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# The sneaker – marketplace icon

Iain Denny

Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

The sneaker is a near disposable foot cover and a precious cultural artefact. It is a platform for some of the most recognizable brands in the world to showcase new technology and a vessel for nostalgia. It is an afterthought we slip on as we shuffle to the bodega on a Sunday morning and an all-consuming subcultural obsession. One can even use it to play sports. Footwear has long served as a means to communicate social status, virility, sexuality, and many other qualities, but how did such an ostensibly practical, prosaic, and ubiquitous item of clothing come to be such a remarkable and versatile icon of contemporary consumer culture? This article attempts to shed light on the actors and practices that have influenced the development of the cultural meanings we have come to associate with the sports shoe.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Wear your sneakers wherever you go,  
even a smooch in the drive-in show ...  
Do anything you want to do,  
As long as I'm wearing my tennis shoes!  
(Youngblood and Steinberg 1959)

## Introduction

In December 2018, the Air Jordan Brand subsidiary of Nike rereleased the “Concord” colorway of the Air Jordan XI sneaker. Something of a technological marvel when it first appeared in 1995, this head-turning white ballistic nylon and black patent leather basketball shoe could certainly be said to be of its time, both in terms of its aesthetics and comparatively “clunky” on court feel when compared to contemporary performance basketball shoes. With a somewhat aspirational price tag of \$220, this is a shoe that costs well over twice the median price of a pair of Nikes (Datafiniti.co 2017; Forbes 2017). Unusually for a “Retro” release – generally only of any real interest to aficionados and collectors – Nike produced and released an “astronomical” number of the shoes (Felderstein 2018). While the big brands are notoriously cagey about acknowledging how many pairs of these exclusive sneakers they release, reliable sources in the industry estimated that Nike produced just under one million Concord XIs in adult sizes and 850,000 in grade school, pre-school, and toddler sizing (Kicksonfire.com 2018). All the shoes sold out within a matter of days (men’s sizes in hours) and almost a year later are still changing hands for around \$100 over their original retail value (StockX.com 2019a).

While this record-breaking release is something of an anomaly in terms of the number of sales, the success of the release was never in any doubt by the company that made the shoes, by the “sneakerheads” who gleefully sought them out, or by the retailers in possession of the coveted Tier Zero and Quickstrike Nike accounts that would allow them to stock the sneaker.

**CONTACT** Iain Denny  iain.denny@fek.uu.se  Ekonomikum, Kyrkogårdsgatan 10, Box 513, 751 20, Uppsala, Sweden

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The Jordan XI Concord is perhaps the epitome of the iconic sneaker, imbued with all manner of tropes that sneakerheads value, such as historical importance, an association with celebrity and success, distinctive design, technological innovation, exclusivity, and notoriety. The shoe was the first one that Michael Jordan wore when he returned from retirement in 1995, revitalizing an ailing Chicago Bulls team and going on to lead them to another period of dominance within the NBA. The visible carbon fiber footplate, amongst other design elements, promised a technological advantage on the court. The shoe's liberal use of patent leather – a material more generally associated with formal footwear – along with Nike's deliberate policy of releasing a limited number of the shoes at a price point that was high, but not outrageously beyond the means of most consumers, signaled an exclusivity that was ostensibly within the grasp of most people. Finally, the shoe was lent an air of notoriety not merely from the pearl clutching of NBA officials who banned the shoe after only two games,<sup>1</sup> but also because of the violence associated with retail releases of the shoe.<sup>2</sup> However, the Air Jordan XI Concord is far from being the only shoe to incorporate these qualities, and almost every weekend there is a sneaker drop that provokes similarly feverish activities on the part of sneakerheads attempting to acquire the latest, freshest kicks.

In this *Marketplace Icons* contribution, I illuminate the iconicity of the sneaker, what fuels the passions of consumers who participate in what is sincerely thought of as the *culture* of sneakers, and the deft manner in which brands navigate and cultivate this esoteric underground for the benefit of their wider businesses.

## Historicizing the hipness of kicks

As intimated by the lyrics that introduce this article, the association of sneakers with what can glibly be referred to as youth culture is nothing new. Whatever youth culture is or is not, its association with “cool” is undeniable, and the sneaker was right there at the start of youth culture in the 1950s. In its transition from the gymnasium and track to the coffee shop and rock n’ roll stage, the sneaker picked up an indelible scuff of youthful vitality and rebellion.

