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# I wear, therefore I am: investigating sneakerhead culture, social identity, and brand preference among men

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## Abstract

While the popularity of athletic footwear or “sneakers” has been widely assessed within academic literature, few studies to date have examined the influence of a specific sneaker subculture called “Sneakerheads”. Moreover, the brand preferences and brand identities that may exist within the Sneakerhead subculture have not been extensively examined. To address this gap in the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 male, self-identified Sneakerheads. The main goal of the research was to explore the Sneakerhead culture, while gaining an understanding of brand preferences, practices, and group identity factors. The Social Identity Theory was employed as the theoretical framework for this research. Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed the following three topical areas: (1) *Back in the Day*, (2) *All About the Jumpman*, and (3) *For Members Only*. Findings regarding the unique culture of Sneakerheads indicate a clear sense of group identity as it relates to motivations, behaviors, and brand identity within the Sneakerhead community. Moreover, the findings of this study further define the lifestyle of a Sneakerhead and shed light on their unique behaviors and practices within the culture.

**Keywords:** Sneakers, Sneakerhead, Social identity, Brand preference

## Introduction

Individuals have long viewed clothing as more than just garments for covering. That is, individuals choose clothing based on aesthetics, as well as functionality (Workman and Kidd 2000). Given this factor, many researchers have assessed the relationship between individuals and their clothing. Specifically, the topic of dress and identity has been examined, and revealed that the way one dresses and the clothing one chooses communicates the specific identities they ascribe to (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992). Moreover, individuals may also identify with certain brands. A brand’s unique benefits and image may influence a buyer’s purchase decision, and evoke identification with that brand (Kapferer 2004; Keller and Lehmann 2006). In that same token, individuals may form groups, called brand communities, where members form alliances around the brands they identify with (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

While this level of identification among individuals and their clothing has been examined within literature, few articles have assessed the unique ways individuals identify with the footwear, specifically sneakers, that they love and wear. Since the late 1980's, sneakers have become more than just an athletic item worn for functionality (Garcia and Semmelhack 2015). Given this, a distinctive group has been introduced into the marketplace called "Sneakerheads," which holds a unique relationship with the sneakers they own. Moreover, certain brand preferences and brand identities may exist within their Sneakerhead community that has not been fully examined within the academic context. Thus, the main goal of this research is to explore the Sneakerhead culture to better understand the motivations and brand preferences of Sneakerheads. In addition, given the group alliances that exist among Sneakerheads, an assessment of group identity within the Sneakerhead community is a secondary goal of the research study, thereby providing a holistic understanding regarding the Sneakerhead group. There is a need to understand Sneakerheads from motivational, brand preference, and identity perspectives, as this will greatly inform how sneaker brands appeal to this subgroup. Moreover, findings from a study such as this can help sneaker brands develop targeting and marketing strategies that can strengthen how sneakerheads uniquely identify with their brands, thereby leading to an even stronger brand loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

## **Literature review**

### **Sneakerheads**

Sneakerheads are defined as individuals who collect, trade, and/or admire sneakers. In addition, most are knowledgeable about the history of sneakers, and are passionate about the nostalgic factors the sneakers possess (Choi and Kim 2019; Powell 2014). Upon their first introduction into the marketplace, Sneakerheads were thought to be a fad group that embraced compulsive shopping behaviors. However, over the years, Sneakerheads have had a financial impact within the marketplace given the sale and resell activity within the sneaker community (Powell 2014). That is, Sneakerheads seek out rare sneaker collections and celebrity collaborations that are exclusive in nature and create a sense of scarcity among Sneakerheads. This, in turn, drives purchase behaviors and also unique values and practices that endure within their Sneakerhead community. To better understand the Sneakerhead culture, sneaker heritage and collections must be understood. The next section will explain the historical context of sneakers with regards to the Sneakerhead community.

### **Sneaker brand heritage and collections**

As mentioned, one keen characteristic of a Sneakerhead is their knowledge about the origins and history of sneakers. In fact, this historical understanding of the background and evolution of sneakers is often thought to be a mark of membership within the sneaker community (Kawamura 2016). Thus, this level of knowledge is essential to be deemed a true Sneakerhead.

