THESIS

AN EXAMINATION OF PARTICIPATION IN SNEAKER CULTURE: CONSUMER

MOTIVATIONS AND RESPONSES TO CO-BRANDING BETWEEN LUXURY

APPAREL AND ATHLETIC SHOE BRANDS - LOUIS VUITTON AND NIKE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigated the phenomenon of 'sneaker culture' influence on the contemporary fashion market by examining consumer perspectives and their motivations for engaging in this subculture and by exploring their responses to the collaborative marketing strategy called co-branding. This research examined the co-branding of luxury apparel brands and athletic shoe/sportswear brands through the collaboration between Louis Vuitton and Nike. This research was guided by the lens of fandom and participatory culture, and it employed an inductive approach to draw general conclusions from specific observations (i.e., interviews). This study was conducted by interviewing 'sneakerheads' who were expected to be particularly interested in this collaboration between luxury and athletic brands. Through a qualitative research method, this study provides insight into consumers' (i.e., sneakerheads) perceptions of the value of this type of co-branding. Findings also provide insights for fashion companies to understand the specific motivations of consumers who participate in sneaker culture and their behavior/response (i.e., consumer attitudes and purchase intentions) to co-branding between luxury brands and athletic shoe/sportswear brands.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Co-branding - "a form of cooperation between two or more brands with significant customer recognition, in which all the participants' brand names are retained" (Motion et al., 2003, p. 1082).

Sneakerheads - People who wear, collect, and have much knowledge of sneakers (Matthews et al., 2021). The core feature of sneakerheads is that they spend a lot of time and money studying the product category and its history to build their collections and they are a very loyal community of collectors and aficionados (Powell, 2014).

Limited-edition sneakers - Shoes released in limited quantities that can only be purchased at selected retailers (Limited Run, 2020); often created from collaborations between athletic shoes and fashion brands, celebrities, artists, or companies external to the fashion industry.

Retro editions sneakers - Goods that are re-released in limited quantities once every few years following the initial release of the original sneakers.

Sneaker resell - A market that typically consists of previously-purchased products from the original brands that generate high-demand owing to the limited quantity release, and is then resold at a higher price to individual consumers or smaller retailers (MVC Magazine, 2021).

Sneaker resellers - People who purchase sneakers for the purpose of selling them to others, at a later date and higher price (Indeed, 2022).

Street fashion and culture - Street fashion and culture refer to sub-cultural styles and fashion trends that have altered product design and retail by crossing over into mainstream culture, predominately focusing on men and as a means to express "coolness" and a "rough" style (Adz & Stone, 2018; Endress, 2015)

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The design and development of sneakers over the past 15 years have created more progressive creativity in product design and greater consumer engagement in the products than it did over the whole prior century (Wood, 2019). Although sneakers have been popular in subcultures (i.e., street culture) for some time, sneakers – as a fashion item – are now influencing the high fashion market and mainstream culture through various brand collaborations, including collaborations between luxury (e.g., famous designers) and athletic shoe brands and celebrities, as well as with well-known brands outside of the fashion industry, such as ice cream company Ben & Jerry's or video game console company PlayStation. In other words, once a symbol of athleticism, sneakers have become items of commercial and fashionable desire beyond their main function (LaBarre, 2021). In addition, there are various groups of consumers who buy sneakers, including Millennial and Generation Z consumers who view sneakers as status symbols. Similarly, wealthy Generation X consumers, who grew up with the Michael Jordan series of basketball shoes, also are avid consumers of sneakers (Gail, 2020).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the emergence of the sneaker subculture and the advent of the hip-hop era, athletic shoes became synonymous with streetwear (Matthews et al., 2021). From this time forward, sneakers became representative of 'streetwear' within street culture, and people who are particularly passionate about sneaker designs and brands are often referred to as 'sneakerheads.' Matthews et al. (2021) defined sneakerheads as people who wear, collect, and have much knowledge of sneakers. In addition, Kulinicheva (2021) noted that the term sneakerheads is now the most well-liked and most commonly used term among sneaker lovers, and she classified these individuals into three categories: sneaker collectors, sneaker

enthusiasts, and others (e.g., sneaker photographers, sneaker art makers, or sneaker fans). The distinction between sneaker collectors and participants is based upon the level and type of engagement in sneaker culture, however, these terms are not mutually exclusive. The core feature of sneakerheads is that they spend a lot of time and money studying the product category and its history to build their collections, and they are a very loyal community of collectors and aficionados (Powell, 2014).

Sneaker culture and the concept of sneakerheads began with the launch of the Nike Air Jordan 1 (Matthews et al., 2021). The reason is that the Air Jordan series has steadily gained popularity since its introduction in 1985, accounting for more than half of the basketball shoe market by 2020 (Choi & Kim, 2019; Matthews et al., 2021). Also, since the late 1990s, athletic brands have been collaborating with hip-hop musicians and famous designers to release limited-edition sneakers, while also releasing retro editions of athletic shoes like the Jordan series. Overtime, sneakerheads' interest in these products has grown, and these individuals frequently share their thoughts about these products with each other in online sneaker communities and in small sneaker stores that sell limited-edition sneakers and retro editions and that provide a space where they can easily engage with one another in person (Kulinicheva, 2021). Kulinicheva (2021) explained that sneakerheads evaluate and manage sneakers on the market using their own standards (i.e., the knowledge of sneakers), which they form through communication with one another.

As such, stories (e.g., history, information, knowledge) about sneakers created by sneakerheads (through their participation in the sneaker culture) rather than by the athletic shoe/sneaker companies provide added value to the product by further highlighting the exclusivity and uniqueness of sneakers (DeLeon, J, 2018; DeLeon, J., & Klanten, R., 2019).

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Furthermore, the development of the digital environment has played a major role in heightening the popularity of sneakers (i.e., limited-edition sneakers and retro editions) among various consumers. Mark Parker, executive chairman of Nike, stated in an interview that "Digital media was fuel on the fire for sneaker culture" (DeLeon, 2018, p.8). This statement is evidenced by many active sneaker blogs and communities in the United States, which include *Nike Talk, Finish Line, Kicks On Fire, Nice Kicks, Sneaker Files, Sneaker Bar Detroit, Just Fresh Kicks, Another Nike Bot, Nike Shoe Bot's Blog, and DeFY New York*. In short, sneakerheads produce content (e.g., history of sneakers, release information of sneakers, sneakerheads' experiences) to share, and, in turn, gain knowledge about sneaker culture through these communities.

The popularity of sneaker culture also has led to the formation of a market called sneaker resell (e.g., StockX and Goat). Sometimes athletic shoe brands release a small number of limited-edition sneakers or retro editions, which are often in higher demand than supply, as some consumers are willing to pay more than the original retail price to purchase the sneakers. Thus, sneaker resellers purchase products for the purpose of selling them at a later date and higher price (Indeed, 2022) to meet the demand of these customers. The growth of these resellers suggests that many contemporary consumers have a propensity to buy special or unique sneakers from selected brands, regardless of price. This further suggests that some consumers place considerable value on sneakers owing to their design and brand, thereby creating 'worth' that is greater than the original price based on the function of shoes.

Just as the concept and position of sneakers are changing in the fashion market, the concept of luxury brands and the tendency of consumers to value and purchase these brands are also changing. According to Yeoman (2011), the most notable point in regard to luxury consumption is that it is now democratized and attainable for the general public. Luxury has

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become a phenomenon that is easily accessible to the public in everyday life, not only the privileged class, so experience and authenticity are more important factors than monetary value or status (Yeoman, 2011). As such, the definition of luxury also has evolved from an old or traditional understanding of luxury (e.g., based on price) to embrace the contemporary concept of "new" luxury (e.g., based on experience and authenticity). DeLeon and Klanten (2019) described 'new luxury' in respect to eight characteristics: 1) knowledge, 2) cultural aspiration, 3) item uniqueness to the individual, 4) status demonstrated by access to the cultures represented by luxury items, 5) a dynamic lifestyle that requires participation, 6) a brand's identity and values felt in digital and physical platforms, 7) values tied to artful ideas executed at a high level, and 8) pieces personalized to a client's identity. Today, luxury fashion brands are seeking to reach new and diverse consumer segments by reshaping their brand identity and applying the contemporary concepts of luxury to their brands (Yu et al., 2020).

This shift in luxury brand marketing aligns with the development of co-branding strategies, which must consider the need to rethink the previous concept of each brand that is engaged in the co-branding collaboration as well as the need to create and communicate the new expression, as described by Motion et al. (2003). According to Blackett and Boad (1999), co-branding was defined as "a form of cooperation between two or more brands with significant customer recognition, in which all the participants' brand names are retained" (Motion et al., 2003, p.1082). In addition, Keller (1998) explained that the core purpose of co-branding is to create a positive association between one's own brand and the collaborating brand. A recent trend observed among luxury brands is co-branding collaborations with street brands and athletic/sportswear brands that are currently attracting significant attention in the fashion market to satisfy changing consumer demands and to extend the new luxury concept to luxury brands.

Yu et al. (2020) noted that collaborations between luxury brands and sportswear or street brands may be more satisfying to consumers than collaborations between luxury brands and fast fashion or mass market brands owing to the proliferation of social media. Social media has brought streetwear into the mainstream – today's blending of high fashion (i.e., luxury) and streetwear is a familiar concept to most consumers in the mainstream market (Yu et al., 2020).

To proceed successfully with co-branding collaborations, assessment of the 'product fit' between the collaborating brands is very important, as demonstrated through collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands. For example, the most noticeable collaboration among such brands is the co-branded product created by Louis Vuitton and Nike, the Air Force 1, which is one of Nike's representative sneaker models. The co-branded shoe was designed by Virgil Abloh, who was the artistic director of Louis Vuitton's menswear from 2018 to 2021, and the designer responsible for merging street fashion with luxury. Unfortunately, it was his last sneaker collaboration as he passed away in November 2021. The limited quantity of 200 pairs of the limited-edition Air Force 1 was auctioned off on Sotheby's website, and among the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1, the US 5 size had a winning bid of $ 352,800 on February 9, 2022 (Silbert, 2022). The limited-edition Air Force 1 sneaker is currently regarded as one of the world's most expensive sneakers. The sneaker also became a hot topic in the sneaker communities before its release as it first became known through celebrity endorsements (e.g., DJ Khaled), another type of co-branding. In this case, it seems that the history and symbolism of Nike Air Force 1 in sneaker culture blended well with Louis Vuitton, and the concept of new luxury and consumer needs were well met through co-branding.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of sneakerheads and their motivations for participating in sneaker culture as well as to examine their responses to co-

branding collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe/sportswear brands. Two

characteristics of the individuals who participate in sneaker culture (i.e., sneakerheads) are

knowledge of sneakers (e.g., the origin and history of sneakers) (Matthews et al., 2021), and

emotional investment in sneakers, as gained through various activities (Kulinicheva, 2021),

which are of particular interest in this study. Thus, this study explored how these two

characteristics inform consumers' participation in sneaker culture and their responses to co-

branding collaborations. Two research questions were developed to guide this study:

RQ1: What motivates individuals (i.e., sneakerheads) to participate in sneaker culture?

a. How does 'knowledge' of sneakers influence participation in sneaker culture?

b. How does 'emotional investment' in sneakers influence participation in sneaker culture?

RQ2: How do individuals respond to co-branding sneaker collaborations?

Potential Contributions

This study contributes to the research on sneaker culture by providing new insights to

the characteristics and experiences that define sneakerheads, the motivations that encourage

individual participation in sneaker culture, and the value of co-branding between luxury apparel

and athletic shoe brands. Athletic shoe/sportswear brands are influencing many areas (e.g.,

society, economy, culture) by co-branding with companies in various fields and celebrities as

well as fashion companies. In particular, the co-branding (e.g., the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air

Force 1 and Dior x Nike Air Jordan 1) between luxury brands and athletic shoe/sportswear

brands attract a lot of attention. As such, this study provides insight into why consumers (i.e.,

sneakerheads) who engage in the culture of participation, which involves both emotional

investment (i.e., participation, sharing, contribution, bonding) and knowledge, are important to

fashion brands. In other words, consumers' responses to sneaker co-branding may provide

fashion companies with greater understanding of sneakerhead culture and consumers.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research on co-branding includes both empirical examinations and theoretical explanations that collectively provide understanding of the merit of this marketing strategy. Researchers have examined the relationships between brand attitudes, brand fit, brand knowledge, secondary associations, and co-branding, as well as the nature and evolution of co-branding, including the influence of celebrity endorsers and sponsorships on the development of this marketing strategy. Researchers also have explored the theoretical explanations for the implementation of this marketing strategy, including discourse theory, resonance theory, signaling theory, and 'fandom' and participation. This review of prior literature focuses on co-branding, the democratization of 'luxury', and the sneakerhead phenomenon.

Co-Branding as a Marketing Strategy

Motion et al. (2003) examined the way that sponsorship relationships may evolve into co-branded partnerships producing a joint identity between corporate brands with three aims: 1) to explore the process of building a workable co-branded identity within the sponsor relationship, 2) to explain co-branding through the application of discourse theory, and 3) to reflect on what co-branding offers a corporate brand. The researchers used a case study approach to investigate the sponsorship relationship between Adidas and the All Blacks, an elite team of the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU). Discourse and articulation concepts were employed to support the case study and to frame the analyses. Data were collected through content analysis of advertising texts, including print and television advertising created by Adidas' advertising agency (i.e., Saatchi & Saatchi). Interviews also were conducted with the key individuals who participated in the development of the co-branding between All Blacks and Adidas. The themes

that frequently appeared, especially in the interview analysis, were brand development, brand communication, and building brand value (or equity). In conclusion, the researchers explained that the three themes mentioned above were strategies for co-branding. Specifically, to manage corporate co-branding, they suggested that brand values should be consistent, and that a common beginning point for establishing a practical co-brand identity should be identified. This beginning point may form the basis for marketing communication (e.g., campaigns, advertisements, and media statements). The researchers noted that discourse theory could provide important academic insights into the ways that identities are reflected, expressed, or transformed, and this theory could be employed to examine the social-cultural influence of how knowledge and social practice are constructed. The researchers also suggested that discourse theory could contribute to understanding of how co-brands provide corporate brands with the opportunity to expand sponsorship relationships into partnerships which redefine brand identity, adjust brand position, and build co-brand equity.