However, the “modern” sneaker is considered to have first arisen in the mid nineteenth century in the guise of the “croquet sandal” (Garcia 2006; Smith 2019). These canvas and rubber progenitors of the sneaker were unusual for the time in being intended for a particular middle-class leisure pursuit rather than for general use. Everyday work boots were even worn on the football pitch at this time, and it was not until 1891 that players were allowed to modify their boots with studs and bars (Footballboots.co.uk 2010; Williams 2015). Primarily, croquet sandals served the practical purpose of limiting the damage caused to communal croquet lawns by traditional, harder-soled shoes and boots. Additionally, the high cut of many of these shoes addressed the scandal of unmarried men and women openly consorting by covering the provocative female ankle, thus preserving the modesty of women required to lift their hoop skirts to play shots (Smith 2019). The final quarter of the nineteenth century saw the rise of “the great sports craze” in Britain, which is primarily attributed to the invention and popularization by Major Walter Clopton Wingfield of *Sphairistikè*: an early standardized form of lawn tennis (Turner 2016). Though equipment for this game was initially marketed towards (and priced accordingly for) the upper classes and aristocracy, imitators soon emerged and the sport spread to the upper-middle and middle classes. UK manufacturers such as William Hickson and Sons and Mansfield and Sons, capitalizing on the popularity and allure of the sport, began producing rubber-soled tennis shoes in prodigious number and variety, catering to the sartorial demands of players for whom tennis was more genteel social intercourse than serious physical

<sup>1</sup>This was due to the shoe's colorway violating league regulations rather than it offering a tangible competitive advantage. The “ban” meant that Jordan was fined \$5000 each time he played in the Concord XIs, further contributing to the legend of both the player and the shoe (Albertini 2018).

<sup>2</sup>Nike continued this policy of deliberately producing limited numbers with later releases of the Jordan XI Concord, culminating in a worldwide and well-documented spate of violence associated with the 2011 rerelease (Vassalo 2011). These events contributed to Nike reassessing the manner in which it released highly desirable shoes in the future.

competition. Though the use of tennis shoes did spread to other sports such as boxing, golf, cycling, fencing, and even big-game hunting, they were not generally worn outside sporting and leisure pursuits (Turner 2016).

Towards the end of the century, basketball was invented and rubber-soled shoes also became the norm for the court-based sport. A number of rubber companies such as Dunlop in the UK and the U.S. Rubber Company in North America began offering rubber-soled shoes for the basketball and tennis players of this time. By the 1950s, American youth culture had emerged and casual dress became not just acceptable, but desirable; sneakers began to appear on the street. To this day, the Converse Chuck Taylor All-Star, a staple of 1950s youth style, continues to be one of the most well-known and recognizable sneakers in the world and remains largely unchanged from its 1922 incarnation. It is estimated that 60% of all Americans will own at least one pair of “Chucks” in their lifetime (Peterson 2007).

While Chucks continue to bear the name of the contemporarily acclaimed player, the shoes were named for Taylor well after his playing days were over in recognition of his efforts redesigning, popularizing, and marketing the shoe. Sneaker design would barely change for the next fifty-or-so years, with solid vulcanized rubber soles connected to canvas or lightweight leather uppers remaining the norm.

Though both Vans and Adidas marketed shoes under the names of accomplished skateboarders and tennis players in the 1960s and 70s, the first true collaboration between athlete and sneaker brand is generally considered to have come in 1973 when Walt “Clyde” Frazier of the New York Knicks was offered \$5000 and unlimited shoes to endorse a Puma sneaker. While Clyde was certainly one of the great players of his era and part of the team that turned the Knicks from a near laughing stock to the toast of New York, it was not only his athletic prowess that drew Puma’s attention, but his outrageously fashionable off-court persona:

Decked out in fur coats, tailored suits, and gold-chained medallions, sideburned or bearded, behind the wheel of his Rolls-Royce or walking down the sidewalk, Frazier’s “Clyde” persona became iconic. The point guard was the subject of magazine photo shoots that involved the round bed and mirrored ceiling in his high-fashion, high-living apartment. Even standing in a filthy, graffiti-adorned New York subway car for a photo shoot he looked sharp in a dark suit, light tie, and wide-brimmed hat.

Frazier’s mix of celebrity, style, and star power on the court began to attract a new kind of notice. (Smith 2019, 103–105).

