

## “Sneakerheads”: Archetypal Craft Consumers

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‘Sneakers’ are ubiquitous in modern society, for many they are simply a form of versatile footwear, an afterthought we slip on to carry out the most menial of tasks (Denny, 2021). In consumer culture though, they are far from an afterthought, generating an estimated \$80 billion dollars globally (Statista, 2021), with this number expected to continue increasing in the next few years. However, it is not just the versatility of these products that have led to their huge popularity.

Since their popularization in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sneakers have increasingly been seen as symbols of youthful rebellion and expression, political persecution, athletic prowess and racial oppression (Florence, 2015). For example, at the 1968 Olympic ceremony American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously removed their Puma Suede sneakers whilst stood on the winners podium, and held their fists up in a black power salute (Florence, 2015).

In recent decades however, there have been huge changes to the sneaker market, and the way these products are consumed. Rather than sneakers being employed by youth-subcultures for the aforementioned reasons, we have seen the rise of “sneakerheads” (Wasserman, 2009). This term refers to the type of consumers who will wait in line for days for a sought-after new shoe (Wasserman, 2009), and for who sneakers themselves have become ‘an all-consuming cultural obsession’ (Denny, 2021: 456). This obsession can be traced back to the huge popularity of sports stars in the 1980s, particularly

Michael Jordan, whose signature *Air Jordan* shoe has reportedly caused stampedes and brawls at shopping malls on the day of their release (Hunn, 2014).

Whilst previously people who were interested in owning these shoes could be said to be ‘passive, manipulated and exploited by market forces’ (Campbell, 2005: 24), who wanted to consume sneakers for reasons as simple as Michael Jordan wearing them in the 1996 NBA Playoffs (Hunn, 2014). In contemporary society, “sneakerheads” can be seen as a more ‘active, calculating and rational actor, someone who carefully allocates scarce resources to the purchase of goods’ (Campbell, 2005: 23), as there is much more nuance and knowledge of products needed to know which sneakers will become sought after and revered within the subculture, due to there being

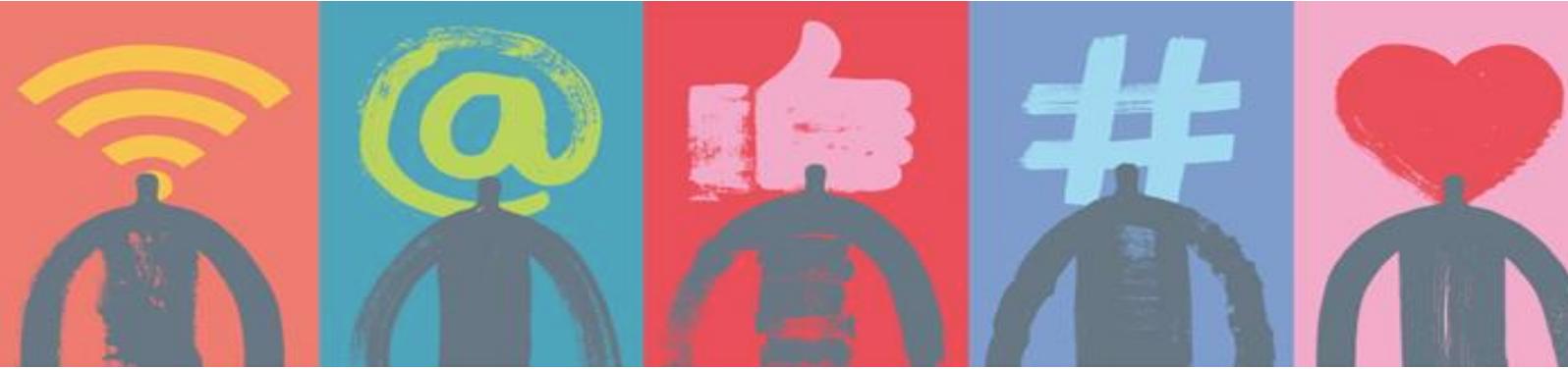
a wider range of products available now. These two contrasting images have been described by Slater (1997: 33) as the “dupe” and the “hero”.

However, Campbell (2005) argues that a better image for understanding contemporary consumption practices is needed, and he refers to this as ‘the craft consumer’ (2005: 24),

and I would argue that “sneakerheads” culture is a prime example of this. For Campbell, craft consumption is not just about consumers being active in the way they consume, but also bringing ‘skill, knowledge, judgement, love and passion to their consuming in much the same way that it has always been assumed that traditional craftsmen and craftswomen approach their work’ (2005: 27).

This argument is developed from Miller’s (1987) work *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, in which he details the idea that modern





consumption is often about translating an object from a 'symbol of estrangement and price value, to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations' (1987: 190).

Miller argues that this is done not through simply possessing an object, but the manner of its use such as 'collecting, gifting or stylizing' (Miller, 1987: 192). Similarly, Campbell argues that craft consumption does not refer to the act of picking and purchasing products, but instead refers to what individuals do with products once they get them home (Campbell, 2005), such as trying on a new pair of shoes, which helps make these mass-produced products more familiar and less alien.

Applying these ideas to the "sneakerheads" subculture, it becomes clear that this is the most fitting image for describing their uniquely post-modern consumption habits. Firstly, purchasing a pair of sneakers would not make one a craft consumer, but the assemblage of an outfit featuring said pair of sneakers certainly would. Since these consumers can generally be assumed to have a keen interest in wider fashion, and not just sneakers, this is a central part of their consumption process.