Most Sneakerheads credit the advent of the Sneakerhead subculture to the late 1970's/early 1980's and the introduction of the hip-hop era. During this time, footwear became synonymous with streetwear, and notable sneakers, such as the suede Puma Clydes, Adidas Shell Toes, Converse Chuck Taylors, and Pony David Thompsons were introduced to

the streets (Garcia and Semmelhack 2015). Yet, a large majority of Sneakerheads attribute their introduction to the sneaker community to the 1985 release of the Nike Air Jordan 1s. Arguably one of the biggest sneaker introductions, the shoe gained its notoriety because of its connection to the athlete Michael Jordan, but also because the shoe was initially banned by the NBA after Michael Jordan wore them on the court (Maux 2019).

The Air Jordan series has continued to gain popularity since its introduction in 1985, and accounts for more than half of the basketball shoe market (Choi and Kim 2019). The series now has several collections or “shoe drops” (as referred to by Sneakerheads) that entails retro marketing of Retro Air Jordan releases that create a sense of exclusiveness within the sneaker community. To date, over 100 million pairs of Air Jordan have been sold since 1985 (Maux 2019). However, in recent years, Air Jordans have not been the only sneaker collection to gain a following. Millennial Sneakerheads (i.e. those born between 1981 and 1993), for example, seem to have an affinity for celebrity collaboration sneakers such as those with Travis Scott, Kanye West, and Pharell Williams to name a few (Williams 2018). The appeal of the celebrity sneaker collections, along with the appeal of Air Jordans, may point to a deeper relationship and connection Sneakerheads have with their sneaker collections. Essentially, Sneakerheads may identify with the brand images and brand personalities of the unique collections and brands, along with the celebrities who these sneaker companies collaborate with. With this in mind, it is appropriate to assess the conceptual theory of the Social Identity Theory to further examine Sneakerheads as a group, especially given the unique orientations and practices that may exist regarding sneakers and the brands they have a passion for. The next section will highlight the Social Identity Theory and its connection to the Sneakerhead culture.

### **Social identity theory**

Social identity entails an individual’s self-concept based on their membership in a particular group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Tajfel and Turner’s Social Identity Theory (1979) extends this notion of social identity by positing that individuals categorize themselves in certain social groups to define their membership within society at large, thereby differentiating their group from other groups based upon their unique group characteristics and norms. According to the Social Identity Theory, as individuals establish membership in a group a sense of identification leads to behaviors that, in turn, serve to reinforce the group’s interests. Given past research that shows evidence of the distinctive community orientation of Sneakerheads, application of this theory within this research study may reveal additional dynamics within the subculture (Choi and Kim 2019).

The Social Identity Theory has also been used to examine the relationship consumers develop with brands. The application of this theory is useful because it illustrates how the notion of brand identification can evolve from relationships that consumers form with a brand. Specifically, brand identification is defined as a consumer’s connection with a brand—such that there is a perceived oneness with the brand (Mael and Ashforth 1992). For instance, Kuenzel and Halliday (2010) apply the theory to understand how positive brand reputation and brand personality congruence will lead to brand identification, thereby resulting in brand loyalty. In addition, if a consumer has a personal association with the personality of the brand, this will also result in brand identification

(Kuenzel and Halliday 2010). Further exploration of the Sneakerhead culture may shed light on the brands and specific shoe collections they innately identify with. Moreover, through the Social Identity Theory, brand preferences and loyalty may be attributed to their relationship with the brand's image and their own individual identities, as well as the identity of the Sneakerhead subculture. In that token, the tenets of the Social Identity Theory were employed within this study.

While most academic literature has not extensively captured the culture of Sneakerheads, one specific article has highlighted the practices and values of Sneakerheads. The article "Sneakerhead Brand Community Netnography: An Exploratory Research" particularly captures the information sharing behaviors of Sneakerheads within the online medium (Choi and Kim 2019). That is, it assesses Sneakerheads through the method of a netnography. A netnography is defined as an "ethnography adapted to the study of online communities" (Kozinets 2002, p. 63). The process involves gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data within the confines of an online culture. Through this method, the authors revealed keen behaviors Sneakerheads exhibit within their culture, predominantly online—especially with regards to how they interact and their decision-making processes. Thus, the current study seeks to explore the Sneakerhead community within the offline and physical confines of the Sneakerhead activities, predominantly within the stores where they purchase the sneakers. It is believed that within this environment, the distinct essence of the Sneakerhead community can be further understood. Moreover, prior research has not examined brand preference motivations of Sneakerheads, and how individuals within the Sneakerhead community may demonstrate brand identification. It is imperative to understand the in-depth role of brand during the decision-making process for Sneakerheads, particularly because identification with sneaker brands may reveal unique motivations of Sneakerheads. Therefore, the current research considers the brand preference and brand identification, and how social identities may impact the Sneakerhead community. The next section discusses in detail the methodology used for this research study.