While Frazier agreed to Puma’s deal, it was with the caveat that he would not have to wear the shoes that were initially offered: the rather prosaically named “Puma Basket.” Instead, Puma redesigned the Puma Suede to accommodate Frazier’s desire for a less bulky shoe and dubbed it the “Clyde.” The sneaker was immediately made available in an unprecedented range of colorways and each pair was adorned with a golden facsimile of Clyde’s signature. Though the shoe from which the Clyde was developed had long been available and was certainly popular, the association of this particular player with this particular shoe proved a phenomenon, especially in the marginalized New York boroughs where hip hop was just beginning to emerge. Frazier was not only a manifestation of “the black athlete as invincible and physically vital” (Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman 2008, 100), but with his ostentatious and unapologetic displays of wealth and fashion he embodied the dream of escape from the iniquities of the American ghetto.

After the Clyde, athlete endorsements would go on to become commonplace. Understanding the roots of Puma’s success, these collaborations were marketed as much by promoting the players’ personas as by their accomplishments on the court, field, or track; Andre Agassi’s scandalous neon pink Nike Air Tech Challenge IIs were a far cry from Pete Sampras’ conservative Nike Air Oscillates. The use of new technology in sneakers also rapidly increased, with each complication (of varying practical utility) implying that you too could go higher, faster, and further.

No discourse on the history of the sneaker can fail to mention the importance of Nike’s Jordan Brand subsidiary. In the mid 1980s, Nike was very much an also-ran in the sportswear market and

were desperate to coax an as yet undrafted Michael Jordan (a lifelong fan of Adidas) away from signing endorsement deals with his first and second preferences of Adidas and Converse (Gwilliam 2014). Nike offered the rookie Jordan the unprecedented deal of an entire *brand* with his name on it. Rather than just a signature model shoe, a new Jordan sneaker would release every year alongside a range of training apparel that would be continuously refreshed. The gambit worked, and buoyed by Jordan's on court success and his active involvement in the design of shoes that reflected his own esoteric style and passions outside of basketball, Jordans became and remain the archetypal "sneakerhead's sneaker." The ever-increasing number of models, each released in multiple colorways, led to various incarnations of the shoe being clearly associated with particular points in Michael Jordan's career – even with particular games. This ability of the shoes to capture and mythologize certain moments in time, along with Jordan's superstar status and talent on the court, is generally regarded as having popularized the culture of people collecting, curating, and trading astonishing amounts of sneakers.

With the sneaker firmly rooted within hip hop culture from the movement's inception, brands also came to see the benefit of endorsing hip hop artists. After a 1986 Run D.M.C. track called "My Adidas" caused sales of the Adidas Superstar to spike, the German brand and the American band began a highly successful partnership – the first formal endorsement of a sporting goods company by non-sports stars (Turner 2015). Today, brands continue to imbue selected sneaker models with "cool" by undertaking collaborations with athletes, artists (both musical and otherwise), street-wear designers, and high-fashion houses; even smaller "boutique" sneaker stores regularly release collaborative designs which are often adorned with the logo of the store alongside familiar swooshes and stripes. Arguably the most desirable release of 2018 was a shoe designed by the co-founder and proprietor of the famed "Round Two" vintage store in Richmond, Virginia. The Sean Wotherspoon Nike Air Max 1/97s retailed for \$160, and mint condition (or "deadstock") pairs currently change hands for well over \$1000 (StockX 2019b). Even toddler-sized shoes are selling for over \$400 (StockX 2019c).

## The rise to iconicity

The impetus behind the creation of rubber-soled sports shoes was overwhelmingly practical, yet this rapidly changed in the 1980s. Footwear once intended as a means of avoiding the embarrassment of losing one's footing on slippery grass playing fields and "hav[ing] pity on ... the turf of your friend's tennis ground" (Turner 2016, 483) has become a potent cultural icon rife with signification. Footwear has long been held "to indicate a great deal about a person's taste (or disdain for such things) and identity – national, regional, professional – class status and gender ... Shoes have, for centuries, given hints about a person's character, social and cultural place, even sexuality" (Riello and McNeil 2006, 3). The contemporary sneaker, however, is as disparate as it is ubiquitous. As Smith (2019) writes:

No shoe is more variable than the sneaker. Whether you know them as sneakers, trainers, gym shoes, tennis shoes, joggers, or runners, almost everyone has owned a pair. Sneakers can help us stand out or blend in. They can be the item we build our outfits up from or an afterthought we slip on before running out the door. And every sneaker we wear says something about us in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. (p. 10)

Sneakers appeared in the midst of the industrial revolution. New methods of mass production were used to create them, and the increased opportunities for the pursuit of leisure activities that also arose in the West at this time facilitated their use. While the comfort and practical utility of sneakers continues to be of importance to a vast majority of consumers, the adoption of certain models and styles by particular subcultures and tribes means that sneakers go a long way towards signaling legitimate membership of these groups, whether this be punks rocking beat-up Vans, or hip hoppers stunting in fresh Jordans. Shoes such as the Vans Half Cab, Adidas Superstar, and Air Jordan III are also able to evoke particularly significant epochs in the development of the movements their bearers follow. The

sneaker became iconic as it came to be associated with the “heroes” of our age: the athlete accomplishing superhuman feats, the rock star or rapper brazenly rebelling against the hegemony of the day. In a similar manner to the electric guitar (Ostberg and Hartmann 2015), sneakers benefit greatly from contemporary mass production methods yet are enchanted with the mana of the athletes and artists who are associated with them. Further lending sneakers an air of something beyond a relatively easily-produced, fast-moving consumer good, brands actively limit the production and release of certain sneakers, facilitating the activities of the fanatic cadre of sports shoe consumers known as “sneakerheads.” In doing this, the brands preserve and cultivate a pastiche of the early days of sneaker collecting when the distances traveled and time invested in acquiring a particular shoe more resembled a quest than a shopping trip.

### The fetish of the sneaker

While the presence of sneakers on the feet of rock n’ roll stars and their fans immediately caused the footwear to become associated with youth subcultures, it was with the advent of hip hop and the attendant sneakerhead subculture that the sports shoe began to markedly take on the qualities of a fetishized object, that is, an otherwise unremarkable object which is imbued with a seemingly illusory power which nevertheless exerts real influence over us (Graeber 2005). The notion of fetishism within the discourse of consumption often turns to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, whereby the labor and “intrinsic” value of an object becomes obscured and subordinate to its value as something that can be exchanged for money or other commodities. As Böhm and Batta (2010) write, “This is something specific to a system of capitalist relations, which turns ordinary things ... into objective, abstract entities that are exchanged within an artificially created market in order to make a profit for the owner of [the commodity]” (p. 348). However, as many authors and researchers have acknowledged, the increasing complexity of consumption contexts and practices has necessitated a reappraisal of the nature of consumers’ relationships with objects of consumption and of the Marxian notion of the commodity fetish as “one particular instance of a much more general phenomenon of ‘alienation’ (Graeber 2005, 428)” within capitalism by which the origin of the value of a product derived from human labor are obscured (Arnould and Cayla 2015; Böhm and Batta 2010; Graeber 2005). The sneaker is just one example among many of this increasing complexity. Supporting the Marxian notion of the commodity fetish, the “value” of sneakers as practical, comfortable footwear that allows one to participate in sporting activities remains key to their popularity, yet it is apparent that these concerns rapidly became subordinate to the value imparted onto them by their iconic (i.e. resemblance to) and indexical (i.e. tangible connection to) links to sports stars, artists, and lifestyles (Ostberg and Hartmann 2015). As Luecke (2019) writes:

Sneakerheads take something with a specific intended use and repurpose it to their own needs, subverting its original meaning without political intentions. Take Jordan 11s, sneakers designed to be worn for basketball. They’re performance shoes right down to the full-length carbon fiber plates in their soles. So, when a sneakerhead repurposes Jordan 11s as a fashion statement, an icon of commodity fetishization, and a marker of community identity, that original athletic intention has been subverted ... sneakerheads wear them as an emblem, creating a whole web of meaning around them that exists outside of athletics.