Helmig et al. (2008) categorized different branding strategies and created a theoretical model for co-branding based on an examination of direct effects and spill-over effects of this marketing strategy. In addition, the authors provided a structural and comprehensive overview of the results of empirical studies on co-branded products. To highlight the benefits of co-branding strategy, the authors compared co-branding to brand extension and other brand alliance strategies (i.e., joint sales promotion, advertising alliance, dual branding, bundling) that have signaling benefits (e.g., enhanced brand image). The authors conceptualized this study through the signaling perspective of Rao and Rueckert (1994) and the process model of attitude formation and change by Hillier and Tikoo (1995) and presented direct effects and spill-over effects to explore factors for the success of co-branded products. Findings revealed that five factors (i.e.,

'characteristics of constituent brands/products', 'characteristics of co-branded product', 'fit constituent brands/products', 'fit constituent brands with co-branded product', and 'person-specific variables') had direct effects on the economic success of co-branding, and three factors (i.e., 'characteristics of constituent brands', 'characteristics of co-branded product', and 'fit constituent brands/products') had positive spill-over effects on constituent brands. Also, to achieve success and positive effects in co-branding, the researchers emphasized the importance of fit between the two brands creating the co-branded product. However, since the researchers analyzed only short-term direct effects and spill-over effects, it was suggested that future studies could provide more information through continuous measurements and long-term outcomes.

Keller (2019) investigated how secondary associations (i.e., building connections with other people, places, or things) change consumers' brand knowledge through application of the brand resonance model. Two important factors were presented to predict how much leverage (e.g., more positive attitude, greater willingness to purchase) might occur when one brand is connected to another company: 1) nature of the knowledge about the linked entities, and 2) impact of the knowledge about the linked entities. With respect to nature of the knowledge, the researcher identified six building blocks (i.e., salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, resonance) in four stages (i.e., brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationships) that are components of the brand resonance model. The model attempts to explain how consumers think, feel, and act, and how much they 'connect' with a brand. With respect to the impact of knowledge, the researcher explored how consumers' knowledge about given entities, to which brand knowledge and judgment and decision-making are connected, influenced consumers' knowledge. Keller (2019) suggested that the resonance model can help explain the breadth and depth of consumers' knowledge about brands, and the secondary associations can

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generate theoretical insights on changes in consumers' brand knowledge and identify practical problems.

Tian et al (2022) expanded on the existing knowledge of celebrity's role in brand communication as partners and co-creators of new products, beyond that of endorser, to enhance advertisers' understanding of celebrity influence. In addition, the authors expanded upon existing research on non-evaluative meaning transfer and contributed to the celebrity endorsement literature. To explore the relationship between celebrity and co-branding, the researchers firstly explained celebrity endorsement or co-branding (i.e., co-creators of new products) with the non-evaluative meaning transfer theory. Next, the authors raised the need to investigate the brand fit between brand and celebrity, as well as the effects of co-branding or celebrity endorsement in celebrity partnerships. For measurement, the researchers collected data from Instagram users, and they consisted of ages between 18–34 years old (i.e., millennials). All the pretests and the main experiment were performed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). For testing hypotheses, a 2x2x2 type study was designed, and a series of one-way ANCOVAs and a series of three-way ANCOVAs were used. In addition, PROCESS Model 86 was used to test the serial mediation effect based on the supported hypotheses. The core result of this study was that alliance of celebrity and brand through co-branding produced more powerful meaning transfer effects on brand beliefs and attitudes than through endorsement. However, researchers addressed that the results suggested that alliances with celebrities with negative meanings could be harmful because co-branding can create more obvious negative brand attitudes than endorsement. Also, Tian et al. (2022) noted that lesser-known brands were more sensitive to meaning transfer than well-known brands. In conclusion, the authors recommended that co-branding with celebrity

could create a positive meaning-transfer effect on brand beliefs and attitudes when small brand performs partnerships with celebrity through appropriate brand fit rather than large brands.

Democratization of 'Luxury'

Wang et al. (2015) investigated the impact of a luxury brand retailer co-branding strategy by exploring the role of independent variables, including brand familiarity, product fit, and brand fit, on consumer response, with a focus on cultural differences. The study examined how consumers from the U.S. and Indonesia responded to co-branding strategies between luxury brands and retailers. The researchers adopted Hofstede's (1984; 2001) five dimensions of national culture (i.e., power distance, individualism/ collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-/short) for this comparison of consumer responses to co-branding. The researchers conducted an online survey with 231 undergraduate students in the U.S. and 240 undergraduate students in Indonesia. ANOVAs were employed to examine differences between US and Indonesian students' responses to co-branding. Findings from the analyses revealed that brand familiarity did not affect consumer's responses across the two countries with respect to attitude toward the co-brand, however, product fit did reveal cultural differences in consumer responses. Although product fit did not influence U.S. consumers' responses, Indonesian consumers rated co-brands higher when there was a high product fit. Brand fit, the remaining independent variable, played an important role in recognizing co-brand in the two countries. This showed a fairly strong positive attitude toward co-brand when luxury brands conduct co-brand with high-end retailers instead of low-end retailers. In attitude change toward luxury brand retailer co-branding, Indonesian consumers showed negative attitudes change toward luxury brand retailer co-branding, but American consumers showed positive attitudes toward that.

Yeoman (2011) explored the changing concept of luxury and the changing behaviors of consumers who consume luxury goods across five dimensions (i.e., luxury and quality, luxury for rent, mercurial consumption, exclusivity, and new expressions). Yeoman posited that the most notable point in regard to luxury consumption is that it is now reachable for the general public and democratized. According to Yeoman, luxury has become a phenomenon of mass marketing in everyday life, wherein experience and authenticity are more important factors than monetary value or status. The author suggested that the quality of luxury is becoming more important since the growth of the luxury rental market allows many people to experience the quality (authenticity) of luxury at a low cost and have more desire for high-quality luxury goods. Also, mercurial consumption to broadly search for discount products is generally becoming an attractive behavior. Although it may be paradoxical when compared to the above-mentioned content, Yeoman argued that everyone should have easy access to luxury, and luxury brands maintain exclusivity at the same time. To achieve this outcome, the researcher explained that luxury brands must not only redefine luxury, but also must understand contemporary consumer attitudes toward luxury. In other words, Yeoman (2011) recommended that luxury needs to adapt to changes in the rapidly evolving fashion market.

Yu et al. (2020) explored the realistic compromises of young consumers through co-branding combinations of luxury brands with various brands in the fashion industry. This study employed signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to examine the four characteristics of luxury co-branding combinations: brand combinations, retail channels, uniqueness, and price, and four brands (each with unique characteristics in the fashion market) were selected for the study. Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the apparel program at a public university in the southeastern United States, who were described as potential consumers of the fashion market,

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were selected as the research sample. In the research method, a survey approach and pilot tests were conducted, impact of four main attributes aforementioned was evaluated through conjoint analysis, and the researchers used D-Optimal design, which is the most common criterion in conjoint analysis, for obtaining the most accurate estimate. The research results were explained by dividing them into two perspectives: general and unique. In the general aspect, the authors suggested luxury brands collaborating with sportswear and street brands may be more satisfying to consumers than luxury brands collaborating with fast fashion and mass market brands. In the unique aspect, the researchers noted that consumers value the exclusivity of collaboration, in other words, suggested that the number of times one brand conducts co-branding with other brands in a year plays an important role in forming the exclusivity of co-branding to consumers. In conclusion, this paper provided important information that street brands and athletic brands could be valuable partners in the luxury co-branding combination and suggested that this aspect be researched more specifically in future studies.

The 'Sneakerhead' Phenomenon

Kulinicheva (2021) presented a new approach to studying sneakerheads by exploring these consumers' enthusiasm for athletic shoes and shoe collections, which the researcher labeled 'fandom and participatory culture.' Jenkins (2006) defined this theory as having five characteristics (i.e., participation, sharing, knowledge, contributors, and bond). Kulinicheva (2021) employed a mixed method approach to her research, conducting 17 semi-structured interviews to gain insight in consumers' participation in the sneaker culture and performing content analyses of niche media (i.e., Crepe City) and websites (i.e., Complex, Sole Collector, Hypebeast, and Highsnobiety). Based upon the interview questions and content analyses, the author defined sneakerheads as an umbrella term, and classified these individuals into three

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categories: sneaker collectors, sneaker enthusiasts, and others. The researcher explained that in the sneaker culture, knowledge of sneakers is very important because knowledge gathering takes precedence over sneaker gathering, and this content was linked with fandom culture. Specifically, Kulinicheva (2021) explained that knowledge can be gained through fan practices, which is the activity of sneakerheads engaging in online sneaker communities or by visiting small sneaker shops where they can easily 'participate' (i.e., interacting with other sneakerheads who share their interests) in person. Also, the researcher explained that the high emotional investment that sneakerheads share and communicate with each other through participation activities is closely related to the cognitive dimensions (e.g., acquiring knowledge, critiquing, transforming work) of fandom described by Jenkins (2006). The author argued that another important feature of the sneaker culture includes the concept of resistance, one of the most complex and contradictory issues in fandom research. To illustrate, sneakerheads evaluate and manage not only sneakers on the market but also phenomena that occur in their culture based on their standards. The researcher also explained that the sneaker culture is not simply a commercial endeavor, but the culture created through interaction with diverse cultures (e.g., music, art, sports), similar to the fact that fandom culture does not prioritize economic interests. Kulinicheva (2021) further explained that sneakers are more than just objects for sneakerheads and argued that this content of the sneakers culture may be connected to the fandom culture in which members consider their interests to be special.

To gain insights into sneaker culture, Choi and Kim (2019) explored the information sharing and purchasing behaviors of consumers who participate in the online brand community of sneakerheads, Niketalk.com. The researchers employed netnography (ethnology + internet) to explore online community engagement within the sneaker culture phenomena from the point of

view of sneakerheads (Kozinets 2002, 2010; Nelson & Otnes 2005). The study sought to address research questions pertaining to what and how to communicate within an online sneaker community, as well as what factors influence community members' purchasing decisions. The researchers analyzed two online threads from Niketalk.com and identified three themes related to sneaker culture: *release information*; *jargon and abbreviations*; and *resemblance, rarity, and inequity*. These themes represent the importance of communication and community within sneaker culture, including the 'online' sharing of information and knowledge that may foster attitudes and behaviors; the shared language that members of the community use to interact with one another; and the shared understanding/value that informs purchase decisions, loyalty to sneakerhead culture, and withdrawal from the culture (Choi and Kim, 2019). Findings indicated that consumers place importance on sneaker brands' social responsibility, and that increasing brand value through the release of rare sneakers as a marketing strategy may have negative consequences (e.g., may increase the number of bot users and backdoor resellers). The researchers suggested that future studies expand their scope and employ both qualitative and quantitative research methods in consideration of the diversifying sneakerhead community.

Denny (2020) examined how sneakers, which are currently attracting attention in the fashion market, have become a marketplace icon. The author identified five themes based on a review of the existing literature: 1) historicizing the hipness of kicks, 2) the rise to iconicity, 3) the sneaker fetish, 4) the marketization of the sneaker myth, and 5) sole searching. In the first theme, historicizing the hipness of kicks, the researcher described the origins of sneakers that first appeared in the mid-19th century, the formation of the sneaker culture that began within the US youth culture in the 1950s, and partnerships with famous athletes and artists dating to the 1970s. In the second theme, the rise to iconicity, Denny explained that athletes (e.g., basketball

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player Michael Jordan) and artists (e.g., hip-hop musician Run D.M.C.) who wore sneakers in the 1980s became cultural icons and their (i.e., athletes and artists) influence was great in the sneaker market, and sneakerheads appeared at this time. Regarding the third theme, the sneaker fetish, the author described the value of sneakers in terms of two behaviors - fetishism and narcissism - and noted that with Cluley and Dunne's concept of narcissism (2012) is possible to understand "hype" culture, which is increasingly central to modern sneakers and street fashion consumption. The "hype" culture refers to an obsession with searching for the future big thing that may induce a high degree of excitement (Bozinoski, 2020). The fourth theme, marketization of the sneaker myth contained the characteristics of the retail environment of the sneaker culture, where consumer-centered thinking is vital, and the advent of the secondary market (e.g., StockX, GOAT, and Klekt) called sneakers resell. The final theme identified by Denny, sole searching, described the subcultural characteristics of the sneaker culture as potent examples of multiple contemporary taste regimes that affect other subcultures as well as the mainstream culture. The author provided a comprehensive summary of the ways in which sneakers have influenced the contemporary fashion market.

Matthews et al. (2021) investigated sneaker culture through the lens of social identity theory to better comprehend the motivations and brand preferences of sneakerheads. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 males, aged 25-44, and employed a grounded theory approach to understand the lived experiences of participants. The authors identified three themes related to the motivations, behaviors, and brand identities of sneakerheads: *Back in the Day*, *All About the Jumpman*, and *For Members Only*. The Back in the Day them suggests that nostalgia for childhood experiences with sneakers informs individuals' interest in and purchases of sneakers. All about the Jumpman references the NBA basketball

player Michael Jordan and his influence on the sneakerheads' adolescence (and subsequent) experiences and purchases, but noting that young sneakerheads (millennials) have less affinity for Jordan and basketball culture. The For Members Only theme refers to the notion that sneakerheads engage in the culture in their own ways and share the latest information about sneakers in their communities. Matthews et al. (2021) suggested that future studies may include examinations of various genders, online activities of sneakerheads, and collaboration with researchers in NYC and Los Angeles which are now leading the sneakerhead culture historically.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The contemporary luxury market has evolved to include consumers who value sharing their knowledge through participation and communication (i.e., emotional investment) with brands and other consumers. Accordingly, luxury brands are trying to satisfy the needs of contemporary consumers by tapping into street and/or sneaker culture through co-branding arrangements with brands that foster consumer knowledge and participation and, in turn, supports the concept of 'new' luxury. Informed by the work of Jenkins (2006) and Kulinicheva (2021), a conceptual framework based on fandom and participatory culture theory were employed to explore consumer engagement in sneaker culture.

