‘Exclusiveness in the sneaker world: a door to enter today’s reign of the ephemeral’

A critical marketing analysis on the presence of exclusiveness in the sneaker market

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Introduction

Since I was raised in Italy, a country with a variegated culture, I have always been fascinated by the historical and sociological background behind any kind of phenomenon. In particular, the element of causality was and is what makes me curious the most. As a matter of fact, I have always been prone to understand why things result in what they actually are, which, I believe, is an essential step before taking on a task. This investigative view accompanied me for my entire life and, constantly eager to learn and understand things, I applied this attitude onto my other passions which can count Fashion among its ranks.

Hence, I started to deepen my knowledge in marketing, consumer behaviour and history of fashion at university and as well in my free time. A fortiori I decided to write, as the final step of my studies, a thesis in which I would have examined in depth a vast characteristic of fashion but narrowed it down to a specific typology of product, videlicet exclusiveness in the sneaker market. By means of this, I managed to ‘combine business with pleasure’ as diverse aspects aligned in this project. The thesis, as business, and exclusiveness and sneakers as pleasures. I will try to explain you the reasons through a brief personal reflection which will be backed up later in the text.

Everything started about three years ago\(^1\) by being increasingly bombarded by newsletters and news in regards to the latest limited edition sneakers which soon would have been released on the market. The pace of this habit kept growing hitherto in which there is no month without a special release. This phenomenon, as you will later read on this paper, is a consequence of a certain modus operandi of brands that became, de facto, a stable characteristic of the streetwear fashion scene. The more the consumer demands exclusive products the more the brand produces them, as a logic consequence. Yet, by virtue of this, together with the rise of social media, which of course did not happen three years ago, and in particular of Instagram, I started to perceive an aura around fashion, around streetwear, around the sneaker world and around life in general, which does not leave room to any other concept rather than self-narcissism and ephemerality. A blatant example of this trend are tattoos and the superficiality behind ‘the choice’ of having one (Aspers & Godart, 2013) (Schiermer, 2014). The concept of choice, in theory so conscious, subjective and personal, in practice the result of external influences. A choice to feel particular, to be different, to be exclusive. The mass diffusion of trends such as customisation or of ‘mythical figures’ such as the hypebeast in streetwear contributed in making me perceive this ‘mass-exclusivity’ in the air.

It is exactly like it used to be in the punk subcultures but on a vaster scale. Everybody is so particularly dressed that in the end all look the same. Yet, here we are not talking about a subculture but an entire clothing style, namely streetwear.

In general, my philosophy of life is to try to always create or find value in any action I do. Ergo, superficiality and lack of personality are synonyms of absence of value, therefore if something does not have value, nor has it meaning. Absence of meaning equals emptiness, hence, it does not have any purpose to exist. Thus, through this project I hope to find the purpose of something that according to me has lost its value: exclusive sneakers.

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\(^1\) After the first release of Riccardo Tisci x Nike, in autumn 2014.
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**Rationale & problem formulation**

*Sneakers* in fashion is a phenomenon which is progressively increasing its importance and dominating the scene worldwide by striking fashion at the core: the runways (Rakestraw, 2017). This fact is giving even more resonance to this kind of shoes and making sneakers an ordinary item present in every person’s wardrobe. In fact, this sector is becoming an extremely important source of revenues for brands as according to *Researchnester.com* is projected to reach a value of USD 115.6 Billion by 2023 when just in 2015 it was valued at USD 75.2 Billion. From a closer look, what is greatly contributing to this growth is an increasing amount of exclusive collaborations with designers and the launch of limited edition products (Rakestraw, 2017). Pushed by social media, exclusive sneakers are becoming accessible to everybody and desired by everybody (Rakestraw, 2017). The demand for exclusive products is drastically increasing, leading consumer to extreme actions for obtaining their object of desire (Salem, 2016). As a consequence, an increased demand is followed by an augmented production of exclusive editions which basically is causing a “mass-exclusiveness” similar to the idea of “democratisation of luxury”, a phenomenon already started years ago (Kapferer, 2012).

