While most people only buy shoes to wear, even if only once, there is a growing group of people who devote themselves to procuring the latest and rarest trainers only to leave them stacked in their boxes among the many others they already have. Although this may seem a little odd to the uninitiated, this practice and the culture that has grown alongside it is starting to spill over from subculture to regular high street fashion. Within this culture we can find examples of many of the sociological factors that define today’s society and also the development that these are going through.

One could argue that the production of trainers is entirely fordist as they are made on production lines where the division of labour as described by Adam Smith (Smith, 1982) is most evident and are churned out by the manufacturer at a fraction of the cost to the consumer. However it can be argued that the trainers which are most sought after by the aficionados of the sneaker collecting subculture are the result of a post-fordist production system. For example, one particular trainer brand which outsourced its production to Asia to reduce costs has recently begun a limited run of shoes made at their old factory in Cumbria. Although the division of labour is still present, it is considerably reduced and the overall quality of the end product is much higher. With these more limited runs there is less likely to be the alienation of the worker from the product as in more divided labour forces, a phenomenon outlined by Marx (Tucker, 1978). This is because the time and effort invested by the worker is returned at a much higher rate both financially and also because the product is something the worker can feel proud of as it is not just a repeat of the same products that are already saturating the market.

Although Bell suggests that the majority of labour today is non-manual (Bell, 1976), we still all long for some sort of material goods to buy at some point or other. With many financial downturns and crises occurring and repeating all across the world, people are less likely to continually buy things, rather, purchases are limited to necessities and when luxuries are bought, a little more thought is put into it meaning people are more likely to try and buy something that they feel is a bit more exclusive and special than the run of the mill items you can get anywhere. This is most definitely a theme present within sneaker culture as people much prefer the limited editions and one off models of their favourite trainers than the everyday standard issues.

At this point, Castells’ informational/network society theory comes into play, suggesting that the possession of information and networks or contacts is one of the most valuable commodities (Castells, 2011). While it is
generally acknowledged that social capital plays a key part in life (i.e. who you know can help you get ahead in life more than what you know), in the arena of sneaker culture this is entirely true as certain people will have information on special limited release dates before most others have even heard they might exist. While this is marginally abated by the increase in use of electronic media and the internet with websites such as sneakerfreaker.com, sneakernews.com and nicekicks.com which post frequent updates on new styles and release dates and locations, getting hold of the newest and most limited styles is still heavily reliant on having people you can go to in order to get hold of them for you as many releases are only available in the country where they are having their first release.

Building on Foucault’s idea that we all survey each other so much so that we change our behaviours to fit in with what we perceive as the accepted social norms (Lyon, 1994), we can also explore the emergence of fashion trends and their followers. In terms of sneaker culture this can be best described in terms of certain models featuring more prominently in collaborations, general news and on the feet of their fans. Invariably people who read the trainer news sites will pick up on this and the prolificacy of these particular models will be further increased. After the promotion of these styles and the interest they generate, a small group among the subculture will manage to get hold of the rarer shoes that start the trends and as with most fashion trends a general formula is then followed.

This involves images of celebrities with a similar fondness for trainers being distributed throughout media networks showing them wearing both the regular and limited releases which essentially provides an unofficial endorsement. At the same time, the brands that produce the trending footwear are creating similar pieces to the limited editions in order to capitalise on the emerging trend that they have seen in their sales figures, a factor only furthered by the unofficial celebrity endorsements. Combined, both these factors lead to an increase in production and subsequent saturation of the market with lower standard trainers. At this stage, what was once something exclusive and special becomes a high street fashion staple. As cheaper, poorer quality copies become more readily available, those who started the trends with the purchase of the exclusive sneaker become alienated from the product and move on to something new and, unfailingly, the cycle repeats.

This system, however, presents a great many difficulties and risks for the companies and consumers alike. For example, brands will often, and at the moment in increasing frequency, try to force trends based on previous successes. These trainers are produced in greater numbers than most others of their kind and rarely fare as well as the previous incarnations as a limited run. As such, a large number of shoes remain unsold for so long that they are returned to the manufacturer and destroyed. Another increasing trend is the failure of emerging companies to meet the demand being placed upon them and experiencing mis-production problems where shoes come back from the factory completely different to the original design. Because these items are considered faulty they are also destroyed which causes a substantial amount of non-recyclable waste, despite the introduction of schemes such as ‘NikeGo-Places’ whereby old footwear is repurposed and reused (Staikos & Rahimifard, 2007) as their use is very minimal.

As mentioned earlier, many of the sneakers are only available in certain countries and often only certain cities. As such, many people travel across the world in pursuit of the latest and rarest footwear which could be argued is a base example of the neoclassical or push-pull model of migration with the push being the lack of access to exclusive shoes and the pull being the abundance of the same (Dorigo & Tobler, 2007). It can also be seen that this migration across borders in pursuit of a consumer product in addition to the national, regional and even municipal restrictions on sales of specific trainers from globally recognised and traded brands represents the emergence of a kind of
post-globalised social structure. When combined with the post-fordist ideas outlined above which promote an increase in domestic rather than outsourced production, we can clearly see that the classical views of Fordism and globalisation have been subverted in favour of this redesigned viewpoint.

Bibliography:

Bell, D. (1976) The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society. London; Routledge,


Picture 1:
http://selectedstore.hhv.de/blog/archives/1693-Sneaker-Freaker-Ausgabe-17-jetzt-zu-haben!.html

Picture 2: