

r/Sneakers

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Ethnographic Report



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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report was to focus on sneaker culture and consumption behaviors of self-identified Sneakerheads. Applied ethnography was employed as the theoretical framework for this research. Moreover, the findings of this study further define the culture of a Sneakerhead and illuminate on their consumption behaviors and practices within the community. Specifically, the unique culture of Sneakerheads indicates an understandable sense of group identity as it relates to motivations, behavior, and brand identity within the Sneakerhead community.

Research Question: Why do these Sneakerheads buy, sell, collect and wear sneakers?

Key Objectives:

- Explore how people interact with one another in the sneaker community of the r/Sneakers Reddit page.
- Understand the values and roles of what sneakers play in people's lives in the sneaker community.
- Learn about what makes someone want to purchase a sneaker.

The Results: Sneaker culture is a pawn shop.

- They buy and resell sneakers to make money.
- They collect sneakers because of their value and history.
- They wear sneakers as a form of self-expression of identity and uniqueness.

People use pawn shops to exchange something of value for monetary gain. Oftentimes these things are antique with history, precious to the owner, and have a unique character. The behavior of Sneakerheads in sneaker culture is similar to the work and culture of a pawn shop because they commonly either sell or exchange their sneakers for something of higher value. This could be money or a different shoe. Owners can sell their sneakers for a higher value due to the story behind the sneaker, just like antiques.

We found that the community around sneaker culture is constantly growing as a place where these people with similar interests can come together to learn more, give advice, and socialize.

Table of Contents



01 | Executive Summary

02 | Introduction

04 | Methodology

05 | Observations

08 | Interviews

10 | Analysis

12 | Conclusion

13 | References

Introduction



Sneaker culture is a pawn shop



Initially, sneakers were invented solely for athletic purposes. However, now, consumers buy, sell, wear and collect sneakers for multiple uses and functions. Sneaker culture is arguably one of the most increasingly discussed topics within today's society. Sneaker culture emerged after Michael Jordan's decision to sign with Nike prior to the 1984-85 NBA season. A very short period after that, hip-hop stars, who were known for their unique rhymes, lyrics and swag, also began to embrace cool kicks and thus, popularized the sneaker silhouette.

Throughout the years, there have been innumerable discussions about why "sneakerheads" (cult followers of sneaker culture) buy, sell, and wear sneakers. Our research revealed that the behavior of these people in sneaker culture is similar to the work and culture of a pawn shop because they commonly either sell or exchange their sneakers for something of higher value.

Initially, the bonded group we chose to study was sneakerheads within the Facebook Group ATATF (Addicted To All Things Fresh); chosen because it is a private group of 46,000+ members locally based in Atlanta. We wanted to investigate value perceptions and consumption behaviors of sneakerheads who are mixed roles resellers of sneakers. Not all of our team was granted access to the group, ultimately causing us to change our field of study to the r/Sneakers Reddit page in order to save the short time we had left to do observations

To better understand sneaker culture, our team of four interaction design major students at Kennesaw State University, conducted an applied ethnography to better understand behaviors and social interactions within the culture:

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With 2.3M members and counting, the r/Sneakers Reddit page contains users from all around the world who converse about their favorite brands and models, share images and ideas on public forums and inherently, contribute to sneaker culture. The findings were drawn from 12 hours of observations each from our team and interviews with 4 participants, self identified Sneakerheads.

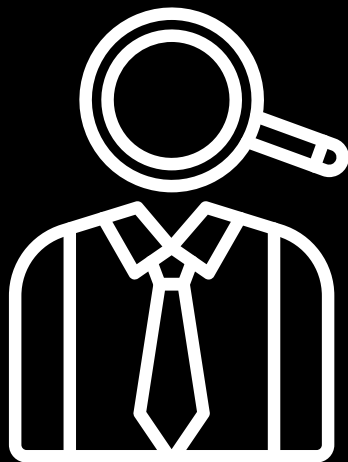
Throughout this research process, the world was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which skewed our research findings because the ongoing crisis has altered how, when, and where we shop and also, how we buy sneakers. Our work aims to explore Sneakerhead culture, while gaining a broader understanding of brand preferences, and brand identities that may exist within.



Methodology

For this study we did an applied ethnography, which is a qualitative research process which gives us a better understanding or interpretation done with observations, interviews, and analysis. We wanted to understand an emic perspective, by participating in close observations and analysis in the r/Sneakers Reddit page in which our main goal was to understand: why do these Sneakerheads buy, sell, and collect sneakers?

Our applied method was done within the span of sixteen weeks starting from August 2021 through to December 2021. More specifically, we performed a virtual ethnographic study, which is an approach that explores how people interact with one another in a virtual environment. The online setting we chose to observe was the Sneakers Reddit page, consisting of 2.3 Million and counting 'sneakerheads' (participants).



