. When the store finally opened, another customer had gone to smoke a cigarette and missed his call, and he was relegated mercifully ten spaces behind his original spot, as opposed to being completely removed. But this small difference in place mattered. As soon as Javier went in, Charles came out and announced that there were no more shoes. In mutterings of disbelief, half of the line broke away and dispersed onto the streets, those three and a half hours of their morning wasted. Being one queue position short of the prize, I was determined to get something. I deserved to finally step inside. At 10:42 a.m. my wristband was checked and approved, and the glass doors opened with a flourish. Intricate and colorful tops lined the walls of the store on sleek black hangers while the most desirable items resided on podiums encased in glass boxes. I was immediately greeted by three store attendants who ushered me to the small corner where the four items of the collection hung, the tracksuit pants, the tracksuit top, an orange and blue hoodie, and a blue and pink hoodie. After so many hours of staring into the store, anticipating the moment I would be allowed to see the collection up close, I was disheartened. The clothes seemed of average quality and didn't have any particularly notable design features. Up close, they were still just clothes. After I had inspected each item for about thirty seconds, a man off to the side suggested they bring in someone else who "actually knows what they want." I realized this was the first time I felt uncomfortable throughout this whole experience. I hadn't felt isolated in the line like I thought I might have. In fact, I felt that I could strike up a conversation with almost everyone waiting with me, and they would have dutifully and happily answered any questions I had about the process. After that comment, I quickly selected the blue and pink hoodie in a medium and scurried to the cashier, eager to leave the store. The woman at the register packed the hoodie into the prestigious black and silver Kith bag and informed me that my grand total was \$180.09 and that all sales were final. Finally released onto the street, I gripped the black rope handles of the bag tightly. I looked back at the line and realized it was no longer there. Now, there were only people victoriously strutting about with their own little black bags. The only sign that the line had ever existed was the hot chocolate-stained paper cups strewn across the ground that the store had kindly served us earlier. The whole collection had sold out in under an hour. Now came the second part of the game, enticing the sharks.⁵



The Kith sweater purchased

5 Sharks: neologism. Buyers/resellers who don't want to wait in line but solicit deals from consumers after or before they enter the store. Usually a little aggressive in their efforts.

Smelling blood in the water, they had arrived around 9 a.m. in a large black SUV. When they unloaded from the van they circled around us all, looking to strike a deal with anyone. They were still parked there now, though they looked more subdued, none roaming on the streets anymore but smoking and talking quietly in the van. I assumed that the people milling about were waiting to be approached, but I could see the sharks had been satiated, and that they weren't going to strike unless provoked. I walked up to the van and the four sharks inside eyed me and my bag, intrigued. After showing what I had and telling them it was a size medium, one shark patronizingly explained to me that I should always get a hoodie one size up, smiling and showing his startlingly white teeth. If I had done so, he would've bought it for himself. I nodded politely and thanked him, as if he had given me very insightful information. Then they sped away, audibly chuckling at the girl who had purchased a size medium and not a large. At that, I chuckled at myself too.

After witnessing the encounter, Bryan (who had stood in front of me in line) approached me. He informed me that he had a size 6 ½ of the coveted New Balance shoes, and wondered if I would buy them from him. He had bought them for his girlfriend who had since decided she didn't want them anymore. He would sell them to me for \$20 above retail. I was shocked. Three hours of his time was worth \$20?! The shoe was selling for over \$400 dollars online. I nodded.

“Ok. I'll do it.” He seemed pleased, but when I pulled out my phone to pull up PayPal or Venmo, his face fell and he shook his head.

“Only cash.”

Disappointed, I wished him luck and went on my way to school. As I was walking, I realized that the green wristband with “51” scribbled across the front was still intact on my wrist, the sticky backing tugging on my skin. I slid my finger under the material to rip it off, and then stopped. I couldn't just rip it off like it was nothing.

So I wore it proudly for the rest of the day.



The Sharks

The Interview

“Hello?” I offered to the office of click-clacking keyboards. Hundreds of plush toys lined the walls on bookshelves, peeking out of boxes that still had to be taped, and lounging in a seating area, competing for attention with pillows so fluffy they induced a sneezing fit just looking at them. I crept into the office tentatively, hoping that the person I was here to interview would reveal herself. To my relief, Zoe shot out of her chair, her extended hand making her bangles clamor. Zoe Fraade studied and now teaches about fandom and subcultures in a digital age at NYU. When it comes to super fandoms, she literally wrote the book exploring the influence of superfans on our lives and culture. She is now the co-founder of Squishable, a plush toy company. She has long, hazel hair with a striking bleached section down the front and oversized glasses similar to my own. Her large black turtleneck seemed to belong to a different person than her bottom half, which sported distinctive cheetah print leggings that ran down her legs and disappeared under her nearly knee-length black leather boots. Grabbing her water bottle, she beckoned for me to follow as she led me to a vacant conference room. I sat down in one of the rolling chairs and set my phone down between us. She perched on the corner seat, her legs crossed and her hands on her lap. She nodded, and I hit record.