However, authors such as Cluley and Dunne (2012) and Graeber (2005) have sought to develop Marx’s notion that “at the heart of consumption, there lies an implicit denial of the forces and relations of production that make commodity consumption possible in the first place” (Cluley and Dunne 2012, 253). Noting that discourse concerning commodity fetishism, particularly in contemporary discussions of enlightened consumption, often leads to a “dead end,” Cluley and Dunne incorporate Freud’s concept of narcissism into commodity fetishism. The authors propose their own concept of *commodity narcissism* whereby consumption “is more than a desire to have – it is a desire to have at the expense of others.” Graeber (2005) has attempted to “broaden the Marxian notion of production to include the fashioning of personas and social relations” (p. 408) and returns to a pre-Marxian notion of the West-African fetish concerning objects imbued with an ostensibly illusory

power that comes to have *real* power in terms of initiating and fostering social relations. As the author writes, “It was only the Europeans’ obsession with issues of value and materiality and their almost complete lack of interest in social relations as things valuable in themselves that made it possible for them to miss this’ (p. 411) and ultimately to dismiss these practices as primitive.

Within the disparate forms of participation in sneaker culture and consumption there has existed evidence for all of these positions for a considerable amount of the time, from consumers ignoring the iniquities of the capitalist system that facilitates the production of their colorful sports shoes, to utilizing the products as a basis for fashioning personas and cultivating social relationships. Cluley and Dunne’s (2012) concept of commodity narcissism in particular has the potential to offer insight into the culture of “hype” that is becoming increasingly central to contemporary sneaker and street-wear consumption.

As the sneaker rose to prominence within various subcultures, particularly that of hip hop, phenomena appeared that demonstrated their complex abstract value beyond that of a commodity that could be bought or exchanged. In the Bronx of the 1960s and early 70s, street basketball was ubiquitous, and an important ritual among players was “stepsies”: a game where the object was for as many people as possible to step on a player’s new sneakers. In the early 70s, a clean pair of sneakers was a shameful indication that you were a casual or “soft” player. By the mid 1970s, the “clean and fresh” hip hop look had come to prominence on the streets of the Bronx and “stepsies was no longer funny. It was grounds for a fist fight” (Garcia 2006, 12). Though hip hop is still often associated with violence and criminality – particularly the “black man as criminal” (Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman 2008) –, the principal motivation of the former gang leaders that instigated the hip hop movement was to deescalate the violence and lawlessness that engulfed the Bronx in the 1970s. With difficulty, the youth of the Bronx and its adjoining boroughs began to leave behind open gang warfare in favor of euphoric outdoor gatherings known as block parties. Formerly notorious gang members began to act as security for block parties rather than antagonists and with belligerent behavior by block party attendees resulting in swift ejection, dressing well and exhibiting skill through DJing, dancing, graffiti, and rapping came to prominence as means for resolving conflict and dispatching rivals (Chang 2007). With inner city youths’ limited opportunities to purchase increasingly expensive sneakers, keeping them “fresh” for as long as possible became a way to signal status. It was not unusual for hip hoppers to go to great lengths in attempting to artificially preserve their sneakers in a “box-fresh” state, covering their shoes with plastic bags in inclement weather and carrying toothbrushes to clean them. In perhaps an inevitable escalation of this trend, wearing sneakers only once and then discarding or gifting them to one’s friends (or “crew”) became an ultimate demonstration of one’s pecuniary capital and street-level success. While these consumers of sneakers were the anomaly, brands came to see the importance of catering to them and those wanting to emulate them. The desire of hip hoppers for more ways to demonstrate their individual style and wear the shoes of their heroes drove the brands to release increasing numbers of colorways and models and seek partnerships with the sports stars idolized by hip hop culture. These heroes were overwhelmingly basketball players, this being one of the only recreational pastimes that American inner-city youth of the time had realistic access to.

Sneaker culture rapidly came to adopt codes of practice beyond the acquisition and wearing of the shoe itself. From the early days of hip hop, a prohibition existed against mixing competing brands (most notably, Adidas and Nike). An outfit consisting of, for example, Nike sneakers and Adidas track pants would mark one out as an illegitimate participant in the culture: a demonstrated lack of awareness of this convention strips away from the wearer the prestige and cultural capital of even the most desirable pair of sneakers (a parallel can perhaps be drawn with leaving the sleeve label on a designer suit). This convention arose as a result of brand tribalism within the culture during the 1980s, with sneakerheads generally being ferociously loyal to one brand or another. While the idea of being exclusively either a Nike or an Adidas “head” has faded, the practice of correctly mixing brands has continued to evolve as “streetwear” and high fashion brands (and their

correct deployment) joined the more typical sportswear brands in becoming key elements of sneaker culture (Bergl 2017; Garcia 2006; Hundreds 2019).