Before beginning observations, our team conducted personal research of articles and websites to bring our prior knowledge of the field “up to speed.” We needed to familiarize ourselves with sneaker culture and the importance of these shoes to consumers and the fashion industry.

During our individual 12 hours of observation we took notes using a method that includes “jottings and fieldnotes.” This process was divided into at least 4 separate sessions. Jottings were detailed notes of every and anything interesting found, followed by a field note that analyzed the behavior documented in our jotting session. We described the setting of our observation, which participants were present, what we perceived participants were trying to accomplish, and how the tone was of interactions. We also identified any “ordinary” and/or “extraordinary” behaviors and started to hypothesize about what we thought was going on as our analysis was tentative and open to changing overtime.

Our team then compiled our notes and analyzed patterns together to create this report of our findings.

Observations

Finding discussions within the r/Sneakers Reddit page proved to be very difficult. Most posts were participants showing off their rare finds, newest buys, or clean refurbishments. Based on profile pictures and usernames observed, the composition of this community consists of mainly young to middle-aged men. This page is for every sneaker collectors' best friend because with such a large membership of 2.3M you can get the answer you need but also learn from the greatest collectors. These sneaker enthusiasts are passionate and dedicated to their subculture.

Buying and Reselling Sneakers

The sneaker culture is still alive and well; however collecting limited edition sneakers has changed forever. It's no longer about who has love for the sneakers, but rather who can actually win sneakers through online ticket raffles. The medium in which customers purchase sneakers has rapidly evolved in recent years. Now, more than ever before, high-end sneakers are a product of real demand by participants who see reselling as the new get-rich-quick plan of action. We observed in our field the controversy of raffles and the sneaker selling web applications such as GOAT or StockX.

People who posted the shoes they had won from raffles consisted of a mixture of responses. We were able to learn that people a part of this community find raffles to be unfair since it is very unlikely to be able to win and find it unethical that the resellers are selling these sneakers four times more than what they are originally priced. Through this we discovered those who have a variety of sneakers in their collection are usually a part of the upper working class.

Value and History

Many of the sneakers that are bought have some history to them and it adds value to them. During our observations, some were finding their parents' old sneakers and trying to revive them; while others buy their sneakers based on the players that have worn them. An example of this is, the brand Jordans. These sneakers are modeled by the player Michael Jordan and the games that he played. There was a game that he played and made a legendary shot. The sneaker that he wore for that is sold out.

Another example is that a user from Reddit was asking for advice on what the sneaker was called and how he could revive his dad's old sneakers. He found out that they were a pair of pumas from 1988.

Seeing that these people just collect sneakers, you may think, "Why don't they just wear them because they are just collecting dust?" In sneaker culture, value is added to the sneaker, and since most of the sneakers have a backstory the value doubles. Another reason is some of them are either rare or limited editions. When they sell them some of the sneakers can go for about \$9000 and even more. The same way people hold on to an antique and try to pawn it or sell it for a higher value, the same goes for Sneakerheads.



Self-Expression and Uniqueness

Sneaker enthusiasts tend to employ a wide variety of forms of self expression, ranging from what kind of shoes you have, to how you're matching your sneaker. What you choose to wear is a form of affirmation of your individuality. Along with the rise of sneaker culture, people have turned sneakers into one of the most important pieces of clothing, your sneakers can say a lot about how one carries themselves. Based on observation, the average member uses their footwear as a form of artistic expression. In this shared community, there are buyers, sellers, collectors and retailers. It's about style and fashion and the uniqueness of their very real love for high-end footwear.

The Community

Through our observations we discovered that the sneaker community focuses on trending sneakers today, value of certain sneakers, and collection of sneakers. The community of the r/Sneakers Reddit page is very supportive with one another through the comments of every post. We observed in our field that people love unique and valuable sneakers.