“Often, people don’t realize the difference that separates a consumer from a fan,” Zoe began. She described how a consumer is someone who uses a product in the way it was intended to be used, as instructed by the brand. They might be a very loyal consumer, but only when one expands on a product by making it a part of their identity and a part of themselves, can they be dubbed a fan. “Even if I use Tide with Bleach religiously, going through a hundred bottles a day, I’m still only using the product for what it was created for,” she explained. A fan is someone who reinterprets a product to suit their own needs. They elaborate on what that product means to them. It’s not just Tide with Bleach anymore, but transforms into a way they hang out with their friends, or they may suggest new Tide with Bleach smells, or make fan art for the item.

“Why do people behave in fan-like ways? We start talking about these deep-seated needs that people have for community, for identity, for feeling like they belong to something bigger than themselves,” Zoe continued. Her eyes lit up as she uncrossed her legs and leaned towards me. Up to about a hundred years ago, questions such as where someone belongs, and what they should be doing to be happy were taken care of by their local communities, immediate families, or organized religion. These sources of wisdom have dwindled as people have moved away from their hometowns, but these needs must still be met. “It makes sense that we’re looking towards pop culture to give us these same answers: Who am I? Where do I belong? What can I do to succeed?” Zoe explained. According to her, there are six fan-like activities that all devoted fans exhibit. They are taking pilgrimages, forming rituals and traditions, creating new uses for the brand, participating in socialization, performing evangelization, and engaging in impersonation.

The Fan-Like Activities

Think of the last product you bought. Why did you ultimately decide to take the plunge and make the purchase? Why were you confident that this product would deliver? The often unconscious mental process that we go through before selecting an item to purchase is called “system one thinking.” If a brand comes readily to mind, it’s a good choice (fame), if a brand feels good, it’s a good choice (feeling), and if a brand is recognizable, it’s a good choice (fluency).⁶ When a brand has checked off all of these boxes, these six overlapping fan-like activities should ensue.

Pilgrimages, Rituals, and Traditions

People have been taking pilgrimages as long as there has been culture. “Literally taking your body and placing it near something that means something to you is a very ancient concept deeply rooted in religion,” Zoe stated. Engaging in rituals reminds participants of past instances when they partook in this ritual. *Psychology Today* states that rituals serve “as a bridge between past and future, enabling us to access, honor, and strengthen our own identity.”⁷ They are a reassurance that, while life is predominantly inconsistent, a ritual is something that will most likely continue and therefore provide some consistency and stability. Rituals also provide relief from everyday life, disrupting our regular schedule to devote time to something that we enjoy doing. Most importantly, rituals produce communities centered around these traditions. This particular aspect of rituals is key for companies. The more you can get people together, online but especially in person, the more you can get them talking about how much they love a brand. A ritual or tradition centered around a brand is usually taking the effort to take a pilgrimage to a store location and wait in a line every week.

For brands like Supreme and Kith, a line enables fans to compare their status. The fans who care the most are the ones who care enough to get there early, or at least know the brand enough to know exactly what time to get there. When companies reach a level of acclaim where fans will wait in line, they are accomplishing at least two fan activities, creating a ritual or tradition as well as having their fans partake in a pilgrimage. There is arguably no better way to demonstrate your commitment than spending your most valuable asset: time. I met people who had travelled miles just to wait in the Supreme line from all walks of life, including a girl with gree hair who drove

6 “Fame, Feeling And Fluency – The Only Brand Metrics You Will Ever Need.” *System1 Group*, 22 Mar. 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-flux/201508/10-ways-rituals-help-us-celebrate-our-lives>.