Jenkins (2006) defined participatory culture in terms of five characteristics: 1) the barriers are low to expressing artistry and to civic participation, 2) powerful support for making and sharing one's works with others, 3) a kind of casual mentoring where many experienced members communicate their knowledge to beginners, 4) members who believe they are important contributors, and 5) members who feel a certain social bond with each other. Fandom and participatory culture were originally developed for cultural research into the behaviors of media audiences, and Jenkins (2006) described fandom as participatory culture. Specifically,

fandom refers to communities created around the joy of sharing one aspect of popular culture, including books, movies, TV shows, bands, sports, and sports teams (Grinnell College, n.d.). Jenkins (2006) noted these communities as 'interpretive communities.' Although members may not always arrive at the same conclusions because interpretive communities value unique insights or unique contributions, these spaces work best when members agree on which topic of interpretation is appropriate (Jenkins, 2006). In other words, these communities are linked to fandom that developed unique patterns of interpretation, ways of social interaction, and types of cultural production from the shared enthusiasm and interests of the community (Jenkins, 2006).

This thesis investigated the characteristics and motivations of sneakerheads and their responses to co-branding, one of the marketing strategies for contemporary luxury brands to pursue the concept of new luxury. Through the literature review it has been illustrated that the new concept of luxury is relevant to sneaker culture (i.e., sneakerheads). In addition, this study was guided by the research of Kulinicheva (2021), who viewed sneakerhead culture through a fandom and participatory cultural lens, informed by two attributes: emotional investment and knowledge. Based upon Jenkin's (2006) five characteristics of fandom and participatory culture, Kulinicheva (2021) suggested that four factors – participation, sharing, contribution, and bonding – are linked to the attribute 'emotional investment' and the fifth factor – knowledge transfer – represents the second attribute, 'knowledge.' Participatory cultures include consumers as well as fans, creators, and producers of any form of creative media (Grinnell College, n.d.). This phenomenon has been apparent in street fashion and sneaker culture since the 2000s. Specifically, before co-branding with luxury brands, Nike collaborated with various brands since the late 1990s (Wood, 2019), and has communicated well with various stakeholders through co-branding. Also, luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton and Dior, are trying to form the concept of

new luxury in the changing market by sharing the positive elements of Nike through co-branding (i.e., the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1 and Dior x Nike Air Jordan 1). This examination of consumers' responses to the co-branding of Louis Vuitton and Nike shoes (i.e., limited-edition "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers), through the lens of fandom and participatory culture theory, may provide new perspectives on sneaker collaborations that may contribute to the academic literature on the sneakerhead phenomenon.

CHAPTER III – METHODS

Co-branding has been studied in fields such as fashion and marketing for over a decade. However, there is no research that specifically investigates the co-branding of luxury and athletic/sportswear brands (i.e., streetwear brands). Yu et al. (2021), who studied luxury co-branding, suggested that future studies might employ alternative research methods, such as interviews, to gain deeper insights into consumers' expectations for luxury co-branding. In addition, this study investigated the value created through co-branding initiatives between luxury brands and sportswear brands (Yu et al., 2021). Thus, this thesis employed a grounded theory approach that was suitable for researchers to conduct when they need to comprehend or describe a phenomenon. This study also focused on limited-edition "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers (i.e., the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1) to gain understanding of consumers' perceptions of the value of this collaboration.

Research Design

An in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted with individuals who self-identify as 'sneakerheads' to more fully understand consumer response to co-branding, in general, and the Louis Vuitton and Nike collaboration, in particular. This approach provided an in-depth look at how consumers' knowledge of sneakers and emotional investment in sneaker culture (i.e., sneakerheads) informed their responses to co-branding between luxury and athletic brands, including their motivations for participation, attitudes, and purchase intentions toward brands, and provided new understanding of the value of sneaker co-branding for luxury and athletic brands. The interview also explored the 'what,' 'why,' and 'how' of consumers' interpretations of the Louis Vuitton and Nike collaboration. Therefore, two research questions were addressed

through an inductive approach that can lead to general conclusions from specific observations (i.e., interviews).

Sampling Procedure

Participants were recruited at a small sneaker store that sells limited-edition and retro edition sneakers, because this store provided a location where sneakerheads easily gather and communicate with one another in person (Kulinicheva, 2021). The store was *29th & Potter Sneakers. Clothing. Quality Goods.*, located in Old Town, Fort Collins, Colorado. The store sells limited-edition and retro edition sneakers, and recruitment proceeded with permission from the store's owner (see Appendix A for approval to recruit participants) and approval of IRB.

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods were used for data collection. Convenience sampling, through recruitment at the selected store, allowed the researcher to easily access potential participants (i.e., sneakerheads), who provided the names of other sneakerheads who were potentially interested in participating in this study. Participants were provided with an overall description of the study (e.g., interview duration and interview content) and informed consent to participate in the study to ensure that each individual fully understands the research and interview process (see Appendix C for consent to participate).

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through in-person interviews with participants. Each interview lasted 40 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants (see Appendix C for consent to participate). Each interview consisted of a total of 10 questions related to participants' motivations for participating in sneaker culture as well as their opinions on the Louis Vuitton and Nike sneaker collaboration. These questions guided the interview and explored participants': 1) motivation for participating in sneaker culture, 2) knowledge of and emotional investment and sneaker culture, 3) consumer behavior/response (i.e., consumer

attitudes and purchase intentions) associated with limited-edition "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers, and 4) consumer behavior/response (i.e., consumer attitudes and purchase intentions) associated with the Louis Vuitton and Nike collaboration. Lastly, some demographic information, such as participants' gender, age, race, and geographic location, was collected.

Data Analysis

A multi-step approach to data analysis was conducted following the recommendations of Creswell & Creswell (2018) and Tesch (1990). Per Creswell & Creswell (2018), a five-step qualitative data analysis procedure was followed to ensure the accuracy of the process: 1) arranging and making the data ready for analysis, 2) viewing all the data, 3) initiating all data coding, 4) creating descriptions and themes, and 5) revealing identified descriptions and themes. In addition, the eight steps to established codes, as presented by Tesch (1990), were followed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018): 1) write down the ideas that form while reading the transcripts to grasp the whole meaning, 2) choose one of the most interesting interview documents, consider the foundational meaning of the information, and record thoughts in the blank space, 3) group similar themes together, 4) abbreviate the themes into codes and record the codes in relevant parts, 5) find the most expressive wording for the themes and convert them into categories, 6) determine the final abbreviation for each category and arrange these codes in alphabetical order, 7) gather the data related to each category in one space and conduct a preliminary analysis, and 8) recode existing data as needed.

Investigator triangulation, which involves the participation of multiple researchers in the data collection and/or data analysis, was employed to improve the reliability and validity of the process and findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). The interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, who is a self-proclaimed sneakerhead. The researcher's personal engagement in sneaker culture provided insight into and understanding of the culture as well as knowledge of

common sneakerhead terminology that facilitated the data collection. However, it also is possible that bias (based on personal experiences and opinions) may have influenced the data collection process. Two measures were taken to guard against this bias. First, the same questions were asked of all participants, and second, multiple researchers participated in the data analysis (i.e., interpretation and coding). The primary researcher and a second researcher used the open coding process to identify discrete ideas or meanings in the data. Both researchers read through multiple transcripts and then jointly discussed the identified concepts or meanings in the data to establish categories of meaning and to develop the coding guide. When interpretations of meaning differed, the researchers negotiated the label and category assigned to the data. The initial data coding (three interview transcripts) was conducted by the primary researcher and a second researcher, using the constant comparison method of analysis to note similarities and differences across the data. The coding guide was revised per discussion of the interpretation of meaning and the introduction of new ideas. A third researcher coded four additional interview transcripts (separate from the three coded by the second researcher) for a total of seven transcripts (50%) that were coded by two individuals to ensure the reliability of data analysis.

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CHAPTER IV – MANUSCRIPT

Introduction

Once a symbol of athleticism, sneakers first became popular as everyday wear among Generation X consumers, who grew up watching Michael Jordan and wearing the Jordan series of basketball shoes, in the 1980s and 90s. More recently, owing to greater creativity in product design and increased consumer-brand engagement (Wood, 2019), sneakers have gained popularity with Millennial and Generation Z consumers, who view sneakers as fashion items and status symbols (LaBarre, 2021). This perception of sneakers as fashion items and status symbols now influences luxury fashion and mainstream culture through brand collaborations between designer brands, athletic shoe brands, and/or celebrities.

Today, people who are passionate about sneaker designs and brands are commonly referred to as 'sneakerheads,' which are defined as individuals who demonstrate great appreciation for sneakers, who collect, resell, and trade sneakers, and who possess considerable knowledge about sneaker culture, including its history and cultural influences (Choi & Kim, 2019; Matthews et al., 2021). Sneakerheads spend considerable time studying sneakers and product history and are part of a loyal community of collectors and aficionados (Powell, 2014).

The sneakerhead phenomenon or culture is attributed to the emergence and integration of basketball, hip-hop, celebrity, and fashion (Choi & Kim, 2019; Semmelhack et al., 2015). Sneaker culture is often associated with the launch of the Nike Air Jordan 1 shoe series, which steadily gained popularity since its introduction in 1985 and accounted for more than half of the basketball shoe market by 2020 (Matthews et al., 202; Choi & Kim, 2019). Since the late 1990s, athletic brands have collaborated with hip-hop musicians and famous designers to release

limited-edition sneakers, while also releasing retro editions of athletic shoes like the Jordan series.

Sneakerheads also have built 'communities' to engage in conversation and knowledge exchange with other like-minded individuals at small sneaker stores that specialize in limited and retro edition shoes and through online platforms (Kulinicheva, 2021). Through these communities, sneakerheads share content or 'stories' (e.g., history, information, knowledge, experiences) and gain knowledge about sneakers (beyond the brand/product marketing) that provide added value to the product by highlighting the exclusivity and uniqueness of sneakers. As evidenced by the many active sneaker blogs and communities, including *Nike Talk, Finish Line, Kicks On Fire, and Nice Kicks,* online platforms have played a major role in heightening the popularity of sneakers.

Sneaker culture involves both shoe collecting and reselling that stem from the marketing strategy used by athletic shoe brands to release a small number of limited-edition sneakers or retro editions to create higher product demand than supply. Consumers demonstrate a willingness to pay higher prices for exclusive items as well as to pay higher amounts than the original retail prices to obtain valuable, preowned sneakers. Sneaker resellers intentionally purchase products to sell at a later date and at a higher price (Indeed, 2022) to meet the demand of sneaker collectors. The growth of these resellers suggests that many consumers have the propensity to buy special or unique sneakers from selected brands, regardless of price. This further suggests that some consumers place considerable value on sneakers owing to their design and brand, thereby creating 'worth' that is greater than the original price based on the function of shoes.

In recent years, the popularity of sneakers has had a growing influence on luxury fashion, contributing to the democratization of luxury consumption that it is now attainable for all consumers, not only the privileged class, wherein experience and authenticity are more important factors than monetary value or status (Yeoman, 2011). Today, luxury fashion brands are seeking to reach new and diverse consumer segments by reshaping their brand identity and applying the concept of "new" luxury to their brands (Yu et al., 2020). "New" luxury brand marketing aligns with the development of co-branding strategies, which are defined as "form[s] of cooperation between two or more brands with significant customer recognition, in which all the participants' brand names are retained" (Motion et al., 2003, p. 1082). The core purpose of co-branding is to create a positive association between one's own brand and the collaborating brand (Keller, 1998). Yu et al. (2020) noted that collaborations between luxury brands and sportswear or street brands may be more satisfying to consumers than collaborations between luxury brands and fast fashion or mass market brands owing to the proliferation of social media. Social media has brought streetwear into the mainstream, making today's blending of luxury fashion and streetwear familiar to most consumers in the mainstream market (Yu et al., 2020). One of the most recognized collaborations among athletic and luxury brands is the co-branded product created by Louis Vuitton and Nike, the Air Force 1, which remains one of Nike's most iconic sneaker models (i.e., widely recognized model). The co-branded shoe was designed by Virgil Abloh, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton's menswear from 2018 to 2021, and the designer who is generally recognized for merging street fashion with luxury. The Air Force 1 immediately became a hot topic in sneaker communities before its initial release by gaining popularity through celebrity endorsements (e.g., DJ Khaled), another type of co-branding, and it remains one of the world's most expensive sneakers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of sneakerheads, their motivations for participating in sneaker culture, and their responses to co-branding collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands (i.e., "luxury-athletic" co-branded sneakers). More specifically, this study examined how two factors, knowledge and emotion (Kulinicheva, 2021), inform consumers' participation in sneaker culture and their responses to co-branding collaborations. Two research questions with guided this study:

RQ1: What motivates individuals (i.e., sneakerheads) to participate in sneaker culture?

c. How does 'knowledge' of sneakers influence participation in sneaker culture?

d. How does 'emotional investment' in sneakers influence participation in sneaker culture?

RQ2: How do individuals respond to co-branding sneaker collaborations?

Building upon prior research into sneakerheads and sneaker culture (Matthews et al., 2021; Choi & Kim, 2019), this study provides a greater understanding of why consumers participate in sneaker culture, as well as the roles that knowledge and emotion play in one's engagement in sneaker culture.