## Methods

An exploratory study was conducted to address the lack of academic research concerning Sneakerheads, their motivations, and brands they may identify with. A qualitative research design was employed which included primary data collection. A grounded theory approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences of the participants, and gain an understanding of the meanings, actions, and motivations of the Sneakerhead culture. Thereby, this approach resulted in an analytical interpretation of the participants' "world" in the context of their identity as a Sneakerhead (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Primary data included twelve semi-structured interviews with males, aged 25–44, who self-identified as Sneakerheads or Sneakerhead enthusiasts. For this study, males were chosen as the purposive sample, as Sneakerheads are predominantly of the male gender, although females are slowly becoming a more visible part of the Sneakerhead community. The average age of the participants was 33.6 years old, and the men resided in the southeast region of the United States. Furthermore, 75% of the participants were African American; two participants were Hispanic (17%); and one participant was Caucasian (8%). African-Americans are historically and currently the heart of the Sneakerhead

culture, as first exhibited in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s through its alignment with black youth culture (Chertoff 2012). Given this, it was essential that this ethnicity be widely represented within the participant sample. Upon IRB approval, participants for the interviews were recruited via a snowball sample, initially through the word-of-mouth of local sneakerhead retailers. This method of sampling was appropriate for this study as the Sneakerhead community maintains a level of exclusiveness. Thus, snowball sampling allowed for introduction from participants into the unique population.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min and was audio-recorded with the participant’s consent. Moreover, a large majority of the interviews took place within sneaker retail stores, as the researchers wanted to interview participants within an environment that was reflective of Sneakerhead culture. This oftentimes helped to supplement and enrich the discussion, as participants frequently referred to specific sneakers and athletic brands within the retail stores. The few interviews that did not take place in sneaker retail stores took place at neutral, public locations or over the phone. The following statements and questions, among others, were posed during the interviews: (a) *Share your journey of how you first became interested in sneakers;* (b) *How often do you purchase sneakers?* (c) *How many pairs of sneakers do you own?* (d) *Would you say you have a favorite brand of sneakers, and if so, what brand?;* and (e) *What is it about the brand that makes it your favorite?* Participants were also asked at the end of each interview if there was anything the researchers did not ask that might be important to understand about the topic. The different ethnicities and ages allowed for diverse viewpoints on the topic. Table 1 provides details regarding the name, age, and ethnicity of the participants. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interview responses were assessed by four members of the research team, and an analyst triangulation process was employed, where each of the researchers reviewed findings individually to avoid selective perception in the interpretive analysis process (Patton 2001). Thereafter, the data was categorized based on common issues that emerged from the data. The categories were then compared and contrasted, and themes used to explain each category were clearly identified (Spiggle 1994).

**Table 1 Name, age, and ethnicity**

Name	Age	Ethnicity
Richard	38	African-American
Marlon	42	African-American
Melvin	25	African-American
Eric	34	Hispanic
Chad	40	African-American
Christian	25	African-American
Elijah	41	African-American
Zeke	27	Hispanic
Mark	30	Caucasian
Justin	35	African-American
Rodney	23	African-American
Jason	44	African-American

## Results and discussion

Three topical areas were identified from the interviews: (1) *Back in the Day*, (2) *All About the Jumpman*, and (3) *For Members Only*. The *Back in the Day* theme revealed the nostalgic nature of the sneakers for participants, and how this nostalgia evoked a desire to attain certain sneaker collections. The *All About the Jumpman* theme represents the strong brand preference of Nike among sneakerheads, especially as it pertains to Jordans and brand identity. Lastly, the *For Members Only* theme entails the exclusive culture of sneakerheads, and the unique practices and social community that exists among this group.