7 Brenner, Abigail. “10 Way Rituals Help Us Celebrate Our Lives.” *Psychology Today*, 2015, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-flux/201508/10-ways-rituals-help-us-celebrate-our-lives.

two hours from New Jersey, a gangly man from Boston, a man with yellow headphones who flew in from Orlando, and a thirteen year-old named Carter from Miami with his whole family in tow. But why would people choose to perform these pilgrimages? To gain an understanding, we must turn to the traditional use of pilgrimages: religion. *Learn Religions* states that pilgrimages help us “to perceive our real identity” and are a way of “acquiring spiritual merit.”⁸ While these quotes are intended for religious instances, one can draw clear parallels to hypebeast culture. Travelling to a place where one buys the products of a brand they love reinforces and makes tangible a passion integral to their identity. Appearing in person collects countless status points within your community as opposed to buying the product online.

Rory Sutherland, the Vice Chairman of Ogilvy, a world-renowned advertising, marketing, and public relations agency, best explains why people feel compelled to wait in line for certain brands and not others: “How you value something not only depends on how you perceive it, and how you perceive it depends on the context in which you view it.” Or more simply, “The value of something is the product multiplied by the brand perception.”⁹ Most would not be willing to pay \$1,000 for a handbag at Walmart, but put it in the context of a Burberry store and you have a whole different scenario. Similarly, a recent study has shown that when consumers wait in a line before making a purchase, they are likely to purchase more as a larger purchase allows customers to offset the long wait time suffered (known as “sunk cost fallacy”).¹⁰ This would explain why Kith, Supreme, and many other brands promote and then exploit their fans by having them wait outside in the cold rather than accommodating them, because it tests their loyalty. Fans are immensely valuable and not just because of what’s in their wallet, but for their devotion and commitment to a brand.

8 Das, Subhamoy. “What’s the Purpose and Benefit of Going on a Pilgrimage?” *Learn Religions*, Learn Religions, 30 Jan. 2020, www.learnreligions.com/purpose-and-benefits-of-pilgrimage-1770618.

9 Sutherland, Rory, speaker. *Perspective Is Everything*. TED, 2011, www.ted.com/talks/rory_sutherland_perspective_is_everything?language=en.

10 School of Business, Georgetown University. “New Research on How Waiting Impacts Consumer Behavior.” *Psychology Today*, 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-initiative/201708/new-research-how-waiting-impacts-consumer-behavior.

Creating A New Meaning

“Why wouldn't you want a sneaker with confetti?”

No matter how many times I come in contact with this culture that I am learning so much about, something shakes me awake, making me realize that I have only grazed the surface. Not long after I had experienced waiting in line for the Kith sweater, I got an email announcing the release of a Nike x Supreme Air Force 1 Low sneaker, and instructions on how to register for the raffle to win a place in the line.

I had heard about the raffle from my many interviews with people waiting at Supreme, teased out of them with the bribe of a KitKat. Hundreds of people enter only to be given a slim chance of getting a low number (a good place) in line, a slightly higher chance of getting a big number, and a probable chance of getting no place whatsoever. If a person is lucky enough to be given a place and fails to show up at the allotted time, they are then removed



Preparing to bribe the hypebeasts for interviews

from any future sign-up lists indefinitely. I couldn't bear enduring another grueling three-hour wait again, and while unlikely that I would receive a decent place, it was my best shot at avoiding that experience again. I decided to register. The next day I received a text that read:

“You have been selected to attend our in-store release. Text ‘Yes’ to confirm and ‘No’ to cancel. Your response must be received by no later than 4 p.m.”

I didn't know what to text back. What time would I have to be there? What location would I have to go to? What place would I receive in line? How can people with jobs just get up and leave at any time Supreme wants them? They were asking me to sign up for anything.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You will receive further instructions tomorrow,” they texted back ominously.

At 12 p.m. the next day, they informed me that I was place #128, that I must bring an ID, and threatened again to remove me from all lists if I neglected to show up. I was skeptical of my chances of being able to buy the shoe with that place in line. I had been #51 at Kith and had just

missed their shoes. I had to go.

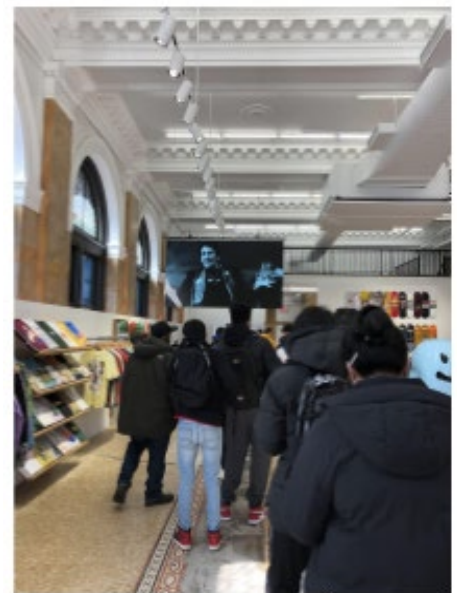
I arrived at 11:45 p.m. that Thursday. The line was much shorter than I had expected. It didn't wrap around the block like past Supreme lines. In fact, I'd estimate that there were only about thirty people. I flashed my ID to the security guard who proceeded to electronically cross my name off a long list he had on his iPad. He then scrawled a "128" in black sharpie on my hand and printed over it with a red compass stamp. He instructed me to go right in the store. I walked right by all of those people standing in the line only to join another line inside.