Literature Review

The 'Sneakerhead' Phenomenon

To gain insights into sneaker culture, Choi and Kim (2019) explored the information sharing and purchasing behaviors of consumers who participate in the online brand community of sneakerheads, Niketalk.com. The researchers employed netnography (ethnology + internet) to explore online community engagement within the sneaker culture phenomena from the point of view of sneakerheads (Kozinets 2002, 2010; Nelson & Otnes 2005). The study sought to address research questions pertaining to what and how to communicate within an online sneaker community, as well as what factors influence community members' purchasing decisions. The

researchers analyzed two online threads from Niketalk.com and identified three themes related to sneaker culture: *release information*; *jargon and abbreviations*; and *resemblance, rarity, and inequity*. These themes represent the importance of communication and community within sneaker culture, including the 'online' sharing of information and knowledge that may foster attitudes and behaviors; the shared language that members of the community use to interact with one another; and the shared understanding/value that informs purchase decisions, loyalty to sneakerhead culture, and withdrawal from the culture (Choi and Kim, 2019). Findings indicated that consumers place importance on sneaker brands' social responsibility, and that increasing brand value through the release of rare sneakers as a marketing strategy may have negative consequences (e.g., may increase the number of bot users and backdoor resellers). The researchers suggested that future studies expand their scope and employ both qualitative and quantitative research methods in consideration of the diversifying sneakerhead community.

Denny (2020) examined how sneakers became an icon in the fashion marketplace by reviewing existing literature on the sneakerhead culture. Denny identified five themes related to sneakerhead culture: 1) historicizing the hipness of kicks, 2) the rise to iconicity, 3) the sneaker fetish, 4) the marketization of the sneaker myth, and 5) sole searching. The first theme, historicizing the hipness of kicks, described the origins of sneakers that first appeared in the mid-19th century, the formation of the sneaker culture that began within the US youth culture in the 1950s, and partnerships with famous athletes and artists dating to the 1970s. The second theme, the rise to iconicity, explained that athletes (e.g., basketball player Michael Jordan) and artists (e.g., hip-hop musician Run D.M.C.) who wore sneakers in the 1980s became cultural icons and had significant influence in the sneaker market, and that the term sneakerheads appeared during this time. The sneaker fetish theme was described as the value of sneakers in terms of fetishism

and narcissism, and Denny (2020) noted that Cluley and Dunne's concept of narcissism (2012) is important to understanding "hype" culture, which is increasingly central to modern sneakers and street fashion consumption. The "hype" culture refers to an obsession with searching for the future big thing that may induce a high degree of excitement (Bozinoski, 2020). The fourth theme, marketization of the sneaker myth, addressed the characteristics of the sneaker retail environment where consumer-centered thinking is vital and the advent of the secondary, or 'sneaker resell,' market (e.g., StockX, GOAT, and Klekt). The final theme, sole searching, described sneaker subculture and its relationship to other subcultures as well as the mainstream culture. The author also provided a comprehensive summary of the ways in which sneakers have influenced the contemporary fashion market.

Matthews et al. (2021) investigated sneaker culture through the lens of social identity theory to better comprehend the motivations and brand preferences of sneakerheads. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 males, aged 25-44, and employed a grounded theory approach to understand the lived experiences of participants. The authors identified three themes related to the motivations, behaviors, and brand identities of sneakerheads: *Back in the Day*, *All About the Jumpman*, and *For Members Only*. The Back in the Day them suggests that nostalgia for childhood experiences with sneakers informs individuals' interest in and purchases of sneakers. All about the Jumpman references the NBA basketball player Michael Jordan and his influence on the sneakerheads' adolescence (and subsequent) experiences and purchases, but noting that young sneakerheads (millennials) have less affinity for Jordan and basketball culture. The For Members Only theme refers to the notion that sneakerheads engage in the culture in their own ways and share the latest information about sneakers in their communities. Matthews et al. (2021) suggested that future studies may include

examinations of various genders, online activities of sneakerheads, and collaboration with researchers in NYC and Los Angeles which are now leading the sneakerhead culture historically.

Kulinicheva (2021) presented a new approach to studying sneakerheads by exploring consumers' enthusiasm for athletic shoes and shoe collections, which the researcher labeled as 'fandom and participatory culture.' The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and performed content analyses of niche media (i.e., Crepe City) and websites (i.e., Complex, Sole Collector, Hypebeast, and Highsnobiety) to gain insight in consumers' participation in the sneaker culture. Kulinicheva (2021) defined sneakerheads as an umbrella term that includes three categories of individuals: sneaker collectors, sneaker enthusiasts, and others (e.g., sneaker photographers, sneaker art makers, or sneaker fans). The researcher explained that in sneaker culture, knowledge of sneakers is very important because knowledge gathering takes precedence over sneaker gathering, and this content was linked with fandom culture. Specifically, Kulinicheva (2021) explained that knowledge can be gained through fan practices, which is the activity of sneakerheads engaging in online sneaker communities or visiting small sneaker shops where they can easily 'participate' (i.e., interacting with other sneakerheads who share their interests) in person. Kulinicheva (2021) also explained that the high emotional investment that sneakerheads share and communicate with each other through participation activities is closely related to the cognitive dimensions (e.g., acquiring knowledge, critiquing, transforming work) of fandom described by Jenkins (2006). The author argued that another important feature of the sneaker culture includes the concept of resistance, one of the most complex and contradictory issues in fandom research. To illustrate, sneakerheads evaluate and manage not only sneakers on the market but also phenomena that occur in their culture based on their standards. The researcher explained that the sneaker culture is not simply a commercial endeavor, but that the

culture is created through interaction with diverse cultures (e.g., music, art, sports), similar to the fact that fandom culture does not strictly prioritize economic interests.

Co-Branding as a Marketing Strategy

Prior research on co-branding includes both empirical examinations and theoretical explanations that collectively provide understanding of the merit of this marketing strategy. Researchers have examined the relationships between brand attitudes, brand fit, brand knowledge, secondary associations, and co-branding, as well as the nature and evolution of co-branding, including the influence of celebrity endorsers and sponsorships on the development of this marketing strategy.

Motion et al. (2003) examined how sponsor relationships may evolve into co-branded partnerships thereby producing a joint identity between corporate brands. Guided by discourse theory, this research explored the process of building a workable co-branded identity within the sponsor relationship and what co-branding may offer to a corporate brand. The researchers investigated the sponsor relationship between Adidas and the All Blacks, an elite team of the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU). Data were collected through content analysis of advertising texts, including print and television advertising, and interviews conducted with the key individuals who participated in the development of the co-branding strategy. The themes from the content analysis and interviews included brand development, brand communication, and building brand value (or equity). The researchers concluded that brand values should be consistent, and that a common beginning point for establishing a practical co-brand identity should be identified (e.g., design, quality, sustainability) to form the basis for marketing communication.

To explore the benefits of co-branding strategy, Helmig et al. (2008) compared co-branding to brand extension and other brand alliance strategies (i.e., joint sales promotion, advertising alliance, dual branding, bundling). The researchers identified five factors (i.e., 'characteristics of constituent (i.e., integral) brands/products', 'characteristics of co-branded product', 'fit constituent brands/products', 'fit constituent brands with co-branded product', and 'person-specific variables') that had direct effects on the economic success of co-branding and three factors (i.e., 'characteristics of constituent brands', 'characteristics of co-branded product', and 'fit constituent brands/products') that had positive spill-over effects on constituent brands. Also, to achieve success and positive effects from co-branding, the researchers emphasized the importance of fit between the two brands creating the co-branded product.

Keller (2019) investigated how secondary associations (i.e., building connections with other people, places, or things) influence consumers' brand knowledge through application of the brand resonance model. Keller examined two factors: 1) nature of the knowledge about the linked entities, and 2) impact of the knowledge about the linked entities to explore the 'leverage' that might be generated through brand connections. With respect to nature of the knowledge, the researcher identified six building blocks (i.e., salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, resonance) in four stages (i.e., brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand relationships) that are components of the brand resonance model. The model attempts to explain how consumers think, feel, and act, and how much they 'connect' with a brand. The researcher also explored how consumers' knowledge about given entities influenced their decision-making.

Tian et al. (2022) explored the celebrity's role in brand communication as partners and co-creators of new products, beyond that of endorsers, to enhance advertisers' understanding of celebrity influence. To investigate the role of celebrity in co-branding, the researchers explained

celebrity endorsement or co-branding (i.e., co-creators of new products) and examined brand fit between brand and celebrity. The researchers used an experimental design to collect data from Instagram users, aged 18–34 (i.e., millennials). Results revealed that the alliance of celebrity and brand through co-branding produced more powerful meaning transfer effects on consumers' beliefs and attitudes than it did through traditional celebrity endorsements. The researchers further discovered that alliances with celebrities who have negative associations or meanings could be harmful because celebrity co-branding initiatives may create more negative brand attitudes than celebrity endorsements (e.g., Yeezy/Kanye West and Adidas). Tian et al. (2022) concluded that lesser-known brands may experience more meaning transfer than do well-known brands; co-branding with celebrities may create a positive meaning-transfer effect on brand beliefs and attitudes when small brands (rather than large brands) create partnerships with celebrities through appropriate brand fit.

Democratization of 'Luxury'

Yeoman (2011) explored the changing concept of luxury and the changing behaviors of consumers who consume luxury goods across five dimensions (i.e., luxury and quality, luxury for rent, mercurial consumption, exclusivity, and new expressions). Yeoman posited that the most notable aspect of luxury consumption is that it has become 'democratized' and is now reachable to many consumers. According to Yeoman, luxury has become a phenomenon of mass marketing, wherein experience and authenticity are more important factors than monetary value or status. The author suggested that the quality of luxury is becoming more important since the growth of the luxury rental market allows people to experience the quality (authenticity) of luxury at a low cost, which creates more desire for high-quality luxury goods. Also, consumption that includes broad searches for discount products is generally becoming an attractive behavior.

Although it may appear to be paradoxical, this author argued that everyone should have easy access to luxury, while luxury brands should maintain exclusivity at the same time. Yeoman (2011) recommended that brands need to understand consumers' attitudes toward luxury, adapt to changes in the rapidly evolving fashion market, and continue to redefine luxury.

This "new" luxury has been described by DeLeon and Klanten (2019) along eight characteristics: 1) knowledge, 2) cultural aspiration, 3) item uniqueness to the individual, 4) status demonstrated by access to the cultures represented by luxury items, 5) a dynamic lifestyle that requires participation, 6) a brand's identity and values felt in digital and physical platforms, 7) values tied to artful ideas executed at a high level, and 8) pieces personalized to a client's identity.

Yu et al. (2020) explored young consumers responses to co-branding collaborations among luxury brands and other fashion companies. The researchers employed signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to examine the four characteristics of luxury co-branding combinations: brand combinations, retail channels, uniqueness, and price. Four brands (each with unique characteristics in the fashion market) were selected to examine undergraduate and graduate students' co-branding collaborations. The researchers examined co-branding from general and unique perspectives. In a general sense, findings indicated that luxury brand collaborations with sportswear and street brands may be more satisfying to consumers than are luxury brand collaborations with fast fashion and mass market brands. Findings also revealed that consumers value the exclusivity of collaboration, in other words, the number of times one, unique brand engages in co-branding initiatives with other brands in a year's time plays an important role in informing the consumers' perceptions of the exclusivity of co-branding initiatives.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

With the aid of social media, the contemporary luxury market has evolved to include consumers who value sharing their knowledge through participation and communication (i.e., emotional investment) with brands and other consumers. Accordingly, luxury brands are trying to satisfy the needs of consumers by tapping into street and/or sneaker culture through co-branding arrangements with other brands that foster consumer participation and, in turn, support the concept of 'new' luxury (DeLeon and Klanten, 2019). Informed by the work of Jenkins (2006) and Kulinicheva (2021), this study employed a conceptual framework based on fandom and participatory culture theory.

Jenkins (2006) defined participatory culture in terms of five characteristics: 1) the barriers are low to expressing artistry and to civic participation, 2) powerful support for making and sharing one's works with others, 3) a kind of casual mentoring where many experienced members communicate their knowledge to beginners, 4) members who believe they are important contributors, and 5) members who feel a certain social bond with each other. Fandom and participatory culture were originally developed for cultural research into the behaviors of media audiences, and Jenkins (2006) described fandom as participatory culture. Specifically, fandom refers to communities created around the joy of sharing one aspect of popular culture, including books, movies, TV shows, bands, sports, and sports teams (Grinnell College, n.d.). Jenkins (2006) noted these communities as 'interpretive communities.' Although members may not always arrive at the same conclusions because interpretive communities value unique insights or unique contributions, these spaces work best when members agree on which topic of interpretation is appropriate (Jenkins, 2006). In other words, these communities are linked to

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fandom that developed unique patterns of interpretation, ways of social interaction, and types of cultural production from the shared enthusiasm and interests of the community (Jenkins, 2006).

Kulinicheva (2021) applied the concept of fandom and participatory culture to an examination of sneaker culture. Kulinicheva (2021) conceptualized sneaker collecting as an object-inspired fandom and demonstrated that sneaker collecting involves both acquiring knowledge about sneakers as well as acquiring the physical object (i.e., sneakers). Based upon Jenkin's (2006) five characteristics of fandom and participatory culture, Kulinicheva (2021) suggested that four factors – participation, sharing, contribution, and bonding – are linked to the attribute 'emotional investment' and the fifth factor – knowledge transfer – represents the second attribute, 'knowledge.' By examining the role of these attributes (i.e., knowledge and emotional investment) in sneaker culture, the characteristics (i.e., consumer behavior) of sneakerheads can be more fully understood.

Participatory cultures include consumers as well as fans, creators, and producers of any form of creative media (Grinnell College, n.d.). This phenomenon has been apparent in street fashion and sneakers culture since the 2000s. Specifically, before engaging in co-branding with luxury brands, Nike had collaborated with various brands since the late 1990s (Wood, 2019), and had communicated well with various stakeholders through co-branding. Luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton and Dior, are embracing the concept of new luxury in today's market by following Nike's success through co-branding and communication with consumers (i.e., the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1 and Dior x Nike Air Jordan 1). This exploration of the co-branding between Louis Vuitton and Nike (i.e., limited-edition "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers) based on fandom and participatory culture theory, may provide new perspectives and understanding of co-branding strategy that may offer practical and theoretical implications.

