



Do the Sneakerheads Just Want To Be Like Mike?

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Sneakers may not be just sneakers. To some sneakerheads who collect and wear sneakers enthusiastically, the Air Jordan sneaker series can make some avid fans engage in extreme behaviors. There have been several incidents that people got hurt or even killed because of a pair of Jordan sneakers. For example, on December 21, 2012, the release date of a new Air Jordan, a young man was murdered by an attempted robbery of his brand new shoes. Nike and Jordan Brand has been changing how they release new Jordan products from “first come first served” to “online photo verifications” (Dunne, 2014). Despite such effort, problems arising from limited edition of sneakers amongst avid sneakerheads have continued to persist. Nonetheless, this unique phenomenon, posing potential risks among their fans is not well understood. Therefore, the current exploratory research aims to investigate the subculture of the sneakerheads with a specific focus on emotions underneath this sneaker frenzy. Previous studies related to sneakers generally focused on the racial aspects and athlete’s influence to youth (Dufur, 1997; Wilson & Sparks, 1996). In order to provide better insights into the subculture of the sneakerheads, this study takes Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) approach with three research questions; 1) How sneakerheads use the online sneaker forum, 2) How they feel about the Air Jordan sneakers, and 3) How they decide to buy the Air Jordan sneaker.

Netnography (Kozinets, 2002) is a method that applies ethnography in the online world. The current study employed netnography to observe the dynamics and the nature of the sneakerheads community without influencing interactions among members and provide useful insights to help understand behaviors of sneakerheads. For this study, one of largest sneakerheads’ online communities “Niketalk.com” was selected after using search engines and consulting with experts. As the oldest and most influential sneaker online community, Niketalk.com has approximately 95,942 members and contains over 267,873 threads in its forums about NIKE footwear since 1999 (Niketalk.com, 2014). For data triangulation, two threads from 2014 Air Jordan Retro Shoes were selected for the current research. A total of 5,700 posts were downloaded and analyzed. All posts were read multiple times to gain a coherent, comprehensive interpretation, and develop meaningful categories from the posts.

The analyses resulted in four thematic categories; (1) information sharing, (2) group identity, (3) positive brand experience, and (4) negative brand experience. First, the community members shared important information about the releasing sneakers amongst them, such as release dates, pictures, videos, locations, website links, discounts, raffle codes, restocks, and deliveries. Even though the information was not always correct, it was critical to decision-making of those who were “on the fence” (who did not decide whether buy it or not).

Second, the sneakerheads strongly distinguished themselves from hypebeasts (who buy things based on the popularity (e.g., did celebrities wear these?) and scarcity (e.g., instant

sellout)) and resellers (who buy sneakers for reselling) and expressed hostility against these groups. Both hypebeasts and resellers were perceived negatively as those who mess with the “Sneaker game” (e.g., cutting the line, stealing opportunities to get the sneakers at retail price) and misunderstand the culture and value of the sneakers (e.g., ignorance of original models). This active distinction from hypebeasts and resellers appeared to help members build a sense of community amongst them.

Third, the sneakerheads from Niketalk.com shared positive brand experiences. Those with good memories associated with the original sneakers (childhood memories, Michael Jordan's legacy, and appearance in animation) were strongly attached to the releasing retro products. Some members claimed the sneakers as the “Holy Grail” and the brand as the “dream” merchant as well. How the sneaker resembles to the original models (e.g., brand logo, color, leather, and mold) was very important to members. Those who share positive memories of the original sneakers generally disliked the fusion models. Some members gave nicknames that relates with the color way of the product (e.g., sports teams, universities, and TV show and Animation characters). Many members were strongly attached and loyal to the brand, and they were willing to buy and collect the retro sneakers series that they liked with extra effort (e.g., premium price and multiple purchases).

Fourth, there were shared negative brand experiences related to the new product release. Some were angry with the corrupted employees of the retailers (e.g., demanding compulsion purchase, unfair distribution), unreliable release methods (e.g., raffles and tickets), violent behaviors in the line, increasing price, decreasing quality, website errors, and payment issues. Due to the increasing demand, some members were anxious about losing the chance to obtain the shoes they wanted. Some of those who expressed the negative emotions were not willing to purchase and spread negative words-of-mouth about the shoes.

The exploratory research using netnography provides new insights into the culture of sneakerheads. Beyond sharing information about new sneakers, sneakerheads explicitly shared their positive and negative brand experiences about the limited product. This exploratory study revealed the key cultural traits of the sneakerheads such as brand attachment (Park et al., 2010), brand fetishism (Assaf, 2009), tension with the brand, and group discrimination. The findings provide insights about how members of the sneakerheads community build a sense of brand community, what cultivates their loyalty to the brand, and what might drive them away. This study provides useful information for brands to build effective relationship management strategies with avid fans as well as directions for further research.

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