When one of the store attendants approached and asked what color (black or white) and what size shoe I wanted, I hesitated. This seemed too good to be true. I could get any size I wanted in any color I wanted?! I was skeptical, but I tried my luck anyway, asking for a black and a white each in a size 9.5 men's. I expected him to shake his head and ask me to try a different combination, a different size or a different color until he found a match. But he just turned around and disappeared into the back of the store. When he emerged with two black boxes and handed them to me, I clutched them to my chest. I couldn't believe this was actually happening. As I left the store with the oversized iridescent bag, having bought the shoes for \$95 each, I got a lot of nods and unabashed peeks inside my bag to see what I had purchased. I ran into the security guard who, unlike Charles, I had grown close to during my many visits to Supreme. He nodded my way and said "Wow. You got lucky!" For my purchase to be validated by someone who is an established member of this exclusive club made any remaining doubts about my purchase dissipate.

When I returned to my apartment, I carefully opened the boxes and the aroma of fresh shoes filled my room. After snapping a few pictures of both the black and the white, taking care to handle them delicately, I listed them both on an app called Grailed (specifically for desirable streetwear), eBay, and StockX. By the time I had returned to school, I'd gotten 23 offers on the white shoes, ranging from \$160-\$230 on Grailed, and one on StockX for \$198. The black sneakers hadn't elicited any kind of reaction on any platform yet. As the day went on, more and more offers for the white shoes flooded my inbox, and the black version received a grand total of one offer. This baffled me. Why was there such a demand for one shoe and not the other when they only differed in color? There was one person I knew who would have the answer: my younger sister Alana.



My place in line at Supreme



The second line inside the Supreme store.

My sister is one of the reasons I became interested in the psychology behind hypebeast culture. Although she is not a fan per se, many of her friends and people she follows on various social media accounts are fans. When I texted her asking why the black shoes were selling for much less, she asserted that this was always going to happen and that I should have consulted her in advance. White shoes are easily customizable compared to black shoes, and people make fun of those who wear black shoes because “they are all robbers.” Complex supports her assertion saying black Air Forces are “...the signature shoe of the degenerate” and that when someone wears black Air Forces, “you have



The Nike x Supreme Black Air Force 1 Lows

to immediately question their motives. These folks have no regard for your safety or their own.”¹¹ I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. There seemed to be a hypebeast handbook that everyone was following that I didn’t have. Part of the reason she was aware of this “rule” is because she is a devoted user of social media, where Tik Tok and Instagram users run rampant with streetwear items and create entirely new meanings for the products through memes and skits. Posting one meme where someone is depicted pretending to be stealing something with black Air Forces could result in the desire for the shoes to decrease, and consequently the value of the shoe.

The resale market is not something that Supreme intended to dominate at all. In fact, Supreme openly deplores reselling even though fans I interviewed estimated that 50-90% of the people waiting in line were there for that very reason. In one instance, a guard overheard someone say that they were going to resell an item they planned to buy that day. He quickly dispelled any notion that that was acceptable, and informed the whole line that if he found out that this was anyone’s intention, they would suffer the ultimate penalty and be removed from the queue.

As I explored the resale market and all the avenues that might reward me with the most return for the shoes, someone recommended a store called Round Two on the corner of Rivington and Ludlow downtown. The glass doors were opened for me by two burly security guards with coiled microphones snaking up their necks. The place was alive with excited chatter and vibrant, color-coded hoodies and sweatshirts that lined the walls. All of the customers seemed more interested in talking amongst themselves about what they might buy or their recent purchases, than buying products. It didn’t feel like a store, but more of a hang out hub. I seemed to have stumbled on the mecca for streetwear resale. As I skimmed the racks, I observed one interaction between two hypebeasts. As they were talking, one of the men wearing a floral button-up t-shirt reached over and plucked a white Supreme sneaker with a small plastic bag secured by the laces to the shoe.