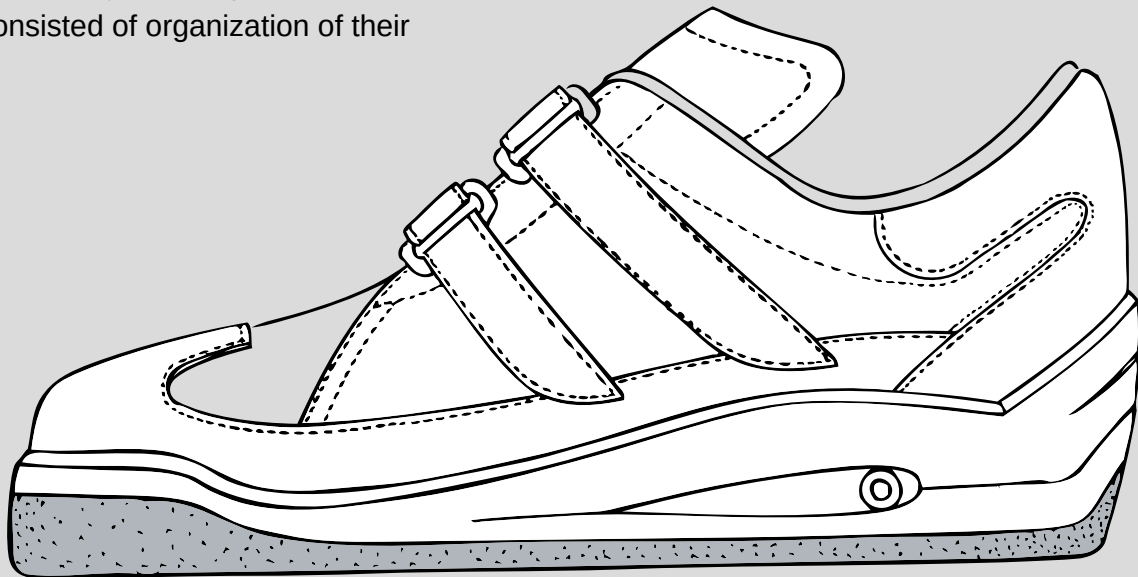
For example, Travis Scott's Jordan 1s collaboration with Nike was a common trend that was seen in the field. People commented on posts about this style of sneaker a lot, whether it was about wanting to afford them, buying them to support Travis Scott, or the interest in style of this specific sneaker.

A lot of the posts that we observed were people posting new sneakers they have added to their collection, mainly being Jordan 1's. Comments under these posts were mainly compliments or uplifting one another for what they own. Posts that consisted of unique shoes or shoes that have stories behind them showed that the people of this community love creativity. The buyers and sellers of the sneaker community try to share the value of these sneakers within these posts. As sneaker culture is similar to a pawn shop, we see within these posts that the community sees high value of the shoes they are purchasing through reselling web applications: GOAT, SNKRS, StockX.

sneaker collection and how they maintain the quality of a sneaker. Not only do people spend hundreds of dollars on purchasing these sneakers but they invest in shelves for these sneakers to be displayed in or cleaning supplies to keep them good as new. This ties in with another pattern that is common within the community is that older or vintage styles contain more value. Though the quality might not be as good as sneakers are today since back then different materials were used to make them, they still contain a high value if they are kept up with. People appreciated seeing older sneaker styles from the 70s or 80s still in almost perfect condition.

Other Patterns

Other patterns that were explored through our observations were not only of the value of sneakers but the work of maintaining a sneaker. People of this community shared posts which consisted of organization of their



Interviews

During our observation period, we took the time to interview four people who are a part of the r/Sneakers Reddit page.

The Interviewees

The first interviewee, Adam Shnick, had a major interest in sneakers. At the beginning of the interview he told us about his father bringing home a pair of sneakers which is how his interest was spiked. Throughout the interview Adam showed us multiple valuable sneakers in his collection and explained the history behind them. He also talks about selling in sneaker culture and how had made \$15,000 in the past year selling popular sneakers. For Adam, selling and collecting sneakers are a personal hobby and views it as an art form.

The second person we interviewed, who was anonymous, did not consider himself a sneakerhead for the fact that he got rid of most sneakers. His reason for this was because he found the sneaker culture to be mainstream, people weren't buying shoes for the history or the background but because it's cool and popular. His other reason was because he was not wearing most of the shoes and they were just deteriorating and found that it was a waste of money.

The main thing he got from sneaker culture was the friends that he made. He was able to make lifelong friends through sneaker culture because of their mutual interest with sneakers.

The third interviewee, who was anonymous as well, did not consider himself a sneaker-head mainly because he does not have a collection of sneakers, but he does have the basic knowledge of sneakers. He explained that social media is one place that helps decide on what shoes to buy. He continued to name certain apps that he uses to purchase his shoes and what he does to check to see if the sneaker is real or not.

The fourth interviewee, Carlos Villanueva, had a major interest in sneakers, but did not consider himself a sneakerhead. He found Sneakerheads and sneaker culture to be full of people who just want to be part of the conversation, that the people in the culture do not fully understand the history behind sneaker culture and the emergence of hip hop. To Carlos, sneakers are just shoes. They're practical, comfortable, made for walking or training to run a marathon.

What makes a good-quality sneaker?

Based on all of the interviews we learned that what makes a quality sneaker for them all is how the sneaker is stitched, versatility, and the color way. For interviewee one, he is more drawn to the uniqueness and the shoes that have a limited release instead of sneakers which are commonly being bought or trending through social media.

During the second interview we learned that the thickness of the thick suede, the high grade leather and the plastic of the sneaker, makes them a good quality sneaker. Still during the interview he shared that the quality of the sneakers today do not compare to sneakers from the past. He continued to explain that companies now use cheaper materials to save money but still are still selling them at a high price.

