



## Who Are These Sneakerheads?

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Introduction and Conceptual Development The sneaker market has grown rapidly (Badenhausen, 2015). As the popularity of sneakers has grown, so has the resale market of limited pre-owned sneakers; this market is now estimated to be at a billion-dollars (Lutz, 2014). Such a market brings about extreme behaviors related to the acquisition of highly valued sneakers. These behaviors are often termed “consumer misbehaviors” and in extreme cases have resulted in injury and death.

People who collect and wear sneakers with great enthusiasm are called sneakerheads. Prior qualitative research on sneakerheads has generally focused on the connection between advertising and consumer behavior related to sneakers (Dufur, 1997; Wilson & Sparks, 1996). However, research on the consumption motives and decision-making processes of sneakerheads is lacking. Despite an increasing social significance within the sneakerhead culture (i.e., consumption misbehaviors), an understanding of sneakerheads in terms of their perceptions, motivations and decision-making processes is virtually non-existent. In order to fill a gap in the literature, the current study incorporates a Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) approach and aims to address 3 research questions; 1) Why do these sneakerheads buy, collect, and wear sneakers with such a high level of enthusiasm?, 2) How do these sneakerheads go about buying, collecting, and wearing sneakers?, and 3) What perceptions do these sneakerheads have regarding inequity and violent incidents related to the limited release of highly anticipated sneakers?

Method Using snowball sampling, five individuals who identify themselves as sneakerheads and meet criteria established by the researchers based on the analysis of sneakerheads online forum were recruited for in-depth interviews. All informants were male college students in the U.S. The size of informants’ sneaker collections varied from 12 to more than 100 pairs. For all informants, at least 10 sneakers were purchased for the purposes of collecting and reselling rather than wearing. All interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto “Dedoose.com” for analysis. An iterative process was used to identify emergent themes.

Results and Discussions The analysis resulted in 6 thematic categories; (1) culture, (2) rarity, (3) purchase decision process, (4) quality and price, (5) reselling, and (6) violent incidents. These themes helped to answer the research questions. First, the themes “culture” and “rarity” provide insights into why sneakerheads take part in sneakerheads culture. From a “culture” perspective, collecting and wearing sneakers is an integral part of the informants’ lives. They feel a deep connection to their sneakers. They also engage in bottom-up dressing; specifically, their sneakers drive their clothing choices in that they select apparel fashions that match their sneakers. Those who collected shoes for a long time expressed nostalgic emotions related to their sneakers. From a “rarity” perspective, ‘one of a kind’ sneakers such as the player exclusives, samples, and other limited editions are considered high-value due to heightened difficulty of

acquiring them. Informants shared their excitement and joyfulness from their experiences of obtaining rare sneakers that they had desired for a long time. Second, the “purchase decision process” and “quality and price” themes offer insights into how sneakerheads collect sneakers. Compared to ordinary decision-making processes, the sneakerheads informants tended to rely heavily on unreliable sources of information such as rumors or leaked information from inside sources. Such unconfirmed inside information played a critical role in creating anticipation and driving purchase plans for some informants. For purchasing channels, the informants reported having bought used shoes from eBay, Facebook group, and friends when they could not get them from the stores. In their comments on quality, the informants complained about increasing prices despite decreasing quality. The informants attributed price increases to the increase of popularity and instant sell-outs. Some informants shared the experience of crumbling and yellowing of the shoes due to poor quality. Such quality issues prompted some informants to switch from one sneaker brand to another. Third, the sneakerheads informants shared their thoughts of “inequity” and “violent incidents”. Limited quantity of popular sneakers appears to have ramifications for sneakerheads, leading to the growth of big resellers who hire people to stay in line or enter raffles to get limited items. This led to perceived inequity among individual sneakers due to heightened difficulty of acquiring rare shoes. A recent change in the release method (i.e., from first come first serve to smartphone applications and multi-releases) was perceived more fair and expected to reduce physical contacts and cheating. Yet the informants generally expressed concerns of misuse of new methods based on their past experiences with resellers. In addition, the informants shared their negative sentiments about violent incidents associated with sneakers and also reported feeling insecure about wearing sneakers in specific locations such as big cities.

This qualitative research using in-depth interview provides rich insights into the sneakerhead culture. The research has limitation in that the informants were homogeneous in demographic characteristics. Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of this rapidly growing consumer sub-culture, and ultimately, to mitigate consumer misbehaviors that occur within.

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