11 Diaz, Angel. “How the Black Air Force 1 Became Sneaker Culture’s Funniest Meme.” *Complex*, 6 June 2019, www.complex.com/sneakers/2019/06/how-the-black-air-force-1-became-sneaker-cultures-funniest-meme.

It appeared to be filled with small pieces of colorful paper. He inspected it, and wondered out loud:

“Why would I want a shoe with confetti?”

“Why wouldn’t you want a sneaker with confetti?” retorted his friend.

It is in moments like these that I see fans create a new meaning out of a brand by defining what is cool and what isn’t amongst themselves and the community. The brand may be able to subject their fans to waiting in lines, but the moment the fans leave the line is when brands have virtually no power; when the true fan begins to define what the brand means for themselves through the resale market. When Supreme sells a Supreme brick for \$30, which then sells for over \$1,000 on eBay, it isn’t the brick that is being sold, but the idea of Supreme and being part of something bigger than yourself.



The Supreme Brick

Socialization

The Romance of Being A Part of Something Bigger Than Yourself

Socialization, or talking with other fans about topics that arise around the fan object, usually happens in the long stretch of time when fans wait in lines together or across social media. Evangelization (like its religious connotation) is the act of trying to encourage others to be a fan of something they are passionate about. In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the main factors that allow a brand to “tip,” or become popular. One of those factors is people called Connectors. Connectors are sociable, energetic, well-liked members of society who highly value (as their name suggests) fostering connections with the people that surround them. Gladwell writes, “Acquaintances, in short, represent a source of social power, and the more acquaintances you have the more powerful you are.”¹²

When it comes to the Connectors of streetwear, there is no one better than Tristan.¹³ He is the

12 Gladwell, Malcolm. “The Law of the Few.” *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Little, Brown and Company, 2000, p. 54.

13 Name has been changed.

UPS delivery man that most everyone who lives in downtown New York knows, the unofficial mayor of the neighborhood. He's the kind of person who doesn't just nod at someone as they pass by, but will set down the packages he is carrying and offer them a gleeful wave that must be returned. I came across Tristan when walking back from Kith after waiting in line. His eyebrows disappeared beneath his coffee-colored UPS cap when he saw the Kith bag. He yelled out from the back of the truck:

“What you got there, Ava?”

I laughed at his surprise and explained my research project. He ambled over to me and then whipped out his black Samsung phone with a small crack visible on the screen protector and pulled up StockX, the most popular app for reselling streetwear, and thrust the screen in my direction proudly. Since December 12th, 2018 he had made a profit of \$7,549 from reselling streetwear items. Now it was my turn to be surprised. He explained how “when you know the security guards, they'll let you bypass the line. It's all about building a rapport with somebody...Now I don't ever have to wait in line. Have you ever seen the Supreme line on Saturdays? You've gotta come with me sometime. I just walk right past those people,” he chuckled. He nodded a goodbye, slid his phone into the back pocket of his uniform and strolled back to his truck.



Ronnie Fieg, the creator of Kith, and me at the meet and greet.

His adeptness at forming relationships is what gets him in the door. Connecting fans is key for brands to maintain and strengthen their following. If fans don't do it enough themselves, companies will find ways to knead socialization into the customer experience. For example, Saturn, the car company, recognized the importance and impact of socialization. In the summer of 1994, Saturn organized an event where forty-five thousand Saturn owners gathered to spend their vacation time at the Saturn factory in Tennessee. They wanted to meet other Saturn owners, they wanted to meet the rest of the Saturn “family” (as Saturn called themselves), they wanted to meet the people who made their car, and the people who made the car wanted to meet them.

These kinds of social events reinforce the devotion fans feel towards certain brands. In a modern-day context of creating platforms for fans to convene, Kith organized a meet and greet with Fieg where fans could learn more about and preview an upcoming release.

Brands are only really able to control the creation of spaces where fans can come together and discuss how much they love a product. A line is the perfect platform for this to take place. “If you can make people show up in person, you are golden,” Zoe stated. Hearing her define this fan-like activity

brought me back to when I had interviewed fans waiting in the Supreme line.

“I meet people. We’ve hung out outside of the line. It’s a sense of community that keeps drawing me back,” said Zyer, a young man wearing a yellow pullover. I met a sixth grader named Carter who wanted a Supreme sweater because all his friends had one. At the end, his mom admitted that she didn’t even know why he was waiting in line, and when she looked to her son for his explanation, he piped up in a little voice, “It’s something to want.” Carter waited in line because a Supreme sweater symbolized acceptance from his friends, and a status symbol that demonstrated his belonging.