Though basketball and hip hop are most closely associated with the rise and popularization of the sneaker and the complications of the meanings associated with it, in the United Kingdom of the 1980s sneakers (or trainers) also came to be central to the participants of the football hooligan sub-culture known as the “casuals” (Filippa 2019). Before the casuals, football hooligans tended to adopt the “skinhead” look, typified by closely cropped hair, bomber jackets, jeans, and sturdy boots such as Doc Martens: outfits well-suited to the large-scale melee brawls in which the hooligans enthusiastically partook. Efforts by British authorities to curb the violence of the hooligan “firms” led to readily recognizable hooligans being denied entry to stadiums and wearers of heavy boots being forced to remove the laces from their footwear or take them off altogether (Crooks 2017). At around the same time that attempts were being made to clamp down on British hooliganism by proscribing certain forms of dress, the dominance of English clubs and the increasing affordability and ease of international travel led to fans attending games on the Continent and being exposed to European brands that were exotic and difficult to acquire back in the UK. Fans returning home with these brands signaled not only some form of relative affluence, but also the devotion to follow their team abroad. Adidas trainers and apparel from Italian designer brands such as Sergio Tacchini, Ellesse, and FILA became common on the terraces. The “dress codes” of the casuals also came to mirror those of hip hop; apparel and trainers were required to be clean and/or new, brands had to correctly complement one another, and outfits operated as a form of “combat by other means.” The ostensibly neutral nature of the casuals’ dress (at least to those outside of the culture) allowed them to infiltrate games and further served as a way to psychologically intimidate casuals from rival teams. Elms (2014) describes one particular example of this during a match between Queens Park Rangers and Coventry City in the 1980s, when two rival groups of casuals encountered each other on the street before the game:

a chant rises up from the Rangers ranks, a hundred or so minds thinking alike and then singing in unison: ‘My dog sleeps on Fila, My dog sleeps on Fila, Lalah lah lah, Lalah lah lah.’

They’d seen that some of Coventry City’s top boys were sporting Fila, an Italian sportswear label which had once been the business but had gone out of fashion in London at least a month before, and were laughing and lambasting them for such gauche sartorial tardiness. Instead of launching themselves at the cocky Cockneys in a fit of rage, the Coventry firm started looking each other up and down, perusing their togs and looking closely at what Rangers were wearing. As it dawned on them they’d been outdone in the style stakes, you could see their faces drop and their will for the contest wane. They’d been beaten and they knew it (p. 250).

Today, essentially anyone can own a pair of sneakers, but, as indicated by the examples above, for many consumers their practical utility has been overshadowed by their use as markers of personal status and social capital of one form or another (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). In contrast to other status-signaling goods – particularly luxury goods – sneakers do not generally retail for exorbitant amounts with most, even the most limited and exclusive releases, having a retail price of around \$200. Sneakers thus seemingly reflect the economic capital of the wearer less than their social capital; one has to be in some way “in-the-know” or willing to expend effort to acquire sneakers that will set you apart rather than simply able to spend a lot of money. Today, sneakerheads often speak of how it is their social networks and friendship groups that enable their consumption of rare and desirable sneakers rather than their financial means (Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman 2008). While it is true that access to money will go a long way towards enabling the acquisition of sneakers, the various forms of ritual involved with the acquisition and display of sneakers and the signs embodied by them are things sneakerheads are expected to *learn* through time spent studying the culture. While it is certainly reasonable to acknowledge that today the “value” of sneakers has little (if anything) to do with the human labor used to create them and that brands are highly adept at imbuing sneakers with value through linking them with abstract notions for their own ends, it is



also true that consumers have themselves further fetishized the sneaker for their own cultural and social purposes.