### Back in the day

Qualitative analysis of the data exposed unique details about the characteristics of Sneakerheads. One distinguishing characteristic most of the participants exhibited was a sense of nostalgia towards sneakers. Specifically, many participants spoke of their affinity for sneakers beginning when they were a very young age. Jason described how his initial interest in sneakers occurred during his early elementary school years:

*Jason: I probably can date it back to the first grade when the first Air Jordans came out. I wanted them so bad! They looked so different. That was the first time that I really noticed them... like wow, I like these sneakers.*

Similar to Jason, Elijah also made reference to the different look or aesthetic of sneakers that sparked his interest. In addition, Elijah credited the presence of pop culture in the 90's for igniting his passion for sneakers:

*Elijah: [Sneakers] interested me at a young age. So, like the Jordan 3s for example, were one of the first shoes to really use the elephant print. They were also one of the first shoes to remove the swoosh from their design. Then, there's a lot of references to Jordans in pop culture. Everyone's growing up watching the movie "Do The Right Thing," and the guy in "Do The Right Thing" has on a pair of Jordans, and somebody scuffs them with a bike. So, he gets in an altercation with him. You know, it really kinda supported and reinforced the love people had for their shoes and for style during that 90's era.*

For Elijah, the nostalgic influence comes from a 90's movie that highlighted the significance of sneakers in a particular scene. In that same token, Justin attributed the 90's pop culture for his enthusiasm towards sneakers. However, consistent TV references are what drove him:

*Justin: I feel like I'm telling my age now, but I watched shows like, "MTV Jams" or "BET Rap City," and I really fixated on what they wore and the exclusivity of what they wore. Then later in the mid-90's you had like Will Smith from "Fresh Prince of Belair" and he would wear Jordans. Then on "Martin" there was the episode where Martin gave the kid a pair of [Jordan] 13s... that was big to me as a kid.*

More often than not, the nostalgic references from the participants included a discussion of how they were not able to attain the sneakers they desired when they were

younger. This unattainable factor, therefore, seems to drive their current appetite and purchase behaviors for sneakers. Marlon discussed this notion further:

*Marlon: So, growing up, I didn't have the option of being able to go to the store and get the latest Jordans and all of the expensive basketball sneakers that all my friends had. So, I said when I became an adult and have some means to be able to buy what I wanted to buy, I would do that. That's how I got hooked into the sneaker game. I just, you know, had the opportunity to be able to buy what I wanted. So, I took advantage of making up for all of those times when I was a kid where I couldn't have what I wanted.*

Like the majority of sneakerheads, it is almost as if Marlon is making up for lost time, and this fuels his sneaker purchase behavior. The same is true for Eric, whose love for sneakers led to him opening a successful sneaker retailer. He explained his past and how it impacted his sneaker journey:

*Eric: Growing up from a family that didn't really have too much, my parents didn't have the means to buy me certain sneakers. You know, it was my dream as a child to have those sneakers. I guess when you don't have a lot of something, it grows your passion more for it. Then, I guess finally being able to attain it, it just really blew up for me. So, then it basically got to the point where I was always searching [for sneakers]. Like my wife was yelling at me one day and she was like you're always on your phone looking for sneakers... you should just open up a business.*

Eric followed through with the challenge from his wife and has since opened and operated his sneaker store for several years. To that end, he has now turned his dreams of back in the day into a reality that is a staple for key merchandise in his local sneaker community.

### **All about the Jumpman**

Across all twelve conversations with participants, the Jordan brand was a core topic of discussion. Many credited their fascination with sneakers to the athlete Michael Jordan. Thus, the allure of the athlete and the shoes he performed in were a novelty to participants. Richard explained his earliest recollection of Michael Jordan and his sneakers:

*Richard: I think my earliest correlation [to sneakers] was the greatest player of that time or arguably ever, and the whole branding associated with the mystique of Michael Jordan. I wanna be like Mike! You know, specifically, it must be the shoes. So, everything kinda aligned with his performance on the court.*

Eric also alluded that being a fan of Michael Jordan incited his sneaker infatuation, which led to wanting to emulate the athlete:

*Eric: Basically, growing up playing sports, and growing up in the era of Michael Jordan, I always was a big Michael Jordan fan as a child. So, growing up and seeing him on TV... basically every kid wanted to emulate him. You know, we just all wanted to have his shoes.*