Brand affiliations are a way of controlling how one would like to be identified by others. The concept of trying on different identities through the things that we own is known as identity leisure. Entrepreneur asserts that “brands are no longer an ancillary accessory of identity -- they are the core of it. That means that in some cases, your brand won’t just be central to your product; it will actually be more important than the product itself.”¹⁴ Clearly, affiliating yourself with a brand is now part of the invaluable process of self-exploration as trying on different clothes that have cultural significance is an easy way to try on identities. Displaying a brand across your body is an easy way to morph into a living culture and persona that the brand already represents.

One of the reasons socialization is such a powerful fan activity is because it allows society to make a set of assumptions based on a person’s affiliations. A native New Yorker waiting in the Supreme line named Darell said he waits in line because “it’s a way to differentiate [him]self.” Historically, it was commonplace for people to never have to leave their hometowns and therefore rarely come across a stranger in their life. Nowadays, we might pass seventy or eighty people a minute when we’re walking down a crowded street in New York. We need quick ways to tell each other who we are since we can’t possibly take the time to get to know everyone. All the way back in our primal days, one had a split second to decide if the person in front of them was a threat or trustworthy. Speed was much more important than accuracy then, and we are still wired to search for quick ways to categorize those we come in contact with. Branding on clothes not only distinguishes a person from others, but also lets everyone else know what group in society that person belongs to.

14 Redmond, Anna. “How Millennials Signal Personal Identity Through Brand Preference.” *Entrepreneur*, 19 Jan. 2017, www.entrepreneur.com/article/287794.

Evangelization

All brands actively and purposefully participate in the evangelization of consumers in an effort to turn them into fans (separating them from commodities), though some brands participate in evangelization more than others and in more obvious ways than others. We have all been subject to attempted conversion at some point, such as emails encouraging content creation, an invitation to an event, or a pop-up soliciting customers to invite a friend to subscribe. Brands aim to become companies that fans can recommend to friends in order to collect more consumers that could then become fans. Consequently, brands will then strengthen their inner network of those who are aware of the company. Kith and Supreme are brands that actively and purposefully choose not to blatantly evangelize or treat their customers with syrupy-sweet promotional deals that are characteristic of the traditional style of advertising called banner marketing. Banner marketing uses advertising on web browsers and usually offers deals or sales. Instead, since Supreme and Kith fall into the luxury category of clothing and will never offer sales to their customers, they participate in a modern and more subtle version of advertising called content marketing, whereby companies focus on the creation and publishing of content for a targeted audience. Social media is perfect for this and is why these particular brands have a strong presence on Instagram. Supreme especially has even been able to maintain a balance of evangelization that feels nonchalant and effortless. Even in my own personal experience when trying to join the raffle, I did not feel welcomed or encouraged to participate. In fact, their communications with me felt borderline abrasive as they made my commitment to join the line at the given time binding. Although it is not immediately obvious, one extremely effective way in which Supreme and Kith advertise or evangelize is by using a line which signals quality. When people choose to sacrifice their time and comfort to wait in line, they are signaling that the item at the end of the line is something worth waiting for.

Impersonation

“Why do you think other people are waiting in line?” I asked a stout woman named Wendy who was waiting in the Supreme line. She was wrapped in a waist-length coat and jumping up and down on one leg to keep warm. When she heard the question, a little smile began to appear on her face, cracking her frozen lips. She laughed as she said, “I saw Usher wearing Supreme once.” At the time, she thought that was a silly answer, but impersonation, the act of trying to emulate an admirable person, is one key factor that has contributed to Supreme’s acclaim.

It is commonplace in society today to see celebrities wearing name brands all over their social media platforms. In response to this, Supreme has initiated dozens of celebrity collaborations, most

notably with stars such as Lady Gaga, Mike Tyson, Kate Moss, and Neil Young. Fans who buy these clothes are able to step into the clothes of the people they aspire to be like, whether it be celebrities that they will likely never meet, or people they see in everyday life. In *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell observes the smoking epidemic and concludes that more and more teenagers took up smoking because people who smoked “...weren’t cool because they smoked. They smoked because they were cool.”¹⁵ Similarly, when Supreme was created, founder James Jebbia hired the coolest skaters he could find from the Downtown scene.¹⁶ These skaters that most teenagers at the time aspired to be like wore the brand looped around their waists or stamped on their shoes. This was arguably the biggest contributor to the brand’s almost instantaneous success. Supreme was founded and got its start by selling a persona to consumers.

