Velour Tracksuit: A Fashionable dress in the 20th Century

Anthony Mota

Humanities Department, New York City College of Technology

ARTH 1204, 20th Century Dress and Culture

Prof. Laura Palmer

December 6, 2020

Abstract

Velour tracksuits were produced during the 20th century, from 1900-2000. Velour tracksuits is one of the many garments that played a significant role in the 20th century. What makes a garment a fashionable dress? The velour tracksuit is a fashionable dress because it was worn by everybody from athletes, break dancers, and celebrities. Not only that, the garment sparked a movement. Velour tracksuits are defined as a fashionable dress in the 20th century that has cultural, social, and historical context. My theory was proven correct because the history of the velour tracksuits originates from sportswear and fly boys and b girls better known as break dancers in the 1970’s. The culture behind the velour tracksuit derives from the hip hop community, majority of the entertainers would be seen wearing velour tracksuits. The social movement behind velour tracksuit is many individuals would create their own brand and market their own velour tracksuits. The velour tracksuit is a timeless piece that is still worn today, the garment which was only worn by males now it’s unisex.

Introduction

What is velour and why was it one of the most fashionable garments in the 20th century? Velour is obtained from the French word velvet, which is defined by a clothing and upholstery fabric characterized by a short dense warp pile. Velour fabric originated in the far east and then carried along the silk route by Arabs to Europe. Moreover, velour is similar to velvet in the sense that it’s woven by a special process with looped threads that are cut from a pile or textured surface. Velour is a loose woven of cotton that blends with synthetic fiber. The traditional tracksuits originated in the 1970's but the velour tracksuit grew to stardom in the early 2000’s. Velour tracksuits are defined as a fashionable dress in the 20th century that has cultural, social, and historical context.

Discussion

Caribbeans have provided us with culture, languages and dress practices. In addition, they have contributed to the diversity of the United States for numerous years. Urban fashion connected to hip-hop and rap music has strongly influenced clothing choices of Caribbean islanders in North America, particularly those of African descent (Tortora, 2010). The concept of music has connected different regions and cultures together. Fashion and hip hop culture correlate with each other, as they both are universal and have a positive impact. Hip hop has broken barriers and opened the door for many fashion brands by marketing which includes song lyrics, red carpet outfits, introducing the outfit to popular magazines, and public interviews. The tracksuits were worn by many athletes and break dancers in the early stages of the 1970s. At the height of the break-dancing craze, many Caribbean “fly-boys'' and “b-girls'' sported colorful, padded track suits and fitted tops (Tortora, 2010). Tracksuits were essential during these times because it completed the whole break dance look. The history of tracksuits goes back all the way to the 1960s. Dress practices have played a significant role in the Carribean community because that's how they identify themselves and show their diversity.

When the tracksuit first came out, it’s purpose was for sportswear. Sportswear is clothing that is mainly worn for sports or physical exercise. Tracksuits would later on become an all purpose outfit for both males and females. The tracksuit in the beginning stage was only for males because many people believed it was masculine which happened to be true. People claimed the tracksuit to be masculine because it was worn or seen for sports and competition only. The transformation of the tracksuit from sportswear to a fashion item was a transition that responded to the zeitgeist, an example of a ‘fitness chic’ instigated in the 1970s and developed into a full-blown gym culture in the 1990s (Turney, 2019). The tracksuit began to evolve over time and it became unisex. The direction fashion was going, it made all the sense for clothing to be unisex. The growth in unisex clothing has helped further the dialogue of gender and identity in society today.

Velour tracksuits are a timeless garment. Every fabric or garment has a decade that symbolizes them. Velour fabric was worn throughout televisions and radios in the 1960s. Adidas would later on use velour fabric for jogging suits. Velour fabric was seen in the famous tv series Star Trek which aired during 1966-1969. It is poignant that times in 1970s fashion velour actually went out of fashion during the 1980s as men returned to a more conservative, buttoned-down looks. However, the fabric came back into its fashion in the late 1990s to 2000 (Albaciete, 2015). Velour fabric reached its highest peak during the 2000s, even though it has been around for centuries. Velour is typically a natural fiber if made from cottons, if it's made from polyester it’s said to be synthetic fabric. Velour is sustainable when made from organic cotton and unsustainable when made from polyester (Mari, 2020). Nevertheless, velour is a durable piece.

The designer brand Juicy Couture emerged to the scene in the 2000s. Juicy Couture would later on become a household name by 2003 and would be popularized for their tracksuits. All A list celebrities wore Juicy Couture which include Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton, Brittney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, Madonna, and much more. The purpose of the tracksuit was changing; it was now a sign of intent, whilst retaining an air of power and recognised excellence or celebrity. It was the clothing to be ‘seen in’, worn on the way to and from the gym, pool, court, aerobics room and so on, it demonstrated to those outside of these sporting arenas that the wearer ‘meant business’ (Turney, 2019). The value of the tracksuit was unmatched. From being only known for sportswear to now universal everyday wear. This speaks volume because it goes to show the customers make the clothing or the brand have value. The velour tracksuit became a culture movement. The tracksuit was seen everywhere from fashion runway shows, to red carpet events, award shows, and much more. Many individuals would vouch that the tracksuits were comfortable and cozy. The era of the tracksuit has shifted over the years, one can’t tell what the future holds. Nevertheless, the velour tracksuits made an impact on society and the fashion world. The velour tracksuits is one of the ideal garments that symbolizes the early 2000s.