In fact, most of the Sneakerheads interviewed considered the Jordan brand of sneakers to be the introduction or base line for being a part of the sneaker community. Christian discusses this unwritten principle in detail:

*Christian: Jordans are kind of like base line for most Sneakerheads, and you kind of go upward from there. He [Michael Jordan] kind of popularized athletes having their own signature sneaker, and it also became more than basketball with Jordan. It became like a lifestyle sneaker as well. You know, people wear them casually. They're not just for basketball purposes anymore. So that's why I say it's [Jordans] like the base line.*

Christian's perspective of the Jordan brand as a part of the Sneakerhead lifestyle is reminiscent of what is seen in Brand Identity literature. That is, when a consumer has a personal connection to the brand, this drives loyalty towards that brand. Thus, the personal connection and aspirational icon of Michael Jordan then compels participants to purchase the brand—so much so that it is deemed a staple brand for Sneakerheads. Chad, for instance, likens the Jordan brand to the high-end level of a luxury car. He describes how this motivates his loyalty to the brand:

*Chad: I am a big Jordan guy. I think Jordans are probably like the Bentley or Aston Martin of the shoe game. If anybody has a pair of Jordans, it's got to be somebody. And my mom always told me, you know first thing a woman looks at is your feet. So, if you have some dusty old shoes on, you won't get no play!*

It is important to note, however, there are differences in the production and manufacture of types of Jordan sneakers. Given this, participants made it very clear that the Retro Jordan sneaker is preferred, while the Team Jordan sneaker is not. Melvin expounded upon this notion:

*Melvin: So, like Team Jordans... I don't know, if you guys are familiar with them. Well, Team Jordans are not valuable at all. Even though they have the Michael Jordan tag and name attached to it, it is not actually something [a shoe] he [Michael Jordan] played in. So, people only want particular shoes that he played with. So, if he did not hoop in that shoe, color and model, then people will not want it.*

While the discussion of the Jordan brand was consistent across all participants, the two youngest participants interviewed did not actually tout the Jordan brand as their favorite. This confirms what has been noted in recent sneaker literature regarding other brands being more notarized by younger sneaker enthusiasts. Particularly, the older Sneakerheads may be all about the Jumpman (name used to refer to Jordan logo silhouette), but younger Sneakerheads may not be. Zeke and Rodney made this clear in their statements:

*Zeke: Older generations are more of like... basketball oriented which is more of the Jordan and Nike brand. Their biggest models are basketball shoes. For instance, me, my brother, and cousins are the younger ones. We kinda like everything. And a big thing now is runners [running shoes]. Adidas is kinda over the runner market right now... they have the leading runners—Ultra Boost, and NMDs.*

*Rodney: I never really liked Jordans like that. I became interested in Adidas. I like the Ultraboost. You know, stuff like that. And also the Pharrell Human Races.*



### For members only

It was not uncommon for participants to talk about fellow Sneakerheads as if it were a community or even family. Certain practices and norms were described as commonplace within the community, which then seemed to cement the bonds that existed within the subculture. Eric described the unique elements of the culture that is present within his sneaker shop:

*Eric: We sit around and chat for hours, kinda like a barbershop. Because that same barbershop culture this is what we try to keep within the sneaker culture. You know we're here to talk about sports, we talk about sneaker history, certain [sneaker] releases that came out, and what people are wearing.*

The barbershop community culture that Eric described aligns with the Social Identity Theory literature which highlights group characteristics and norms that are commonplace among a group's identity. While this sharing of information and keeping up-to-date about sneakers is done in-person within Eric's shop, a huge part of the Sneakerhead community involves being connected online, specifically through social media and various sneaker apps. These apps are their connection to the pulse of what's up and coming within the sneaker community and is a must. Christian, for instance, described it as "the chase":

*Christian: So, basically the chase is really being updated on information as far as sneaker release dates and what stores are getting them. Because certain stuff only comes out certain places. You have to just really be in tune with the social media and the internet and keeping up with those blogs that continuously post what's coming out and where it's coming out at. You have to really be on it! That's part of the chase.*

Elijah takes part in "the chase" and described which apps and blogs he used to get his information:

*Elijah: Nike has an app, Reebok has an app. Then there's a bunch of retailers. I mean Footlocker, Foot Action, Flight 23, and Finish Line. I mean, you can get sneakers from all these places and then there's a ton of secondary markets like GOAT, Flight Club, and StockX. You go everywhere. Sneaker blogs... sometimes the company will give a direct to consumer in like a sneakers app. There's a ton of information on different shoes and when they're gonna release and at what time. And whether you have to enter a draw or do some kind of a ticketing or lotto system to get it, or if you can just buy it. And sometimes you'll get a text from a friend, who also is a Sneakerhead. He'll give you information about a sneaker release that's coming as well.*

Based on Christian's and Elijah's dialogue, "the chase" is an essential part of the Sneakerhead community, and, thus, provides the group somewhat of a sense of identification. That is, the behavior of "the chase" reinforces the group's interests thereby strengthening the culture.

While connections clearly persisted within the sneaker community, participants discussed a division of sorts that was also present within the sneaker community. Specifically, this division existed between what was referred to as "True Sneakerheads" versus a

group called “Hypebeasts.” Eric was passionate about this subject, as he is often exposed to both types of sneaker enthusiasts within his sneaker store. He defined what a True Sneakerhead is:

*Eric: A True Sneakerhead is somebody that really loves the shoe. They are passionate and can tell you history about it. They can tell you about the culture and they love the culture... that is a true sneakerhead to me.*

In contrast, Christian and Chad describe the characteristics of a Hypebeast and how it differs from a True Sneakerhead:

*Christian: Hypebeast. So basically, that's a big word in the sneaker culture. True Sneakerheads say it a lot. It's the person who only buys things that other people like. They only buy them because of the hype. You buy only hype stuff. So, that's like a subdivision of the sneaker community that's frowned upon.*

*Chad:... the Hypebeast, they call it. They are like hype over shoes, not really knowing the true history of a shoes. They buy them just to resell them and overcharge [people].*

While this division within the sneaker community is surprising, it is akin to what is mentioned within the Social Identity Theory literature. Specifically, an aspect of the theory called Group Distinctiveness entails a social group differentiating their group from other groups based upon their unique characteristics and norms. Given this, the True Sneakerhead is embodied by the norm of understanding sneaker history, and possesses a true love for the culture. While a Hypebeast does not embrace these unique norms. Therefore, there is a “for members only” distinction that exists within the Sneakerhead community.

## **Conclusion**

The current study sought to explore Sneakerhead culture from the perspective of male Sneakerheads, to gain a better understanding of their motivations and brand preferences. Findings from this study, therefore, aid marketers in developing marketing strategies that speak to the unique orientation, identities, and preferences of the Sneakerhead community. Moreover, findings from the study may also be applied in the academic classroom setting to give students a relevant and practical example of a niche market segment that is heavily targeted by industry. This investigation was conducted using a Social Identity Theory lens, to assess the impact of group identity and norms on the consumer behaviors of self-identified Sneakerheads. Three themes emerged from individual interviews with participants. These themes included: (1) *Back in the Day*, (2) *All About the Jumpman*, and (3) *For Members Only*. Overall, the findings confirm observations from prior research with members of this subculture, while also adding additional nuance to the academic literature.

Although the current findings are based on research with adult and emerging adult males, their reflections are similar to those that researchers have found among adolescent male consumers. As such, when considering the theme *Back in the Day*, we see that adult male Sneakerheads reflect back on social and psychological drivers of behavior including peer influence, self-esteem, and desired connection to larger fashion trends

(Beaudoin and Lachance 2006). As such, many of the participants in the current study noted their inability to fully engage sneaker culture in their adolescence and the importance of being able to fulfill those desires in adulthood.

This notion of wanting to fulfill a material desire from childhood is akin to the concept of social identity. That is, children use possessions to signal pertinent aspects of their identity both to themselves and peers (Chaplin et al. 2019). Findings from this study show that the material possession of sneakers and certain nostalgic sneaker brands allow Sneakerheads to express their identities in an outward way. This material possession then solidifies their place in the community, while allowing them to capture the essence of the sneaker culture of the past. Marketers may want to capitalize on this idea by including nostalgic images of sneakers in their advertisements to evoke a reference to this aspect of the Sneakerhead identity.