Method

A qualitative research method, involving semi-structured interviews, was employed to explore consumers' associations with the term 'sneakerhead,' their motivations for participating in sneaker culture, and their responses to co-branding and the Louis Vuitton and Nike collaboration. Each interview consisted of 10 questions (see Appendix D for sneakerhead interview questions) that guided the interviews and addressed participants': 1) identity as a sneakerhead, 2) understanding of and motivation for participating in sneaker culture, 3) knowledge of and emotional investment in sneaker culture, 4) responses (i.e., consumer attitudes and purchase intentions) associated with limited-edition "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers, and 5) responses (i.e., consumer attitudes and purchase intentions) associated with the Louis Vuitton and Nike collaboration. Lastly, demographic information, such as participants' age, gender, and race, was collected. Interviews lasted 40 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants (see Appendix C for consent to participate).

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 male and 1 female sneakerheads, aged 19–47. Participants were recruited at a small, independent sneaker store that sells limited-edition and retro edition sneakers. The store is in a downtown shopping district and serves as a location where sneakerheads gather and communicate about sneakers with one another in person (Kulinicheva, 2021). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants self-identified as sneakerheads, and both convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants for the interviews. First, potential participants were recruited using flyers posted at the independent sneaker store, thereby allowing self-identified sneakerheads to volunteer for the study. Second, initial participants provided the names of other sneakerheads who they thought might be interested in participating in this study. The average

age of the participants was 26.85 years. All participants resided in Colorado; 50% of the sample identified as White, 21.43% as Asian, 14.29% as Black, one participant identified as Hispanic (7.14%), and one participant identified as mixed-race (7.14%).

A multi-step approach to data analysis was conducted following the recommendations of Creswell & Creswell (2018) and Tesch (1990). Per Creswell & Creswell (2018), a five-step qualitative data analysis procedure was followed to ensure the accuracy of the process: 1) arranging and making the data ready for analysis, 2) viewing all the data, 3) initiating all data coding, 4) creating descriptions and themes, and 5) revealing identified descriptions and themes.

Investigator triangulation, which involves the participation of multiple researchers in the data collection and/or data analysis, was employed to improve the reliability and validity of the process and findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). The interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, who is a self-proclaimed sneakerhead. The researcher's personal engagement in sneaker culture provided insight into and understanding of the culture as well as knowledge of common sneakerhead terminology that facilitated the data collection. However, it also is possible that bias (based on personal experiences and opinions) may have influenced the data collection process. Two measures were taken to guard against this bias. First, the same questions were asked of all participants, and second, multiple researchers participated in the data analysis (i.e., interpretation and coding). The primary researcher and a second researcher used the open coding process to identify discrete ideas or meanings in the data. Both researchers read through multiple transcripts and then jointly discussed the identified concepts or meanings in the data to establish categories of meaning and to develop the coding guide. When interpretations of meaning differed, the researchers negotiated the label and category assigned to the data. The initial data coding (three interview transcripts) was conducted by the primary researcher and a second

researcher, using the constant comparison method of analysis to note similarities and differences across the data. The coding guide was revised per discussion of the interpretation of meaning and the introduction of new ideas. A third researcher coded four additional interview transcripts (separate from the three coded by the second researcher) for a total of seven transcripts (50%) that were coded by two individuals to ensure the reliability of data analysis. To ensure inter-rater reliability in the qualitative data analysis, the researchers followed Cofie et al.'s (2022) eight recommendations for achieving consistency in the coding process.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative analyses of the interview data explored 1) participants' definitions of the term 'sneakerhead,' 2) their understanding of sneaker culture and their motivations for participating in sneaker culture, and 3) their responses to sneaker collaborations, with emphasis on the *Air Force 1*, the co-branded sneaker created by Louis Vuitton and Nike.

Sneakerhead Definition

Content analysis of interview data revealed that individuals' definitions of the term 'sneakerhead' centered on three themes: (1) *Love Match,* (2) *Starring Role*, and (3) *Nostalgia*. The first theme, *Love Match*, characterizes the enthusiasm or devotion that individuals expressed for sneakers. The *Starring Role* theme represents the importance or value that participants attributed to the role sneakers play in their everyday lives. The *Nostalgia* theme emphasizes the role of past experiences and memories in conceptualizations of sneakerheads.

Love Match

One common characterization of a sneakerhead that was identified by all participants was a strong appreciation, enthusiasm, or devotion toward sneakers, as represented by the theme *Love Match.* One participant described a sneakerhead as *"someone that values or like, has a deep*

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appreciation for sneakers" (Participant #7). Another participant elaborated upon the factors that drive his appreciation for sneakers:

> it's … someone who just appreciates the culture of shoes and sneakers and like, it doesn't have to necessarily be to any brand, but like, as long as someone appreciates a shoe and like that overall aesthetic and everything about a shoe and like how it was made to construction and everything to the materials. (Participant #2)

Other participants used terms such as love or passion for shoes to define sneakerhead. For instance, one participant defined sneakerhead as *"someone who just, like, they love shoes, they love to wear the shoes, they love everything that kind of is like around the shoe, like the culture, the experience, like trying to get them"* (Participant #8). Similarly, another participant conveyed his belief that sneakerheads demonstrate a strong degree of devotion to shoes by stating: *"For me, sneakerhead is just someone who has a love and passion for sneakers. … I think a sneakerhead is someone who has an obsession with shoes"* (Participant #11). Another participant shared this view, but also implied that such devotion influenced interpersonal behavior: *"So, to me a sneakerhead is just someone who loves sneaker culture. Someone who pays attention to sneaker culture. Someone who makes shoe contact before they make eye contact"* (participant #4). Being knowledgeable about sneaker culture was emphasized by another participant, who described a sneakerhead as someone with *"an appreciation towards history and culture and all the stuff that shoes represent pretty much"* (Participant #3). Another participant further elaborated on the importance of cultural knowledge:

> … someone who appreciates and understands the culture of shoes and has many different kinds of shoes, right, is understanding of all aspects of the culture, not just what gets the

most attention … sneakerhead is someone who has and understands all kinds of shoes, uh, all kinds of sneakers, and the culture behind it. (Participant #5)

Starring Role

The *Starring Role* theme represents the importance or value that sneakerheads attribute to the role sneakers play in their everyday lives as revealed in multiple statements regarding personal dress and appearance. One participant described a sneakerhead as: *"Someone who centers their outfits around their shoes versus vice versa"* (Participant #4). Other participants shared similar views regarding the role of sneakers as an important expression of personal appearance and values:

I would say that they [sneakerheads] value sneakers above any other garment that they're wearing… every time I wear it, like I get dressed, I pick my shoes first, and then I pick everything else… I think in general, all sneakerheads kind of value shoes over any other garment. (Participant #3)

Sneakers are really important to me just because, um, it's an expression of like, the things I like, and I like clothing a lot, but I think sneakers are the most valuable aspect of an outfit. … I pick my sneakers to define my dress. So, I'll match my clothing and what I'm wearing to what I put on my feet first… (Participant #7)

Nostalgia

Another theme present in participants' definitions of sneakerheads was *Nostalgia*, which is consistent with research by Matthews et al. (2021), who labeled this theme as *Back in the Day*. Multiple participants described their enthusiasm for sneakers as developing at a young age, and frequently they tied their early interest in sneakers to NBA player Michael Jordan, who they credited with creating sneaker culture:

I feel like everyone has like a shoe that they like grew up on or like always wore, like kind of resembled when they grew up. And for me, … that's Jordan's and Nike's, that's just like something I've always been like into and gravitated towards ever since I was a kid. (Participant #2)

I'm 47, so I grew up watching Michael Jordan actually play basketball. Right. So, that he's the guy that created sneaker culture. Really. Right. So that was our lens was Jordans. But now a new pair of Jordan's comes out every week, but back then three pair came out every year. Ah, that was it. Right. Three colors every year. And you had to wait, you knew the day and you would wait in line on Saturday morning to see if you could get a pair. (Participant #4)

Collectively, participants characterized sneakerheads as individuals who love sneakers and demonstrate appreciation for the culture, who give importance to the role that sneakers play in their everyday lives, and who exhibit nostalgia for the origins of sneaker culture and their own early experiences with and memories of sneakers. Consistent with the findings of Matthews et al. (2021), when discussing childhood experiences participants often mentioned that highly desired shoes were difficult to attain, which appears to have further driven their efforts to purchase shoes:

ever since I was a kid, I was like always into like shoes, … when I grew up, like my parents … couldn't afford like to give me the new shoes and stuff. So, I would save my money, like doing anything I can to like … get a shoe (Participant #2).

One individual explicitly discussed the emotion he felt when an older shoe is re-released, noting the connect to childhood memories:

So, it provides me with like, emotional benefits because like I said before, like when a new shoe is getting like re-released hold up, like when a new shoe is getting re-released in

an old color way, that like, it just brings back so many memories for me. And like, it just

like sparks that like, I don't know, almost inner childhood… it connects the shoes because

like, I feel like every shoe has like a memory with it. (Participant #2)

This comment supports the idea that emotional investment in participation activities is closely

connected to cognitive dimensions of fandom – in this case, knowledge of the original sneaker

design (Jenkins, 2006; Kulinicheva, 2021).

Sneaker Culture: Fandom and Participatory Culture

Further analysis of the interview data focused on participants' characterization of the

sneakerhead culture and their motivations for participating in sneaker culture to address research

question #1. This analysis also considered the role of knowledge and emotion in fandom and

participation (Kulinicheva, 2021), with respect to participation in sneaker culture. This analysis

revealed six themes related to participation in sneaker culture: (1) It's My Jam … It's My Life,

(2) *Cultural Bridge,* (3) *The More you Know,* (4) *How Much?,* (5) *This is How I Do It,* and (6)

Gratification.

It's My Jam … My Life

The theme, *It's My Jam … My Life,* references the self and how one defines the self with

respect to what one particularly likes, enjoys, or does well. This theme incorporates personal

perspectives, preferences, motivations, and the noted conflict between conformity and

individuality that may be experienced through individual engagement in sneaker culture.

Participants frequently described their motivations for engaging in sneaker culture in terms of

their enjoyment of, or passion for, sneakers as an object; their enjoyment of sports (as an athlete

or fan); and their esteem for brands (e.g., Nike) and celebrities.

One participant explained that *"Everyone has their kind of own specific taste and mindset on what they think"* (Participant #1). Another participant identified the object itself – the sneaker – and its proximity to self (Sontag & Schlater, 1982) as the defining element of sneaker culture.

> Just like Air Max Ones, just how you wear it, how you lace it, how you rock it. It can be like defined as, you know…Air Max is a very common sneaker, but if you rock it and… it's just how you wear it. How you wear the sneaker ... The defining factor of sneaker culture is the, it's the sneakers themselves. You know, it just depends on what you're kind of going for. (Participant #6)

Two facets of the concept of "proximity of clothing to self" are implied in this quote. First, the participant appears to perceive sneakers as being one with the self or as a component of the self and second, the participant appears to recognize sneakers (or the wearing of sneakers) as an aspect of appearance by which the self may be established and validated (Sontag & Schlater, 1982). This quote suggests that sneakerheads may, at times, conform to the preferences or values exhibited by the group (e.g., purchase of Air Max Ones), but still may seek to individualize one's own appearance and to validate the self. Similarly, another participant noted that when he was young, his behavior tended to conform to that of other sneakerheads, but now he is more interested in representing his individuality through his sneaker choices.

> I used to collect Jordans LeBrons, Yeezys, you name it. Um, but as I'm getting older, I'm less into conspicuous consumption and wearing what everyone else is wearing and more in defining like dope sneakers that not everyone has to define my own personal style. (Participant #4)

Participant #7 expressed his motivation for engaging in sneaker culture by noting an association between sneakers, dress, and fashion; implying that sneakers provide enjoyment through aesthetic value and appearance.

> I participate in sneaker culture because I've just always found like a liking to it. Like ever since I was growing up, I always thought sneakers were awesome. So, I stay involved in it.... I would say sneakers are my favorite part of dress. And you know, I'm a merchandising major and I've always had like a big, uh, big liking I would say, or love for fashion.

Participants commonly shared references to the influence of sports, athletes, and celebrities on their motivation to engage in sneakerhead culture. Some participants noted the strong associations between sports, athletes, and shoes that influenced their engagement: *"I was like always into shoes and like basketball ... I always watched like Michael Jordan and like Kobe"* (Participant #2).

> But my other thing is playing basketball as well... From a young age. I think it was in like, probably fifth or sixth grade is when I started playing basketball. But I was really into the shoes. LeBron James shoes, Kevin Durant shoes, Kyrie shoes. (Participant #1)

Participants also referenced esteem for a well-known shoe designer, or a musician turned shoe designer: *"... I honestly think Kanye West. That's where it started for me... whole Kanye West trend really started a lot of people off and got people into it"* (Participant #1). One participant conveyed his personal enjoyment of design and his professional aspirations:

> I think one of the biggest people in the sneaker industry, that's my favorites, is Virgil Abloh. Yeah. Virgil. And I think his designs are very interesting and it can teach you a lot about dress, especially, uh, he released a book, it's the Nike 10 collection and shows how

he designed... at some point in my life I wanna be able to design my own sneakers. I

wanna be able to design my own sneakers. (Participant #7)

These quotes convey the influence of cultural trend-setters – athletes, designers, musicians – on

individual engagement in sneaker culture, and imply that cultural awareness or knowledge may

further foster personal engagement.

Another participant described his experience with Nike *Air Jordan* sneakers, sharing that

his motivation for obtaining this specific shoe was not directly driven by personal esteem for an

athlete, but rather by a desire to conform. The positive emotion that stemmed from this

experience created a lasting memory, which, in turn, fueled his admiration for Nike.