Impersonation, or cosplay, could be as subtle as wearing a soccer jersey or as complex as going the full Elvis. Not only does branding demonstrate a small part of who someone is to the world, but also creates a special type of understanding of the tribal colors displayed amongst your community. “Even something as basic as a white wedding dress is a form of cosplay. You’re giving off very specific cultural symbols about your own specific status based on what you’re wearing,” Zoe elaborates. Outside of Western culture, one might not understand the significance of a white dress.

Encouraging fanlike activities is what brands aim to do. Whether it’s turning the purchase experience into a ritual, creating a platform whereby consumers can connect, or encouraging content creation (like a hashtag), brands can cultivate a true fan.

“Fandom is all about ‘doing.’ Being a fan isn’t something that someone is, it’s something that they do. Fandom is a verb. If you’re not fanning you’re just a consumer,” Zoe elucidates. Brands recognize these fan-like activities and do everything they can to create a company that fosters those desires. A perfect and cheap place to supply the breeding grounds for a brand to become more than just a brand is a line because it incentivizes most of the fan-like activities: socialization, evangelization, it demands taking a pilgrimage, and creates a new meaning for the brand. When this transition, a consumer turning into a fan and a brand becoming a community, occurs, it’s difficult to explain to an outsider who still sees the person as a consumer and the brand as just another brand.

15 Gladwell, Malcolm. “Case Study: Suicide, Smoking, and the Search for the Unsticky Cigarette.” *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Little, Brown and Company, 2000, p. 232.

16 Sullivan, Robert. “Charting the Rise of Supreme, From Cult Skate Shop to Fashion Superpower.” *Vogue*, 10 Aug. 2017, www.vogue.com/article/history-of-supreme-skate-clothing-brand.

Most fans will try to find ways to self-justify their fandom to seem more socially acceptable. One of the classic examples of this was a study conducted to observe the kind of people who played the game Warhammer.¹⁷ When they asked the players why certain people play Warhammer as opposed to others, the most common answer was that those that played the game were more creative than the general public. When they studied it quantitatively by having players fill out what their other hobbies were and what they did right before playing the game, they found that they weren't more creative than the general public, but that they were actually more aggressive and angry than the general public. When asked, a Supreme fan or any fan won't come outright and say, "I'm extremely aggressive in the world and need an outlet for my anger" or "I desperately need a place that I can depend on for stability in my life" because they may not even be aware of it themselves.

17 Pentony, Robert J. *Video Games, Personality, Aggression, and Arousal: The Predictions of the General Aggression Model*. 2013.

Into the Depths of eBay

I turned on my computer and uploaded the pictures I had taken of the tie-dye Kith sweater I bought earlier that day to eBay. When I was asked to list the price, I faltered. The value of the sweater extended beyond the material. I had no idea how much value this piece of clothing held within hype-beast culture, and waiting for three and a half hours in line made the item feel priceless. I eventually decided to value it at \$250, a \$70 profit. After four hours I had three bids: two for \$210, and one for my asking price. The possibility of making \$70 felt electrifying. I made \$20/hour standing in that line, which is much more than some people make working at a minimum wage job. If a person knew how to navigate the market to collect the rarest items, they could make a decent living. I had been the person on the other side of the ropes hours ago, scrutinizing those who chose to undertake this excruciatingly long proof of loyalty to the brand. Now, I wondered why more people weren't taking advantage of this opportunity. I immediately hit "Accept" on the offer for my asking price, but making the money wasn't as easy as it had seemed.

I waited weeks for the buyer to respond to my acceptance of his offer. After contacting him and asking him to release the funds, he responded immediately and asked me to remove him from the sale because the product was "not as described." His offer was redacted and I was sent right back to where I had started, with a small black bag in place of three hours and \$180. I thought back to those hours I spent waiting in line, the money seeming to burn a hole in my pocket. I immediately relisted it on eBay that night. When I woke up the next morning, I was delighted to find that another buyer had offered \$250 dollars, and I quickly accepted, the sporadicity of these offers making my fingers fly across the keyboard for fear they would dissipate. Only after accepting did I notice the note the buyer had included with his offer.

I'd been warned of the numerous tell-tale signs of an online scammer in the past. They make strange requests, have no reviews, usually forgo a profile picture, and try to get you to communicate and transact away from the safety of official platforms. But with the looming promise of \$250, I did as he requested and sent him my PayPal email address over text, leaving eBay and the protection it provides. I became suspicious as soon as he asked me to also send him a \$300 gift card with the package (which he promised to reimburse). I had run into a different shark, one that seemed much more menacing when its glimmering teeth were replaced by the glow of the screen. I decided to play along for a little while, asking exactly what kind of gift card he would accept because there are so many kinds on offer at Duane Reade. Finally, he sent the "payment," which was an email made to look like a PayPal receipt for \$550, when my PayPal account itself had not received any money. Sensing I may be catching onto the ruse, he texted a demand for a picture of the (pre-scratched) \$300 gift card. In response, I sent a three-word text back:

"Get a life."