Many of the Sneakerheads in the current study came of age during the rise of Sneakerhead culture. As such, *All About the Jumpman* reflects the influence and symbolic value of sports, music and fashion on the construction, negotiation and performance of masculine social identities (Swain 2002). For many, the Jordan brand identity became synonymous with their development of ideal selves during adolescences and emerging adulthood. However, among younger Millennials, diversity in brand options and ambassadors opened opportunities to expand their ideal self while also holding a space to acknowledge the historical value innate to the theme of *All About the Jumpman*.

This theme relates to the social identity theory in that participants identify with the sneaker based on the athlete, musician, or figure they seek to emulate. In that same token, by owning the shoe that is worn by that figure, their identities are then further shaped as they connect to the sneaker brand. This is especially true for the Jordan brand, as Michael Jordan is an athletic icon that generations have admired for years and is still relevant today given the recent success of the 2020 ESPN documentary series on Michael Jordan entitled *The Last Dance*. To further connect the Jordan brand with the shoe's icon, Jordan brand marketers may want to feature ads that include montages of older Sneakerheads discussing their experiences watching Michael Jordan perform in his namesake sneakers during his early years, and how the nostalgia of that image connects to the love of the sneaker brand. This may also help to appeal to the younger Sneakerheads by including the historical context of the shoe.

Although there may exist differences in perception of Sneakerhead culture based on age, across the spectrum, Sneakerheads agreed that membership is exclusive and built upon a shared enthusiasm, often developed early in life. The emergence of the theme *For Members Only*, highlights the importance of history, community and culture for Sneakerheads. As such, participants were able to document historical shifts in the cultural experience and note opportunities for continued contribution in the areas of legacy building, mentorship and entrepreneurship. In line with the tenets of Social Identity Theory, those who have established membership within the Sneakerhead community have a clear sense of group identification and are evolving in a manner that serves to reinforce the community's shared interests. Moreover, their place in the community is a sense a "natural fit" with their personal identities, further supported and exemplified by their fellow Sneakerheads within the subculture (Oliver 1999). Lastly, research findings illustrate how participants define themselves as a Sneakerhead given their passionate

appeal and overall “lifestyle” for sneakers, thereby confirming the definition of Sneakerhead suggested in previous research (Choi and Kim 2019; Powell 2014).

### **Limitations and future studies**

While our findings add to the dearth of academic literature exploring the Sneakerhead community, there are a few noted limitations. The current study relies solely on semi-structured interviews with male sneakerheads in the Mid-Atlantic. Given the vast geographic reach of sneaker culture, it can be surmised that Sneakerhead communities may vary based on regional demographic factors, such as urbanicity and socio-economic status. Additionally, there has been a rise in the visibility of female members of the Sneakerhead community, of whom we were not able to recruit for the current investigation. Lastly, our participants were recruited in person, and largely from local sneaker shops. This presents a limitation, as a growing number of sneaker transactions and communal bonding is occurring in online spaces.

Given these limitations, future research should seek to engage a broader group of self-identified Sneakerheads. In order to more fully encapsulate the depth of this community and its shifting cultural norms, researchers should seek to engage female members, adolescent members, members from Gen X, and those across a variety of geographic locations. Regarding geographic locations, it may be optimal for researchers to collaborate with researchers in the NYC area as the sneaker culture was historically born out of the geography and still maintain dominance in the culture. Los Angeles may also be another region to tap into, as the sneaker culture is also flourishing in this area. Keeping in mind the driving factors of Sneakerhead membership, future research should also engage a dyadic approach by exploring familial and peer influences on sneaker consumption. As such, this research should explore issues such as father–child bonding or school/neighborhood belonging that may be facilitated via Sneakerhead culture membership. Further, this research should also explore the potential for labor market entrance and diversity for Sneakerheads who identify or are identified as Hypebeasts.

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DM and QCC contributed to develop the manuscript from introduction to limitations and future studies. As a graduate student, ND contributed to the literature review and transcriptions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### **Availability of data and materials**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the need to keep the anonymity of the participants within the study, but are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Ethics and IRB Administration Approval was received for this current study on June 17, 2019. The IRB protocol number is 14036.

### **Consent for publication**

The authors declare consent for publication.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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