When I was a kid, I moved into, is it inner city? Like the downtown area? And, uh, I

skateboarded ... I never, never had like, a nice pair that I wore ... when I moved to the

city, everybody wore Jordans ... I wanted a pair ... I got to gym class, and I was ...

everybody in the gym class started clapping for me because I had Jordans. So ever since

then, I know it was kind of like, it was, it was kind of a joke, but also kind of, uh,

heartwarming. So, uh, ever since then, I, I've just been ah, into 'em. (Participant #6)

In some cases, motivation for engaging in sneaker culture appeared to transcend the

object (i.e., sneakers) and any associations with the object, as some participants described their

motivation in terms of great importance – as a "way of life." For example, one participant

described his motivation to participate in sneaker culture as follows: *"I think I participate in*

sneaker culture because it's, it's my love and my life ... I mean, growing up I was into a lot of

different things, but right when I got into sneakers, it's just never changed" (Participant #1).

Similarly, another participant stated that: *"Sneaker culture is my way of life. I've been living this*

way since I was 13 years old ... this is what I do ... it's my calling" (Participant #11). These

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quotes imply a devotion to sneakers that convey the individual's social identity and role (Tajfel, 1979). More specifically, as self-proclaimed sneakerheads, these individuals appear to experience a deeper relationship with sneakers that creates a sense of belonging to this lifestyle, community, or culture.

Cultural Bridge

The *Cultural Bridge* theme represents the idea that a connection can be established among people and across subcultures through a shared interest in or love for sneakers. Participants expressed the idea that sneaker culture is a subculture within the broader society, a bridge to other cultures, and a means for fostering 'community' among sneakerheads. One participant (#11) described sneaker culture by stating that *"It is literally like a subculture of life."* Another participant made a distinction among sneaker brands, suggesting that sneaker subcultures exist within the larger culture:

> I feel like, so the big cultures like sneakerheads and like shoes and sneakers, so like, but then there's also like the subculture of like Jordan's, Nikes, Asics, and like the smaller brands are like different brands…So, I think that's like what I mean when I do like, think about the subcultures, there's like Nike and then there's like Jordan, there's like these different brands, but they still like mean the same thing. (Participant #2)

Participant #11 described sneaker culture by stating:

> …sneaker culture is a bridge … From sneakers, you could go to sports. From sneakers, you could go to music. Sneaker, sneaker culture is the hub. Because like, you get, you get different people from different walks of life… common is the love of sneakers. right? Like you could have a guy who loves to play basketball, right? And you could have a guy who loves to skateboard. And, their common ground could be the love of a shoe.

This quote conveys the belief that sneakers transcend a singular group or purpose and thereby can create bridges across subcultures – music, basketball, skateboarding – that allow individuals to connect with others who have a shared love of sneakers. This view is consistent with Muggleton (2019) who argued that fashion is a cultural structure and that a fashion subculture is defined as a subset or group of a broader culture based on unique characteristics (e.g., clothing, appearance, and adornment).

Participants also explicitly noted the importance of community, suggesting that participation in sneaker culture provides fellowship based upon common interests. *"the sneaker culture are definitely, um, the community"* (Participant #7), and *"Things that, that bind people together… sneaker culture is definitely community"* (Participant #12). These participants shared similar views on the importance of community:

> Community. Yeah. Uh, if you attend like big events and stuff like that, um, the community's always, there's a connection there to be built. And I think like making those connections is really important in the sneaker culture. (Participant #7)

> …community. It's a shared ground that people can connect on. I've definitely made friends or, you know, talked to people in class because of the shoes that we're wearing or, you know, something like that. It's an opportunity to connect with someone on something that you guys share. (Participant #12)

This theme is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Matthews et al., 2021; Choi & Kim, 2019) that have identified 'community' as an important theme in sneaker culture. These quotes imply that community is generated from shared interests and norms that create a space for building connections and friendships within the sneaker culture.

The More You Know

  The More You Know theme captures the notion that knowledge is central to fostering understanding of and engagement in sneakerhead culture. This theme aligns with the findings of Matthews et al. (2021), who described the information-gathering and sharing behaviors of sneakerheads (i.e., "the chase") as an important component of sneaker culture. As conveyed in the following quotes, participants specifically noted the importance of knowledge about the history or 'stories' of sneakers, the brands, the product aesthetics and design, and the products' monetary value:

    I just think the defining factor is kind of the knowledge … knowing what things are, the

    knowledge of how to get things. Uh, and also kind of the knowledge of what works for

    you. … the history of the sneaker too. … you have to have an understanding of like, the

    eighties, nineties, and today of what is cool, you know? (Participant #6)

    I think a lot of sneaker culture is knowledge. Like knowing different designs, different,

    the prices of things. The, the designs, how it looks, what they like, what they don't like,

    um, the different brands. (Participant #13)

These comments convey shared recognition of the role knowledge plays in sneakerhead culture – the value of learning about products, brands, and designers to foster one's engagement as well as the ability, gained through knowledge, to connect emotionally with products/brands and people.

  One participant shared that he gained knowledge about sneakers through his employment: *"I would say working, uh, in the sneaker culture industry … it's definitely led me to know a lot more about shoes than most people do"* (Participant #3). Further, this participant described how his knowledge enhances his motivation to engage in sneaker culture and the benefits gained from doing so:

I can sell shoes cause I know about the product, you know?... And so, um, that ability to

connect with the consumer I was actually selling one of my Chicago's, um, and this kid

and his mom … came in here and he was like maybe seven or eight and he wanted his

first pair of Jordan's…Like, "Mom, please let me get these." And I told the mom, I was

like, "I'll get you a great deal." Like honestly, like this shoe was selling for like $800

right now on the aftermarket. "I'll give it to you for $250." And she was super happy, and

her kid was super happy and I was so happy that like, that kid got so much enjoyment out

of my shoes. So, like that kind of bonding and that kind of, um, those moments.

(Participant #3)

Others shared how knowledge influences their purchase decisions, which is central to

engagement in sneakerhead culture:

Um, so sort of having that knowledge. Like I know like if I go into like a resell shop, I

know like if I see a shoe that's like stickered at, you know, at a certain price, I know if

there, if it's a good price or like a bad price, like I know if they're asking way too much or

if it's like a really good deal and I should buy it right now. (Participant #8).

Collectively, these quotes lend support to Kulinicheva's (2021) proposition that knowledge

gathering is an important component of sneaker culture that often takes precedence over sneaker

collecting, and thus is closely associated with fandom culture. Kulinicheva (2021) explained that

knowledge can be gained through fan practices, such as by engaging in online sneaker

communities or visiting small sneaker shops where they can easily 'participate' (i.e., interacting

with other sneakerheads who share their interests) in person.

How Much?

  Another theme related to motivation is *How Much?,* which represents the monetary value that participants associate with sneakers, including resell value fostered by product scarcity and the 'hypebeast' mentality. As noted in other studies (e.g., Matthews et al., 2021), some sneakerheads make a distinction between true sneakerheads (i.e., individuals who love shoes and know the history of shoes) and hypebeasts (i.e., individuals who are taken in by the hype surrounding shoes, who do not know the full history of the shoes, and who buy shoes to resell them and make a profit). One participant criticized a phenomenon in sneaker culture that is changing.

    Changed in seeing videos of Sneaker Con nowadays makes me want not want to go to Sneaker Con. Seeing the people that are there, they don't know what they're talking about anymore. No one's as knowledgeable anymore. Everyone's just in this YouTube, TikTok sneakerhead phase and it's, it's not real anymore. These people aren't going out shopping and thrifting and looking for all this stuff and gaining knowledge on it. (Participant #1)

  The resell value of sneakers is an important component of sneaker culture because price is often a motivation for, as well as a detriment to, participation among sneakerheads. Monetary value often differentiates participants from fans as well as true sneakerheads from hypebeasts (see Matthews et al., 2021). As the following quotes imply 'resell' is a significant component of the exchange or transaction activities that define sneakerhead culture. Resell activities are important because they allow individuals to grow their sneaker collections and because they contribute to the value of sneakers over time:

    Resell value has a really deep root… in sneaker culture… it's really important because a lot of the shoes that people covet and like, see as really important or something like that

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typically have high value. And so that value is determined by how limited it is, um, the

importance of like what it stands for. (Participant #3)

I think that resell has really, really changed everything… all profit, resell, the monetary

value associated with it. A lot of people think that something is, is hot, right? Like some,

someone will say their shoe is fire, but it's because they know that it's gonna cut like it

sells for over a thousand dollars. (Participant #5)

One participant, however, alluded to the negative impact of resell resulting from the current

economy and desire for profit:

I think the sneaker culture is not as crazy as it was … people were buying and selling and

trading … but people are not really doing that now … because of the economy and

inflation … and I think it creates a toxic community created by, um, unreasonable

pricing, unreasonable margins … people are always trying to profit. (Participant #7)

This comment suggests that because resellers are driven by profit, sneaker costs are sometimes

unreasonable or unaffordable, which is contradictory to the notion that "luxury-athletic" co-

branded sneakers contribute to the democratization of luxury posited by Yeoman (2011).

Although such collaborations may offer wide brand accessibility and allow mass consumers to

attain a sense of luxury or exclusivity at the initial point of purchase (i.e., original price), the

price of sneakers in the resale market is driven by supply and demand and therefore not

representative of the democratization of luxury.

This is How I Do It

The *This is How I Do It* theme refers to *how* individuals' motivation to engage in

sneaker culture is manifested, which typically involves some type of transaction supported by

virtual and in-person interaction with sneakers, brands, and other sneakerheads. Transactions

include a range of exchanges (monetary and non-monetary) such as browsing, buying, "camping out," collecting, communicating/conversing, gathering information/researching, posting, selling, and trading. One participant described participating in sneaker culture simply as: *"The way I just, like, buy the shoes"* (Participant #14). Other individuals shared similar observations as to how they and others participate in sneaker culture:

> I think another big one for me is just buying the sneakers. Trading the sneakers knowing where to get them. Yeah. I mean, I have a pretty good big collection myself, so I would say that I'm a pretty big participant in the sneaker culture. (Participant #1)

> I think like a way to participate is like collecting shoes. And then like, there's also like other ways like buying and selling and trading. So, like every time a shoe comes out, some people like buy 'em for themselves or some people buy 'em to trade 'em, some people buy 'em to sell 'em. (Participant #2)

Digital Media. One important subtheme related to transactions, that was shared by all participants, was the use of digital media – Instagram, Twitter, and brand websites and apps. All participants, regardless of their generation, indicated that the main purposes for using digital media was to obtain information about sneakers and to purchase sneakers. For example, participants stated that they used Instagram to gain information and stay informed: *"I follow a lot of Instagram accounts that has like sneaker stuff… and it keeps me updated"* (Participant #13) and to learn about new product releases: *"I'm checking social media, … looking to see like, what's coming out … like just today Jordan brand talked about what's releasing this summer … I follow a lot of pages on Twitter that'll like post when, like shoes go on sale or, or when shoes are dropping"* (Participant #5).

Participants also implied that the use of digital media is a frequent and important part of their sneaker experience – an activity that fosters cultural engagement and personal growth:

> I'm a big Instagram person… For example, those Nike SB Jordan four samples came out the other day, some pictures of those came out… I feel like having that constant mindset of always looking, always having to know, always having to be where the stuff is, really helps you, I think, grow in the sneaker culture, but also just grow as a person that loves sneakers … (Participant #1)

These quotes convey the ubiquitous nature of digital media in today's sneaker culture and also mirror an observation by Mark Parker, executive chairman of Nike, who claimed that digital media has had an extraordinary impact on sneaker culture (DeLeon, 2018).

Further, participants noted that they frequently use digital media, specifically brand apps, to acquire sneakers when brands release limited-edition sneakers. Through these brand apps, sneaker companies execute 'raffles' that allow consumers the opportunity to enter their names (and if selected) to purchase the highly sought-after sneakers.

> There's the sneakers app by Nike. There's like the Yeezy, um, or Adidas app by Adidas all on, uh, the apps and like the websites too. And that's how I like, tried to enter the raffle and tried to buy the sneakers and stuff like that. (Participant #13)

> I'll like go on Instagram and I'll just be scrolling and then I'll see like, oh, they're dropping more of this shoe and I'll go over to the Nike app and sign up for the raffle. (Participant #9)

In-person Interaction. A second subtheme of engagement or transaction is in-person interaction, which includes attending sneaker events (e.g., Sneaker Con), visiting physical stores (i.e., brand name retailers or resellers), and engaging in conversations with others who

demonstrate shared interests in sneakers. Participants frequently shared their enthusiasm for attending sneaker events, *"[I] started going to sneaker events in Colorado all my life. Um, I've been going to sneaker events for probably about 10 years"* (Participant #1), and *"I go to events like Sneaker Con. There's a lot of local ones that ... people will throw [read: host]"* (Participant #3). Other participants described their reasons for visiting sneaker stores by noting the retailer's focus on product category and/or assortment (large or unique):

I pretty regularly go to like sneaker stores and like boutiques and stuff like, uh, reseller stores that have like, just like sneaker related things instead of like a Finish Line or like a Nike, I'll go to like a sneaker boutique. (Participant #2)

They [All Access Kicks] definitely have a huge assortment. Yeah. Go to that one ... Magoos is cool too. Magoos is really cool. And, uh, there's another one up there [in Boulder] you can ask when you get there, but there's another one up there that's got some stuff for sure. (Participant #7)

One participant discussed a small independent retailer that focuses on the resell of unique and scarce sneakers, and in so doing differentiated this retailer by its assortment and by its customers: *"So, this would not be like low key sneakers, like New Balance, Adidas, um Sacony ... This is a place where someone [is] a little more like refined ... a little more stylish"* (Participant #4).

Although not a transaction per se, participants also noted that the act of wearing sneakers (by the self or others) is an important aspect and signifier of participation in sneaker culture. One participant responded by stating: *"[In] what ways do I participate in sneaker culture? Hmm. I guess, uh, wearing the sneakers. Collecting the sneakers is basically, wearing, ... researching.* (Participant #6). Other participants shared that they initiated conversations with strangers (or that strangers initiate conversations with them) based upon the sneakers that the individuals were

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wearing. For example, one participant expressed his perception that sneakers open the door to engaging with others and making friends based upon a common appreciation for sneakers: *"I've definitely made friends or, you know, talked to people in class because of the shoes that we're wearing" (*Participant #12*)*. Other participants shared that this is a common experience that they enjoy as well as an opportunity to bond with like-minded individuals or to foster deeper conversations about sneakers.

> I find it very enjoyable … something to like bond with people over … for example, I have a pair of, um, the Yellow Bear, grateful Dead Dunks... anytime that I've worn them, like around [town], … I typically have like at least one or two people tell me like, oh hey, nice shoes… I immediately know like, oh, they're into it too. (Participant #9)
>
> I feel like sneakerheads are like more open to like, meeting new people because like, all a person has to do is like, say I like your shoes, and then, the other person says, I like your shoes…they just start talking about shoes…we start talking about like the culture and like shoes and stuff and then like, that just leads us to like being friends (Participant #2)

The reference to bonding with like-minded individuals is consistent with findings from Kulinicheva (2021) who observed that sneakerheads often communicate with one another in physical stores, which is a unique aspect of sneaker culture that fosters bonding. The act of bonding further illustrates the emotional investment that individuals gain from participating in sneaker culture.

Gratification

This theme represents that idea that participants experience gratification from engaging in sneaker culture, including three subthemes related to the act of purchasing sneakers: Got 'em, Self-esteem and Validation, and Relationship Building.

Got 'em. The *Got 'em* subtheme references the transaction (i.e., buying, selling, trading, collecting) component of sneaker culture, including the efforts and methods used to acquire and/or dispose of shoes as well as the emotions or satisfaction that sneakerheads experience when obtaining new shoes and building their personal sneaker collections. The satisfaction gained from the act of obtaining shoes includes the sense of accomplishment felt from obtaining a desired object as well as from obtaining a scare or limited-edition shoe. One participant, who values individual style, stated: *"if I really want something, I go get it. And that, that gives me a greater sense of satisfaction"* (Participant #4). Another participant shared a similar view regarding personal preference: "*I get satisfaction out of getting things that I want. You know, shoes and product that I like I get, I get instant gratification outta that. It feels good to get the, the product that you want. It, it feels like a win"* (Participant #11). Another participant shared his feelings of satisfaction from obtaining unique sneakers:

I just keep satisfying myself by getting the, the more rare stuff, the more exclusive stuff. Based off, two years ago I was trying to buy Jordan's zip in Foot Locker, right? I'm like very satisfied now because I'm able to get my hands on a little bit more exclusive stuff. (Participant #1)

Other participants shared feelings of satisfaction associated with the actual purchase process, noting the sense of achievement gained from competing with other sneakerheads to obtain limited-edition sneakers, described as follows:

[A] good example of this is like the sneakers app, and when a shoe comes out it's like really hard to get. So, like, if you get it, like, I'm just like instantly gratified. And so like, and instantly satisfied. I'm like, yes, I got 'em. Cuz like me out of so many million people

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that also entered like I got'em. So, like, that just makes me feel like even more special

about the shoe and even more connected to the shoe. (Participant #2)

Like entering a raffle or like a draw[ing] when there's a bunch of people, like millions of

people trying to get a shoe. And no one gets it except like me, and it's super hard to get

into. And if I get it, it's super gratifying. (Participant #13)

Self-expression and Validation. This subtheme refers to the satisfaction that individuals

experience related to self-expression through awareness of sneaker trends as well as social value

gained from the attention or approval received by others. As one participant commented, *"It, it*

brings me gratification, I guess, knowing that I have a product that's on trend. So, I think that

brings me gratification cause ... I feel like I'm edgy, I'm on trend, you know?" (Participant #10)

Another participant noted the alibility to express himself through his sneakers and shared that he

derived greater satisfaction with his choices/purchases when others noticed his sneakers:

I can express myself with these. And I guess it's just also like the satisfaction of like,

when you have a conversation, somebody's talking about, you know, what you're wearing

… people value what you're wearing more, you know, you get those compliments, you

have those conversations, which brings higher value, brings you more happiness, stuff

like that. (Participant #7)

This quote aligns with Stone's (1977) personal acts/symbolic interaction theory suggesting that

personal actions, such as wearing sneakers, often serve as 'symbols' that have the capacity to

create common meaning and shared experiences. In turn, such interactions may contribute to

individual understanding and mood (e.g., empathy, happiness). Another participant described a

change in his behavior after receiving praise as follows.

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When people compliment me on those shoes throughout the day, I think that for me, like

I've gotten to a point where people know that I really care about shoes. So, a lot of

people, when I see them, I like, I see them look at my shoes first before they like, look

like, make eye contact with me. (Participant #5)

Relationship Building. A third subtheme represents the sense of gratification that

participants derived from relationship building through their engagement in sneaker culture. One

participant shared that he experienced gratification from meeting and connecting with other

individuals who participate in sneaker culture, *"I think it just brings me gratification of like, just

connecting with people"* (participant #6). Other participants shared that they have established

friendships through common appreciation for sneakers:

I've built like a lot of good friendships and good like, relationships with people who are

also into shoes… almost all of my best friends are like into shoes… we've just like, that's

how we met… we just said like, oh I like your shoes. And then it just like kept going

from there… now we've been friends for like, almost my whole life. (Participant #2)

If you go to the gym to work out and you know, you might, might see a guy there who's

wearing cool shoes and you, kind of, you know, you can, you become friends, sort of,

you know, because you, kind of, both like shoes. (Participant #10)

The following quote describes the bonding that can result even when engagement with other

sneakerheads occurs through social media (versus in-person). This comment implies satisfaction

from relationship building that one individual experienced from connecting with other

sneakerheads that have similar tastes in shoes:

I feel like I'm in sort of a group where there's other people that I associate with, or talk to,

or follow, on social media that wear the same shoes or have the same style as me. Um,

for example, there's this dude on Instagram that lives in London, that has the same style

as me, And I sent him a message the other day that I'm gonna be in London this summer

and he's gonna take me out shopping. (Participant #1)

This quote supports findings from Gentile et al. (2007), who described the importance of the

'customer experience' in establishing emotional value for customers; including benefits gained

from relationships with other people that develop from shared experiences, community, or

lifestyle.

Responses to Co-branding

The final analysis of the interview data focused on research question #2. This analysis

represents sneakerheads' opinions about "luxury - athletic" co-branded sneakers, including a

collaboration between Louis Vuitton and Nike. The themes, (1) *Unique Aesthetic,* (2) *Cost, and*

(3) *Brand Identity* represent participants' perceptions of and experiences with sneaker

collaborations.

Unique Aesthetic

Participants frequently expressed similar opinions regarding the distinctive aesthetic and

creative aspects of the sneakers created through collaboration. One participant expressed this

idea by simply stating, *"Favorite. And uh, I would say because, uh, they're more unique"*

(Participant #7), whereas another participant noted the unique level of artistry displayed in co-

branded sneakers: *"I think they're cool. ... I think it brings a level of like artistry, like artistry or*

art brings up the artistic level, more artistic" (Participant #10). Participants also acknowledged

the creativity and skill of the shoe designer, thereby demonstrating their interest in and

knowledge of sneaker collaborations:

Sometimes there's some really creative designers, like, like Virgil Abloh … with Off-White. He did a really, really good job, I think with Nike, because Nike's traditionally athletic shoes only. Yeah. But he combined it with Off-White and made it really, really cool. I think if it's creative, I like it. (Participant #13)

Another individual noted appreciation for the specific design details found in a sneaker collaboration between the Off-White designer brand and an athletic shoe brand, and implied that these design details influenced his attitude toward Nike:

I mean, look at the Off-White and Nike collaborations. They have crazy things like the swoosh stitched on like in two places, you know what I mean?... I like Off-White, so I obviously am gonna like the Nike Off-White, you know... theoretically Off-White made me like the Nike shoes more. Yes. You know what I mean? (Participant #7)

The comments suggest that sneakerheads view collaborations as a positive aspect of sneaker culture resulting in unique sneakers that are appreciated for the artistry that luxury brands and designers bring to the co-creative process.

Cost

The affordability of sneakers, which is an important concern for participants, in general, also was discussed in the context of brand collaborations. One participant shared a favorable impression of how collaborations between luxury and athletic shoe brands can favorably impact pricing as described in this quote: *"It's public in normal public, yeah. It's too expensive. But if they get, uh, a collaboration with a traditional athletic shoe brand, then, all of a sudden, it's affordable and people can get it"* (Participant #3). Another participant expressed the same idea, noting that he experiences a greater likelihood to purchase due to the affordable price.

I definitely would consider myself more like middle class. Um, and so it's like I don't necessarily have a bunch of disposable income to just drop on designer brands or luxury

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items. And so, when they do these collaborations, I'm definitely more inclined to buy them cause it's more budget friendly for me. (Participant #9)

Brand Identity

Participants also noted the influence of sneaker collaborations on brand identity and shared that some collaborations may be viewed negatively because they do not demonstrate respect for sneaker culture and history. One participant shared his opinion that collaborations have impacted the identity of the Jordan brand, such that the Dior co-branded sneakers are not considered to be basketball shoes, which is what made the Jordan brand famous. He also implied that for such collaborations to be successful, luxury brands need to understand sneaker culture and history:

> I'd say both positive and negative… I think it's super important to sort of bridge that gap... Yeah. It's like shifted a lot… Jordan's for example, they went from a basketball shoe to a, like a high-end sneaker… I would never, like, I could never imagine someone trying to play basketball in like the Dior ones... I feel like it shifts the sort of the perspective people see shoes in with those luxury collaborations in… I think it's really important that these luxury brands sort of understand the history and the culture behind the shoes. and the companies that they're working on. Cuz they sort of ignore the history or the importance of that shoe. I feel like that's when it kind of crumbles and it kind of all falls apart. (Participant #8).

Another participant went even further, expressing a more negative opinion by emphasizing that sneaker culture should be accessible to everyone, and implying that luxury brands are co-opting sneaker culture:

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I don't like the luxury brands… I think everybody should be able to get a pair of sneakers. Everybody should have an opportunity to get a pair of sneakers. they're like sneakers are from the streets… it's not their culture… It's not theirs… it has to be, there has to be an aspect of the sneaker that anybody can get it, you know? The street culture influenced the luxury market. The luxury market isn't influencing the street culture. You know, they're just stealing ideas, you know. (Participant #6)

These quotes imply that product authenticity may be an important aspect of sneaker culture for some individuals. Positioning shoes in a way that differs from the usual or original basketball or street culture association appears to be problematic and not acceptable for some sneakerheads because such co-branding collaborations do not appear to respect the norms and values within sneaker culture. As implied in these quotes, this lack of authenticity may influence individual attitudes toward and willingness to purchase the luxury brand or co-branded shoe. In their exploratory study of product authenticity, which includes concepts of originality and heritage, Liao and Ma (2009) observed that consumers with a high need for authenticity tend to consume authentic products deliberately, demonstrate loyalty to authentic products, and do not purchase unauthentic goods.

Co-Branding: Louis Vuitton and Nike

The final analysis also explored participants' responses to the Louis Vuitton Air Force 1, revealing that the collaboration and shoe was very familiar to sneakerheads, however, the collaboration did not necessarily influence their attitudes toward the brands or their likelihood to purchase the shoes. As demonstrated by two participants, their response to this collaboration was primarily positive: *"I think with the Louis Vuitton Air Force collection, I think that was a really cool thing"* (Participant #1), and *"I loved it. I, I thought it was great. Um, I thought it was a*

great tasteful way to do the collab" (Participant #5). However, these participants did not convey any change in attitude toward the brands or a greater likelihood to purchase the shoes because of the Louis Vuitton – Nike collaboration, which was attributed to the unaffordable price. *"I do like Louis Vuitton, but I probably wouldn't end up buying from Louis Vuitton just cuz they did a Nike shoe. Cuz it's such a high, such a designer brand ... this is too expensive for me. I can't buy Louis Vuitton stuff...Yeah. Cuz it's too high price"* (Participant #1), and *"No, not this one specifically, because I didn't care about, like, I don't have Louis Vuitton stuff already, you know, [it's] too expensive. I just know I'm not gonna pay that, that price for it"* (Participant #5).

In the design evaluation of these products, it was analyzed that it was derived from the custom culture commonly found in sneaker culture. One participant shared his knowledge*: "It's Dapper Dan...It's not Louis Vuitton's putting out this sneaker. It's a guy in Harlem is making like a customized sneaker"* (Participant #6). Other participants also shared their views on the products derived from sneaker culture.

> They also made something that's like, kind of like a dream cuz you know, that you see that people made like, you know, custom versions of these and stuff and they made the like a dream a reality. Yeah. So, I think that's, that's cool. They took the customized subculture and made it a reality. (Participant #7)
>
> I mean, so there's, um, there's a guy in New York City named Dapper Dan… Like Virgil and Louis Vuitton, like Nike and Louis Vuitton making an Air Force one… That's where it comes from the streets. Like, this is nothing new. I think that's why I think it's great. (Participant #11)

Dapper Dan, whose real name is Daniel Day, is a tailoring designer in Harlem, and he reforms (i.e., customizes) the products of luxury brands with various fashion items. Since the late1980s

he has been providing his products to hip-hop musicians and athletes ("Dapper Dan," 2022).

Through the responses of the participants, it shows how far the position of subculture has come in the contemporary fashion market.

As the following comments suggest, multiple participants also addressed how sneaker collaborations foster brand exposure and the merging of groups or cultures, which they perceived to be a positive aspect of co-branding.

> I just feel like it opens new doors…it opens the possibility to like merge, the two groups in a sense. Merge the sneakerheads and like merge like the people who are into high fashion and designer and just seeing the two brands work cohesively, like allows a chance for like, almost the two groups to do the same thing… I feel like it's really good and like, I feel like it influences also the sneaker culture because like people want something new and like, not something that Nike has done repetitively... (Participant #2) It creates this, uh, it creates, it brings two, two types of people together. You know, it takes the people that like the Air, like regular Air Forces and it takes people that love luxury, and it brings it into one. So, then that influences the sneaker culture by bringing in different types of people... Various people from different, you know, subcultures and stuff like that. And brings 'em all together into one. (Participant #7)

Conclusion

This research provides greater understanding of the characteristics and experiences that define sneakerheads, the motivations that encourage participation in sneaker culture, and the value of co-branding sneaker collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands. This study also explored the co-branding case of the Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1, designed by the late Virgil Abloh, who possessed a good understanding of sneaker culture and had co-

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branding design experience. The themes identified through the content analysis of interview data

lend confirmation to findings from previous studies, but also make new contributions to our

understanding of sneaker culture, including participants' attitudes, emotions, and purchase

intentions toward co-branding sneaker collaborations.