Afterword

We see lines everywhere we look: out of bookstores and cafés, restaurants, and, most commonly, out of clothing stores. I now know that a line is not just a line, but a way for people to come together and find others that enjoy the same products and activities they like. A line is a place that people can return to, week after week, to seek refuge in a location where they feel at home. Someone waiting might feel one step closer to becoming their idol everytime they move up a slot in line. After this project, I know that I will never ridicule a line the same way ever again. This activity could be fulfilling an integral part of a person's identity. My biggest mistake going into this project was assuming that people who wait in line are cultural dupes, that they are being brainwashed by brands to do things that don't make logical sense. In fact, these people understand something that not many (sometimes even the hypebeasts themselves) can see or understand; these people waiting are in active pursuit for somewhere to belong. They are taking control of their lives and carving out time for an activity that means something to them, acting of their own volition every time they choose to place themselves in line again and again each week. Ironically, someone may stand in line in order to feel as though they are going against what society expects of them, participating in an activity that leads instead of follows. Society, in fact, is the herd of sheep, and hypebeasts are distinguishing themselves as leaders.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Andrea Simons for acting as a constant source of support and expertise, and Zoe Fraade for providing an instrumental interview that exposed the intricacies of brand influence and the other side of this culture to me. I would also like to thank the unofficial mayor of NoHo for imparting his personal experience, as well as all of the hypebeasts who were kind enough to allow me to interview them. Finally, I would like to thank Charles for unknowingly encouraging me to pursue this project each time he shook his head *no*.

Works Cited

- Brenner, Abigail. "10 Way Rituals Help Us Celebrate Our Lives." *Psychology Today*, 2015, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-flux/201508/10-ways-rituals-help-us-celebrate-our-lives.
- Das, Subhamoy. "What's the Purpose and Benefit of Going on a Pilgrimage?" *Learn Religions*, Learn Religions, 30 Jan. 2020, www.learnreligions.com/purpose-and-benefits-of-pilgrimage-1770618.
- Diaz, Angel. "How the Black Air Force 1 Became Sneaker Culture's Funniest Meme." *Complex*, 6 June 2019, www.complex.com/sneakers/2019/06/how-the-black-air-force-1-became-sneaker-cultures-funniest-meme.
- "Fame, Feeling And Fluency – The Only Brand Metrics You Will Ever Need." *System1 Group*, 22 Mar. 2019, system1group.com/blog/fame-feeling-and-fluency-the-only-brand-metrics-you-will-ever-need.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Law of the Few." *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Little, Brown and Company, 2000, p. 54.
- Pentony, Robert J. *Video Games, Personality, Aggression, and Arousal: The Predictions of the General Aggression Model*. 2013, *Video Games, Personality, Aggression, and Arousal: The Predictions of the General Aggression Model*.
- Supreme Colorist Shoe, <https://hypebae.com/2020/1/kith-new-balance-colorist-1700-sneaker-release-closer-look-ronnie-fieg>.
- School of Business, Georgetown University. "New Research on How Waiting Impacts Consumer Behavior." *Psychology Today*, 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-initiative/201708/new-research-how-waiting-impacts-consumer-behavior.
- Sullivan, Robert. "Charting the Rise of Supreme, From Cult Skate Shop to Fashion Superpower." *Vogue*, 10 Aug. 2017, www.vogue.com/article/history-of-supreme-skate-clothing-brand.
- Sutherland, Rory, speaker. *Perspective Is Everything*. TED, 2011, www.ted.com/talks/rory_sutherland_perspective_is_everything?language=en.
- Supreme Clay Brick Red, <https://stockx.com/supreme-clay-brick-red>.
- Redmond, Anna. "How Millennials Signal Personal Identity Through Brand Preference." *Entrepreneur*, 19 Jan. 2017, www.entrepreneur.com/article/287794.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Case Study: Suicide, Smoking, and the Search for the Unsticky Cigarette." *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Little, Brown and Company, 2000, p. 232.
- Kith x New Balance Williams III Hoodie, <https://kith.com/collections/kith-x-new-balance-the-colorist-collection/products/kith-x-new-balance-williams-iii-hoodie-blue-ombre>.