Juicy Couture is one of the main brands that capitalized off velour tracksuits. They played an effective role in the early 2000s fashion. They made 605 million in sales in 2008. The Juicy Couture establishment was run by two ladies by the name of Gela Nash Taylor and Pamela Skaist Levy. The attraction to celebrity culture in the early 2000s is really what contributed Juicy to become such a popular brand. It really was the height of: "Celebrities! They're just like us” (Kim and Cameron, 2020). Juicy Couture tracksuits were accessible to the customers, as they cost $155. For $155 you were able to have the same Juicy Couture tracksuit as the celebrity you idolized.

Velour was a fabric that was around but it wasn’t glamorized as it is now. Velour was used for other essentials. Before the 1970s, velour was mostly used as a cheaper alternative for velvet in upholstery, becoming drapes and covering couches, and the tracksuit was quite literally a suit designed to be worn by a runner on a track to keep warm before a race (Noone, 2020). Velour went from being a cheaper alternative to being spotted everywhere from kids to adults in velour tracksuits. The velour movement became so influential. Nas stated that the tracksuits were so important to him when his best friend died, he buried him in a black FILA tracksuit. Hip Hop moguls like Jay Z, Diddy, and Russell Simmons started selling velour sweatsuits with their brand name. Jay Z had rocawear, Diddy had Sean John, and Russell Simmons had Phat Farm. Kimora Lee Simmons who’s a household name is another individual who launched her own brand selling velour sweatsuits. The brand name was Baby Phat; it was a women’s offshoot of Phat Farm. The baby pink and rhinestone emblazoned tracksuits was one of their signature looks.

Some garments are masterpieces and others are seasonal. Some garments can have a hot buzz for 3-6 months and eventually it would die out. Other garments have the ability to be popular for years and still be trending or worn years later. The velour tracksuits are back in style, all the high brands have been adding velour styles to their brands. Brands such as Vetements, Balenciaga, Gucci, and Fenty have incorporated velour to their collection. The tracksuit is also perfect for our pandemic-prescribed lifestyle, our new simple lifewhich includes [working from home](https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/living/wellness/work-from-home-productivity/), making the occasional [grocery run](https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/food-drink/dining/impossible-beef-fairprice-redmart-singapore/), or [heading to the gym](https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/living/wellness/gyms-in-singapore-covid-19-pandemic/). It’s the apex of [athleisure](https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/style/fashion/off-active-off-white-new-activewear-collection-info/), which has defined the last decade and ruled our shopping decisions for the last six months and counting (Cambe, 2020). Our life has done a full circle due to Covid-19. Velour tracksuits suits perfect for a stay at home outfit or a store run. Velour tracksuit is one of those outfits that can be worn for any event.

Velour tracksuits were a fan favorite because it made a fashion statement. Urban streetwear brands like Fubu, Enyce, and Ecko Unlimited drew attention from their tracksuits. Sean John, aka P Diddy’s infamous streetwear collection, even made it on the NYFW calendar with a show that basically invented the concept of fashion show attendance pandemonium (Robinson, 2018). Velour tracksuits were highly favored. It was a multi purpose outfit. It could either be flexible or a flex, it all depends on you. Most trackies consist of a zippered jacket with a coordinating pair of pants. Originally, they were made of materials like cotton, terry cloth and polyester though modern incarnations come in a variety of synthetic and tech alternatives like nylon, Gore-Tex and Sympatex that look slick and wick away moisture. Oh yeah, and velour (Mak, 2020). These are all the materials needed to make the tracksuit.

Conclusion

The evolution of the velour tracksuit is memorable. It went from being only worn by male athletes in the 1970s to being globally worn by the hottest celebrities both males and females in the 2000s. The tracksuits are even coming back full circle in the 2020s. The velour tracksuit has shifted the culture. The tracksuits derives from the carribean community and break dancers. Celebrities from all diversities from actors, rappers, athletes were spotted in velour tracksuits. The history of velour dates all the way to the 1960s. Velour tracksuits is a garment from the 20th century that depicts the cultural, social, and historical context.

Annotated Bibliography

Albaciete, A. (2015, November 11). Velour Fabric: History and How It Became Popular. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from <http://sewingideas.eu/velour-fabric-history-and-how-it-became-popular>

Cambe, P. (2020, October 30). Velour tracksuits are back: How the '00s trend has evolved since Juicy Couture. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from <https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/style/fashion/velour-tracksuits-2000s-revival-fashion-trend/>

Kim, I. A., & Cameron, S. (2020, October 19). The rise and fall of Juicy Couture. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from https://www.businessinsider.com/rise-and-fall-of-juicy-couture-tracksuits-2019-11

Mak, P. (n.d.). The history of tracksuits: Proof that style is not only an art but a sport. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from <https://www.frankandoak.com/handbook/style/history-of-the-tracksuit>

Marie, A. (2020, October 17). Velour [Fabric, Material, Textile Guide for Home, Environment, Animals, Laborers]. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from https://healabel.com/v-fabrics-materials-textiles/velour

No-one, G. (2020). The Velour Tracksuit: Dream of doing nothing. Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/fashion/the-velour-tracksuit-rip-to-the-dream-of-doing-nothing>

Robinson, R. (2018, February 13). Charting the History of the Velour Tracksuit. Retrieved December 07, 2020, from <https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a17204412/history-of-the-tracksuit-juicy-couture/>

Tortora, P. G. (2010). *Berg encyclopedia of world dress and fashion. the United States and Canada*. Oxford: Berg.

Turney, J. (2019). *Fashion crimes: Dressing for deviance*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.