Regarding the definition of a sneakerhead, two themes: *Love Match* and *Nostalgia*

revealed from the present analysis are consistent with previous studies. The first theme, which

represents love, passion, and appreciation for sneakers, aligns with the definition of sneakerhead

as described by Choi and Kim (2019). Also, as previously noted, the nostalgia theme is

consistent with the definition provided by Matthews et al. (2021). The *Starring Role* theme,

which refers to the importance of sneakers as a means of self-expression and an important aspect

of dress and appearance, lends a new understanding to the term sneakerhead. This theme

captures the perception that, among some sneakerheads, sneakers are a valued fashion item that

may influence the individual wearer's views and behaviors. This finding suggests that sneaker

brands may benefit from positioning their sneakers in terms of the meaning or value that some

consumers derive from owning and wearing sneakers.

Findings from the main analysis addressing research question #1, revealed four themes

related to individuals' motivations for participating in sneaker culture emotional investment, and

including insights into the complementary roles of knowledge and emotion, which are attributes

of the fandom and participatory culture theory (Kulinicheva, 2021). Most sneakerheads

participate in sneaker culture because it provides enjoyment and emotional benefits. Like

findings from Matthews et al. (2021), some participants spoke to the emotion experienced from

the inability to participate in sneaker culture in their adolescence (owing to limited monetary

resources), which was fully realized in adulthood when they had more resources to engage in

sneaker culture. Other sneakerheads participate in sneaker culture because of the resell value of sneakers; they are the ones who connect their emotional investment (i.e., enjoyment) with sneakers through monetary value. Findings also demonstrate the link between emotional investment and knowledge, which is necessary to effectively conduct transactions (e.g., buying, selling, trading) and a key aspect of participation in sneaker culture.

The most noteworthy aspect of this analysis is the creation of a community that is fostered among sneakerheads - that a connection can be established among people and across subcultures through a shared interest in or love for sneakers. Participants shared their experiences and noted emotions, friendships, knowledge, and other benefits gained from engaging in sneaker culture. The community was noted as a reason for participating in sneaker culture and it also contributed to one's sense of gratification or satisfaction from participating, thereby suggesting that brands may benefit from hosting online communities (e.g., *Nike Talk, Nice Kicks)* and in-person gatherings (e.g., Sneaker Con).

Responses from the final analysis related to RQ #2, revealed unique aesthetic, cost, and brand identity influenced participants' responses to luxury and athletic shoe co-branding. Most participants identified Virgil Abloh, the founder and designer for Off-White shoes, as the designer of the Off-White and Nike co-branded sneakers. Participants conveyed strong appreciation for the artistic value of the sneakers, and some participants expressed a strong emotional connection to the product. Abloh frequently shared his work activities and shoe designs on his social media, allowing him to connect with his consumers or fans that fostered bonding among the designer and sneakerheads, which is an important aspect of co-branding (Motion et al., 2003). This suggests that luxury and athletic shoe brands, in addition to executing creative designs, should focus on their marketing communications to interact with consumers.

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Many participants shared that "luxury – athletic" co-branded sneakers let them experience their taste for luxury at an affordable price. This result aligns with findings from Yeoman (2011) suggesting that many consumers can access luxury products more easily through the "democratization" of fashion. While achieving better affordability through co-branding, it also is important for luxury/designer brands to maintain product exclusivity for strong brand identity when they collaborate with athletic shoe brands. Brand identity, another important theme related to co-branding, was included in the definition of 'new luxury' as stated by DeLeon and Klanten (2019). Participants' responses suggest that luxury brands need to fully understand sneaker culture as well as their own brand identity and that of their brand partner to develop successful collaborations that signify new luxury. In sum, creative design, affordability, and strong communication are essential to the success of "luxury-athletic" co-branded sneakers.

Limitations and Suggestions for future research

This study explored individuals' participation in sneakerhead culture and their responses co-branding between luxury and athletic shoe brands. One limitation of this study is that the semi-structured interviews were conducted by a self-proclaimed sneakerhead, so is possible that bias (based on personal experiences and opinions) occurred in the data collection process. A second limitation is that participants were recruited in Colorado, which may not be representative the larger population. The findings may differ in other regions of the United States and in other cultures (e.g., Asia, Europe, etc.). Thus, future studies will be able to obtain data from various cultures and other states by analyzing co-branding related to sneaker culture geographically. It is also suggested that future research may be able to provide in-depth insights into subcultures and consumers by studying co-branding between athletic shoe brands and street brands/contemporary designers.

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APPENDIX A – APPROVAL TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANT

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Design and Merchandising
114 Richardson Design Center
1574 Campus Delivery
Fort Collins, Colorado   80523-1574
(970) 491-1629
http://www.chhs.colostate.edu/dm

Date

Dear store owner,

My name is Donghoon Shin and I am a graduate student researcher from Colorado State University in the Department of Design and Merchandising. I am conducting a research study on co-branding collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe/sportswear brands, the characteristics of sneakerheads, and motivations for their participation in sneaker culture with guidance from my faculty advisor. The title of the project is "Investigating Co-branding Between Luxury Apparel and Athletic Shoe Brands: The Case of Louis Vuitton and Nike." The Principal Investigator for this project is Dr. Karen Hyllegard (my thesis advisor), Professor in the Department of Design and Merchandising and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

Given your customer base, we believe that some of the consumers who visit your store would be interested in participating in this study, and therefore we would like to recruit participants for this study at your store location. Specifically, we would like to recruit participants by placing flyers, which briefly explain the contents of our research, in your store. The flyers will provide information about the study and how potential participants may contact us directly to participate in the study. All participants will be compensated with a $20 (USD) gift card for your store.

If you have any questions, please contact Donghoon Shin at

Donghoon.Shin@colostate.edu or Dr. Karen Hyllegard at Karen.Hyllegard@colostate.edu. If

you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB
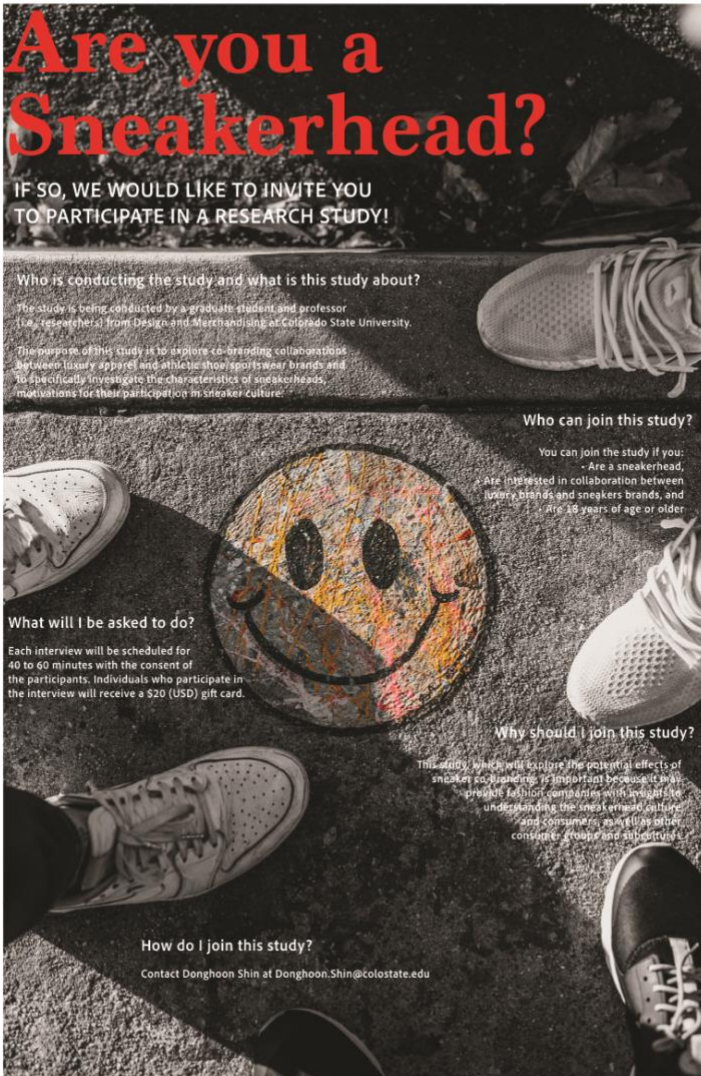
at: CSU_IRB@colostate.edu;

970-491-1553.

Sincerely,

Karen Hyllegard, Ph.D.   Donghoon Shin
Principal Investigator   Co-Principal Investigator

INVESTIGATING CO-BRANDING BETWEEN LUXURY APPAREL AND ATHLETIC SHOE BRANDS: THE CASE OF LOUIS VUITTON AND NIKE

Colorado State University

Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Study: Investigating Co-branding Between Luxury Apparel and Athletic Shoe

Brands: The Case of Louis Vuitton and Nike.

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Donghoon Shin and I am a graduate student researcher from Colorado State

University in the Department of Design and Merchandising. The principal investigator for this

project is Dr. Karen Hyllegard (my thesis advisor), Department of Design and Merchandising,

and the Co-Principal Investigator is Donghoon Shin, Department of Design and Merchandising. I

am conducting a research study on co-branding collaborations between luxury apparel and

athletic shoe/sportswear brands, the characteristics of sneakerheads, and motivations for their

participation in sneaker culture with guidance from my faculty advisor. Therefore, I would like

to invite you to take part in my research study.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct an interview with you at a time

and location of your choice. The interview will involve questions about sneaker culture and co-

branding between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands, including a collaboration between

Louis Vuitton and Nike. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. With your

permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The audio recording will be

used to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes

only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being

audiotaped but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

I expect to conduct only one interview; however, follow-up communication may be needed for added clarification. This may involve asking you to review the transcribed interview to edit the text for clarity. If this is necessary, I would like to contact you by email to request your review of the text.

Benefits

Although there is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this, it is hoped that the research will help fashion companies to understand the value and importance of sneaker culture.

Risks/Discomforts

There are no known risks to participating in this study. However, if some of the research questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are free to decline to answer any questions you don't wish to, or to stop the interview at any time.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality

Your interview data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results from this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used. The audiotape will be destroyed after it has been transcribed. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, the data collector and principal investigator will have access to the information that they provide. In addition, participant data will be shared with a transcription service like Rev.com, which will have access to de-identified data.

When the research is completed, the transcriptions will be saved for possible use in future research conducted by myself or others. We will retain these records for up to three years after the study is completed. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this research data. We may be asked to share the research files with the sponsor or the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. Because compensation is provided for participation in this study, your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

Compensation

You will receive a $20 (USD) gift card for the selected store immediately upon completion of the interview.

Rights

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the study. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the study at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research, and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, feel free to contact Donghoon Shin at Donghoon.Shin@colostate.edu or Dr. Karen Hyllegard at Karen.Hyllegard@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1381, or e-mail CSU_IRB@colostate.edu.

****

CONSENT

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped?   ___Yes   ___No

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

May I contact you via email if I need to clarify your responses? ___Yes   ___No

Email address: _____

_____

Participant's Name *(please print)*

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

Researcher/person providing information to participant:

_____

Researcher's Name *(please print)*

_____   _____

Researcher's Signature   Date

APPENDIX D – SNEAKERHEAD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you identify as a 'sneakerhead'?   How do you define that word?

2. In your opinion, what are the defining factors of sneaker culture?

3. What are some of the ways that you participate in sneaker culture?
    a. How often do you visit stores or retail websites that have a sneaker-focused merchandise assortment?
    b. What are the names/locations of these stores and websites?
    c. How often do you visit websites or podcasts that have a sneaker-focused content?
    d. What are the names of these websites and podcasts?

4. Why do you participate in sneaker culture?

    a. Does participation in sneaker culture provide you with knowledge about sneaker design, brands, products etc.?   Explain

    b. How does this knowledge benefit you?

        i. Does this knowledge inform your purchase decisions?   How so?
        ii. Does this knowledge inform your interactions with other sneakerheads? How so?

    c. Does participation in sneaker culture provide you with emotional benefits?   How so?

        i. Does this emotional investment inform your purchase decisions?   How so?
        ii. Does this emotional investment inform your interactions with other sneakerheads? How so?

5. How does participating in sneaker culture bring you gratification or satisfaction?

    a. Do you build relationships/partnerships by participating in sneaker culture?
    b. Do you experience a sense of belonging to a group by participating in sneaker culture?

     c. Do you experience greater satisfaction from your brand/product purchases by participating in sneaker culture?

6. What are your thoughts about 'sneaker collaborations' between traditional athletic shoe brands and luxury about brands?

     a. Do these sneaker collaborations influence your attitudes toward the brands? How so?
     b. Do these sneaker collaborations influence your likelihood to purchase the brand's products? How so?

7. What are your thoughts about the 'sneaker collaboration' between Louis Vuitton and Nike featured in this photograph?

Figure1. The Louis Vuitton X Nike Air Force 1 (2022)

     a. Are you familiar with this collaboration? How did you learn about this collaboration?
     b. Do you like the design that these brands have created?
     c. Does this sneaker collaboration influence your attitudes toward the brands? How so?
     d. Does this sneaker collaboration influence your likelihood to purchase the brand's products? How so?

8. How do you think co-branding between the luxury apparel and athletic shoe brand (i.e., Louis Vuitton x Nike) influences sneaker culture, the luxury market, and/or the athletic shoe market?

9. How does your knowledge of sneaker culture inform your responses to co-branding collaborations between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands?

10. How does your emotional investment in sneaker culture inform your responses co-branding between luxury apparel and athletic shoe brands?