Another way to find out the quality of the sneaker is by using a black light. In the third interview he explained that whenever he receives his sneakers, the first thing he does is use a black light to find out if the shoes that he ordered are real or fake. According to the interviewee there is a certain stitching that is used for the sneaker, so the black light helps him to determine if the stitching is correct or not.



What are the drivers and brand preferences?

This study covers the drives and brand preferences of r/Sneakers Reddit members on different shoe brands with selected brands of shoes based on the emotional value and quality of their collection. Brand equity can be defined as a set of brand liabilities or assets that are linked to a brand's name or symbol (Aaker, 2013). Branding is the process of connecting good strategy with good creativity (Neumeier, 2020). Brand equity represents the value of a brand. There are four different brands that we found common in our research. Among various shoe brands most of the sneaker enthusiasts have a preference for Jordan over other brands. It highlights the dominance of a company in the market especially among the sneaker culture. It's competitors like Nike, Yeezy, Converse must closely keep track of Jordan's strategies in order to compete with the company in branded sneakers. Each of these now iconic brands have engaged with consumers through the values consistent with their unique brands.



Analysis

After reviewing our fieldwork of observations and interviews of people apart from the r/Sneakers Reddit page, we came to a conclusion: Sneakerheads apart of the sneaker community buy, sell, and trade sneakers to find the value whether it is reselling a sneaker for more worth or buying a sneaker to show its importance by using it to express their style. Just as a pawn shop, resellers buy sneakers for the original price or at a lower cost and try to resell them through sneaker web applications or as a back door seller to see how much value or worth they are able to get out of these sneakers.

Our team created a conceptual matrix which is a tool that helped us organize all of our findings of our qualitative research that was done from our applied ethnography in the field. We created a chart of our conceptual matrix using Miro, which is a collaboration workspace tool, organizing common patterns that were found within our fieldwork of observations and interviews.

The sneaker industry is also seen to be a money making industry. People use the sneaker community as a way to make fast money or money on the side aside from their actual work (2018, Ema).

Adam, interviewee 1, shared with us that he made about \$15,000 alone in the past year from just reselling sneakers to get more worth. Adam himself shared with us at the beginning of his interview that he works for SAP in technology but selling sneakers is a great investment. The most common sneakers that are being sold in this industry are those that are unique, original, or classic which sneakerheads long for. Through our observations we learned those who were buying sneakers from resellers posted these certain styles, more specifically they were the Nike Jordan Brand which received a lot of attention under these posts.



Though we saw buying and reselling in sneaker culture, we also saw the controversy of sneaker culture as well. From our interviews, we learned from our second interview that the direction resale culture has gone he has less of an interest in sneakers. He finds that the raffles through apps like SNKRS and backdoor sellers are unfair since these sneakers are being sold at almost four times the original price of when they first came out. From our discussions about our findings, we agreed that some people within the r/Sneakers Reddit page community also found raffles and reselling to be unfair due to bots within these reselling web applications.

An article posted by Insider about: How to get sneaker bots: the controversial tech that helps resellers flip hundreds of hyped pairs of Jordans, Dunks, and that helps resellers flip hundreds of hyped pairs of Jordans, Dunks, and Yeezys, explains that the reason people are missing out on drops regularly is because the software applications expedites when people are checking out so that resellers are able to pull in the “hyped” pairs (2021,Ciment). This gives them more of an advantage and explains as to why and how these sneakers are being sold for more value. This supports why the sneaker community is one big pawn shop. Just like in pawn shops, the disadvantages with them are that sometimes the interest rates and finance charges are often too high but with the sneaker community we notice that the shoes being sold are often being sold too high than what they originally cost.



Conclusion

Coming to the end of our research, we were able to answer our research question, "Why do these Sneakerheads buy, resell, collect and wear sneakers?" We also learned a bit more about sneaker culture. We learned that most Sneakerheads are like people who have precious antiques and sell or exchange them at pawn shops.

When Sneakerheads are collecting, it is either because they are trying to get the sneaker that has a story or background to it or because it is popular, and they just want to be part of the trend/conversation. We also learned that shoes were resold to simply make more money. Resellers will sometimes increase the price of the sneaker by four times the original price.

Even though most of these sneakers are bought to be part of a collection, they are still bought to be worn. Some are bought for comfort, to play a sport, or to wear casually and express one's self.

There are many places where these shoes are bought and sold. Knock-offs tend to slide through these stores because of this. During our research, we saw and learned that there were three sneaker apps (GOAT, SNKRS, StockX) that many Sneakerheads preferred to use because they verify sneakers and insure the safety of its' users.

Even though sneaker culture is based on the soles of feet, it also brings a community together. Friendships are formed and people are able to learn about different shoes and the stories behind them.



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