The act of design that goes into putting together an outfit requires an individual to inject their own personality into the process and is a visible act of self-expression, that ultimately creates an 'ensemble-style product' out of the raw materials of finished commodities (Campbell, 2005: 33).

Additionally, the individual products that make up this outfit, whilst they may be mass produced, such as a pair of jeans or a hoodie, become assimilated into the consumers' 'own world of meaning' (Campbell, 2005: 29) helping to overcome their

alien nature and transforms them into personalized products. Another major aspect of being a 'sneakerhead' that is also typical of being a craft consumer is the activity of collecting. Belk (1995: 67) describes collecting as "the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing, things removed from ordinary use".

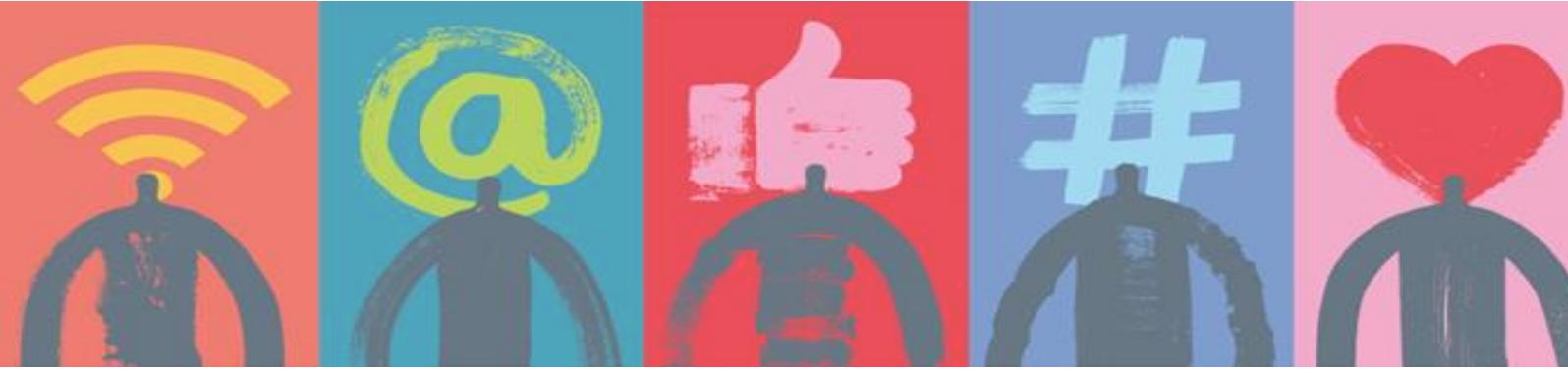
The importance of collecting in this community of consumers is perhaps best highlighted through the massively popular *YouTube* series 'Complex Closets', in which famous rappers show off their vast sneaker collections, with the most popular video having over 14 million views. Collecting not only requires cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to know which sneakers are sought after and highly

regarded, but is also inherently creative as it requires collectors to 'actively recontextualize individual products, situating them in a larger creation called 'the collection' and thereby giving them a new meaning and significance' (Campbell, 2005: 34).

Finally, the recontextualization and personalisation of products is reinforced through 'grooming rituals' (Campbell, 2005). In the context of "sneakerheads" these rituals would take the form of cleaning trainers after wearing them out of the house, or using products such as suede protection sprays before wearing them out of the house to keep them protected from the elements.

Whilst it is clear that the consumption habits and processes of "sneakerheads" make them craft consumers, this is not the only thing that makes their consumption habits uniquely post-modern and different from consumers of previous decades. The growth in the number of people who could be classified as a member of this group and the rise in the sneaker resale market is intertwined with the rise of ICTs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As previously mentioned, *YouTube* video series about sneaker





collecting are massively popular, but blogs on social media sites are hugely important to these consumers, with popular sites effectively deciding which sneakers people will be queuing up for on release day (Wasserman, 2009).

An example of this is *NiceKicks*, started by Matt Halfhill in 2006, which eventually became his full-time job and now runs ads from *Nike*, *McDonalds* and major media companies (Wasserman, 2009), showing the huge popularity of such sites, and the influence they have not only on consumers but also on the marketing campaigns of major sneaker companies.

Throughout this piece, I have applied Campbell's work on craft consumers to a unique group of contemporary consumers, commonly referred to as "sneakerheads", who it can be said are archetypal craft consumers. Firstly, for their 'ensemble creativity' (Campbell, 2005: 34), in putting together mass-produced products to

create something new and personal such as an outfit of clothing.

Secondly, for taking part in the activity of collecting, which is arguably the most important aspect of their consumption habits, and is an inherent aspect of craft consumption as the process can be seen as creative as it requires collectors to 'actively recontextualize individual products, situating them in a larger creation called 'the collection' and thereby giving them a new meaning and significance' (Campbell, 2005: 34). Additionally, I have highlighted how these consumers use 'grooming rituals' such as cleaning sneakers to reinforce the assimilation of mass-produced products into their own world of meaning (Campbell, 2005). Finally, I have argued that the rise of ICTs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is another central aspect of 'sneakerhead' culture that makes their consumption habits uniquely post-modern.

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### **Pictures:**

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