### The marketization of the sneaker myth

As described above, the consumers who drove the sneaker beyond its practical utility were overwhelmingly young men from poor urban backgrounds. As hip hop spread beyond the borders of the New York boroughs in the 1980s, sneakers quickly became ever more elaborate. Though many consumers would balk at price tags over \$100, this amount of money was not beyond the means of most people. As with many consumer goods, the desire to acquire sneakers is bound up with narratives of hopefulness and the facilitation of beneficial social relations (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), and to have priced sneakers much higher would have resulted in the key customers who gave the product credibility (principally, teenage boys and poor urban youth) being excluded. However, the brands still had to maintain the air of exclusivity of a product that was now seen pounding the sidewalks of decidedly unhip suburbia. By the beginning of the 1980s, it had become the norm for brands to release a sneaker only for a particular year or season: an archetypal retail strategy intended to keep the consumer regularly coming back for more. However, the release of the Nike Air Force 1 in 1982 would result in the brands changing tack markedly. The Air Force 1 was the first basketball shoe to incorporate an air pocket in the heel and was released to much fanfare. Its designer, Bruce Kilgore, gave the shoe a robust silhouette adapted from a hiking boot, and the rugged looks, comfort, and outsole designed to facilitate easier pivoting on the forefoot made the shoe an instant success, both on the court and the street. Nike ended the production run in short order and began marketing its successor, the “new and improved” Air Force 2. Sales of this shoe were inexplicably unimpressive. Unknown to Nike, consumers were scouring the sale racks and backrooms of sneaker stores all over the East Coast for unsold “deadstock” pairs of the Air Force 1. However, three Baltimore retailers – Charley Rudo Sports, Downtown Locker Room, and Cinderella Shoes – had recognized the hype, and in 1983 the owners of the stores flew to Nike’s headquarters and pitched the idea of bringing the Air Force 1 back into production to a skeptical Nike boardroom. A compromise was reached whereby Nike would produce the shoe again, but only on condition that the stores ordered 1,200 pairs in three colorways. This was a huge order for what were rather modestly-sized operators, but the shoes soon sold out, with sneakerheads traveling to Baltimore from all over the country to pick up the coveted “Uptowns”<sup>3</sup> as they had become known. The Air Force 1 has since been released in innumerable colorways and collaborations and has gone on to become Nike’s best-selling shoe of all time (High Snobity 2017). Nike and other brands learned their lesson and came to recognize the importance of maintaining a presence within the youth subcultures that favored their product as well as both responding to and cultivating “hype.”

A compelling example of perhaps one of the most cynically successful campaigns to “re hype” a shoe was that of Adidas’ decision to “end” production of one of its best-selling models, the Stan Smith (Bain 2018). Through online rather than traditional advertising channels, Adidas let it be known that production of Stan Smiths was coming to an end in 2011 and the shoe subsequently became increasingly hard to find. In 2014, Adidas rereleased the shoe, both in its original colorway and in special editions and collaborations with artists and fashion designers such as Pharrell Williams and Raf Simons. The reissue was a huge, though not unexpected, success. Adidas Vice President at the time, Jon Wexler, told the Guardian in 2015 that “We knew three and a half years before we did step one what would happen” (Fox 2015).

Though the fairly typical strategies of artificial scarcity and celebrity endorsement have worked well for sneaker brands, they have also shown themselves adept at reacting to the market in more novel ways. With the advent of the internet, for instance, Nike in particular sought to keep its

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<sup>3</sup>With the term “downtown” generally referring to the more affluent central business districts of US cities, the use of the nickname “Uptowns” was a means by which to emphasize how the shoe became popularized in the less affluent inner-city residential areas of New York, specifically, Harlem and the Bronx (Bengtson, 2012).

most storied and desirable models out of the warehouses of large internet stores, preferring to nurture exclusivity through a tiered account system that favors specialist and boutique stores. This strategy is now the norm for most sneaker brands. Seeking to keep their brands associated with a relatively small number of “cool” retailers ensured that overnight campouts by visibly passionate consumers became a phenomenon irrevocably associated with the sneaker.

However, the highly publicized (though in actuality quite uncommon) violence that accompanied the release of certain shoes – such as that of the Air Jordan XI Concord in 2011 – incentivized brands and stores to start adopting online raffle systems. These raffle systems seek to make the process of purchasing desirable sneakers fairer by registering a customer’s payment information and IP address in advance of a release, ideally assuring that people can only purchase one pair of the shoes. On the day of the release, the winners’ names are randomly drawn and either made available for instore pickup or sent directly to the buyer. These online systems generally require that consumers create a profile of some sort to access the releases, and sanctions such as banning particular profiles, IP addresses, or payment methods linked to people caught trying to buy multiple pairs are regularly leveled against transgressors. Reflecting the fanaticism that goes hand in hand with sneaker collecting, brands and stores are now engaged in a game of cat and mouse with consumers who are constantly attempting to get around the online systems with computer programs known as bots; some consumers will even spend more on a bot than the retail value of the shoes purchased and seek to recoup their losses by selling extra pairs on the secondary market.

Acceptance and cultivation of the secondary market is another somewhat nonconventional way the brands have continued to drive demand for particular products and further gild their brands overall. As addressed above, brands rarely retail their shoes for much over \$200, though many sneakers attain an aftermarket value many times this; sneakers “worth” over \$1000 dollars are becoming increasingly common. Brands recognize the intangible value of having their products associated with this market and this makes them reluctant to undermine it by increasing production numbers or raising prices. Additionally, brands actively participate in the hype building that drives up the prices of certain shoes on the secondary market through feeding and “leaking” increasing amounts of information about upcoming releases on the social media platforms that sneakerheads inhabit (Tomaszewski 2014). New sneaker and streetwear-specific online trading platforms such as StockX, GOAT, and Klekt that facilitate trading and physically authenticate each product sold have also quickly become central to sneaker trading and collecting, acting as de facto stock markets and rationalizing resale prices for sneakers. An acknowledgment of StockX’s importance to the market is the fact that the green tamper-proof hangtags used to guarantee the authenticity of sneakers that pass through its facilities have themselves been counterfeited (Salami 2018).

## Sole searching

In the last 150 years, sneakers have moved from practical leisure equipment to a key component of consumers’ identities, reflecting the general trend of sports and active wear becoming ever more entwined with both everyday clothing and high fashion (Salazar 2008). Following Arsel and Bean’s (2012) practice theory-informed construction, the investigation into the consumption of sneakers offers insight into potent examples of multiple contemporary *taste regimes* which coalesce around similar ideas of scarcity and iconicity, be these the fundamentalist sneakerhead culture, or the various other subcultures and consumer cultures in which sneakers play a prominent role. These communities of consumption and individual consumers exhibit a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes that problematize, ritualize, and instrumentalize the consumption of this ubiquitous product in myriad ways. For some consumers, the problematization of sneaker consumption is as prosaic as finding a comfortable model that can acceptably be worn in the office, while for others it is an all-consuming struggle to maintain an acute awareness of the mercurial discourse of the culture and, at great expense, acquire and display new shoes and suitably complementary outfits on a weekly

basis. The ways in which consumers ritualize and instrumentalize their sneaker consumption are equally disparate.

Arsel and Thompson's (2010) sophisticated description of consumers' interactions with marketplace myths is also evident in sneaker consumption, with many examples existing of a decentralization of marketplace myths in consumers' identity projects. Brands both exhibit a willingness to capitulate to the demands of consumers (even when this is antithetical to their preferred strategies) and recognize consumers in many respects as co-curators of their marketplace myths.

Today, the sneaker is also a compelling site of investigation into "fashion ... as an explicit form of communicating and challenging numerous social identities and as part of the complex process of situating people and bodies within social worlds" (Scott 2011, 148). Interest in sneakers beyond that of the casual consumer (as exemplified by the sneakerhead subculture) has traditionally been regarded as the preserve of heterosexual, urban, male youth; a community "that reinforces the traditional male qualities and excludes women" (Kawamura 2016, 2). However, while female sneakerheads have tended to be side-lined within the subculture and "denied the authenticity of being a true connoisseur, as well as ... aficionada status," women are becoming increasingly visible and active within the culture by "enacting their agency and negotiating their femininity, through a bricolage of masculinity and femininity" (Lindsay-Prince 2013, 4). Further challenging the presumed heterosexual masculine exclusivity of sneaker culture, sports shoes have also been shown to play a significant role in North American gay culture, with "athletic footwear operat[ing] as part of a complex, collective process of mediating ideals and experiences of sex, sexuality, and gender identities, and also ... articulating the wearer in relation to mainstream, assimilated gay culture and/or oppositional gay subcultures" (Scott 2011, 159).

Sneakers are rapidly becoming the de facto footwear of (though by no means exclusively) most Westerners, visible at ever more sites of consumption and capable of communicating an overwhelming variety of things about their wearers. And while even the most naïve of consumers is unlikely to sincerely believe that their new Jordans will really make them "be like Mike," nevertheless, when leaving the store with a new pair of kicks most people will have a spring in their step that has little to do with an air bubble in the sole of their sneakers. A fairly prosaic and ubiquitous product has, by intent both on the part of brands and consumers, become an irresistible and magical totem of contemporary consumer culture.

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## Notes on contributor

*Iain Denny* is a PhD candidate in the marketing section of Uppsala University's Department of Business Studies. His research is principally concerned with consumption sociology and consumer culture.

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