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“The Stories that Come With the Shoe”:

A Qualitative Study of Male Sneaker Collector Motivations, Experiences, and Identities

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Background and Purpose: For the typical consumer, sneakers are merely one footwear choice among many, and they are often donned for strictly utilitarian purposes. However, there is a thriving community of individuals with a passion for wearing, collecting, and sometimes reselling sneakers. Sneaker collectors, or more popularly, “sneakerheads,” are predominantly male.¹ In mainstream culture, the male role has long eschewed shopping except when necessary, spending as little time as possible on the activity (Hansen & Jensen, 2009; Hasan, 2010). However, male gender norms are changing; growing numbers of men now evince interest in fashion and apparel (Florin, Callen, Mullen, & Kropp, 2007). Belk and Wallendorf (1994) argued that collections are “linked to the collector’s identity” because they exist through “purposeful acquisition and retention” over a period of the collector’s life (p. 240). The phenomenon of sneakerheads may be seen as one manifestation of a more fashion-conscious identity for men. Although there has been some focus on sneaker collectors in both the popular and academic press (e.g., Chow, 2014; Miner, 2009), the potential importance of this group as a harbinger of change in the performance of identity or gender roles suggests that further study is warranted. The purpose of this study therefore was to explore the motivations and perspectives of male sneaker collectors. Research questions included: (1) How do sneaker collectors perceive the experience of sneaker collecting? (2) What makes a shoe collectable? (3) Is sneaker collecting used to represent or explore identity?

Method: Participants for this qualitative study were found through a mass emailing to males 18 years or older who were undergraduates at a large, Midwestern, land-grant university. While a convenience sample, college undergraduates have been identified as having great purchasing power as a group, as well as being early adopters of trends (Reuters, 2014), indicating this as an appropriate approach. The researchers conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with twelve males who self-identified as sneaker collectors. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The first two authors coded the transcripts, achieving an 81% inter-rater agreement. The researchers used the constant comparative method throughout the data collection process.

Results and Discussion: Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants described themselves as active in sports, especially basketball. Others characterized themselves as long-time basketball

¹ A survey conducted by a popular sneaker website revealed that almost 98% of its respondents identified as male (Campless, 2014).

fans, but not players. In general, participants seemed to think that collecting arose naturally from these sports interests; Ethan² stated, “I’m just a basketball fanatic, so the shoes come with that.”

There were three primary reasons respondents found a shoe collectable. First, shoes that were associated with particular moments in basketball history were prized. Nolan remembered that he became interested in one shoe that had been shown in a TV program on the history of the 1992 U.S. Olympics basketball team. A second reason for collecting was purely aesthetic. Boyd liked to have the same shoe model in several different colorways so he could color coordinate with his clothing. Only one respondent primarily saw himself as a reseller of shoes, although a few others had occasionally sold some of their sneakers. Nolan described himself as an entrepreneur and followed sneaker trends closely to determine what he bought. He planned to open a sneaker consignment store in the future to expand his reselling activities.

For most participants, questions of identity did seem to be tied up with their shoes. As their expertise grew and became nuanced, collectors noted that they were more willing to embrace apparently unpopular shoes or brands or unusual colorways, as if their increased knowledge and taste gave them a greater sense of freedom in displaying their individuality. One shoe that Daniel liked to wear was the Nike Cortez, saying, “They’re pretty low-key, simple,” preferring them over shoes that he felt had been overdesigned or featured too many colors.

In conclusion, sneaker collecting does appear to be a way for these men to voice their interests in fashion, dress, and personal expression. Although reselling has been featured in the popular press about sneakerheads, interviewees typically did not participate in the reselling market. Instead, their shoe collections can be seen to tell a continuing story about themselves. Although the quotation in the title, “The stories that come with the shoe” is from Kevin, who was talking about the basketball history tied up in the shoes he bought, it is equally true to see these growing and changing shoe collections as stories about their owners’ growth and self-definition as individuals.

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² All names are pseudonyms.