Going into details, the reasons for investigating the phenomenon of *exclusiveness* in the *sneaker world* are diverse, all of them having as a common denominator the fact that exclusiveness and mass-production do not go hand in hand. By virtue of this, a study will be done on the following areas which as well motivate this investigation:

1. A research on a presumably established concept which, instead, has a more profound origin. Whether the reader is a “sneakerhead”\(^2\) or not, this research will help him/her to question his/her own beliefs and restore a truer sense of *exclusiveness* in regards to the sneaker world and to the sneaker itself as a mere object.

2. Furthermore, there is an insufficient scholarly writing on neither *exclusiveness* as fundamental characteristic of a shoe nor on the mechanism of consumer’s attraction towards the exclusive sneaker. An exclusive sneaker is just something hyped by the market and the media, which, in turn, contribute simply to increase the denaturalisation of the concept instead of helping in defining it (Amed, 2007).

For these reasons, this investigation aims to understand the above-mentioned points in regards to the sneaker subculture which, from a bigger perspective, contributes to make exclusiveness so present in the contemporary fashion world (Pike, 2016).

3. Therefore, how differently, why and when the perception of this *exclusiveness* can vary? It is fundamental and fascinating to understand how exclusiveness acts in the purchasing process per different individuals and if and how this phenomenon will survive in the future (Sanchez, 2016).

4. To conclude, the main rationale behind this investigation is to determine whether or not and how *exclusiveness* exists in today’s sneaker market. This tool could be relevant for theoretical purposes (marketing), for the ordinary reader (consumer) and for brands which would feel endangered the exclusiveness of their products/image (industry).

From a more holistic perspective, the final goal is to obtain a *perception of exclusiveness* close to its pure form for any of the previously mentioned beneficiaries.

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\(^2\) A person who collects limited, rare or definitely exclusive sneakers (urban dictionary.com).
Aim

The following paper aims to study the presence of the concept of *exclusiveness* in the *sneaker* market from a qualitative and a quantitative perspective. It centres on *exclusiveness* as one of the main motors for the acquisition of the good by the consumer and the way it acts. Furthermore, it focuses on which components of exclusiveness are implied in its action and on what are the external and internal features of it.

The project will begin with exploring the concept of exclusiveness by analysing first its components and, thanks to a better understanding of its characteristics, it will possible to see it from different perspectives. The analysis will help the reader to globally understand the concept of exclusiveness, how it is nowadays and then how it is perceived by the consumers. In addition to that, there will be an analysis of the concept of luxury in order to gain even more insight in regard to exclusiveness due to the affinities between the two of them.

It will follow an investigation on the mechanisms that drive the consumer to buy exclusive products (personal and interpersonal reasons) which will help to fathom the dynamics surrounding the trio of consumer-brand-product. At the end of this article, consumers, brands and scholars will gain a better understanding and eventually create a clearer and more personal view on *exclusiveness*, as the research’s scope is providing an understanding and stimulating questions in regards to the conundrum of ‘*exclusiveness* being actually *exclusive*’.

This thesis is a source of information which will give birth to an article based on it. Both the thesis and the article will illustrate a research designed to study the qualitative and qualitative presence of exclusiveness in the sneaker market. Everything will be developed in order to be relevant for scholars, the fashion industry and consumers by providing them a tool to perceive *exclusiveness* in a purer way.

Fiat lux.
Research questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to shed light on the concept of *exclusiveness* in regards to the sneaker market. In researching this topic, this study attempts to answer the following questions, which consist of a main question and four sub-questions.

**Main question:**

*Does exclusiveness exist in the contemporary sneaker scene?*

The main question will be answered with the help of the following sub-questions:

1 - *What is exclusiveness in a product and what does it involve nowadays?*

The aim of this sub-question is to investigate the internal and external elements which can render a product exclusive. A brief historical background and analysis will be given and the concept of luxury will be explored as well.

2 - *How exclusiveness is connected to consumers, brands and products in the purchasing process?*

This sub-question investigates on the psychological aspects of what happens between the consumer and brands in relation to products. It will analyse the mechanism of attraction between consumer, brand and products. Furthermore, it will uncover the mechanism happening between the consumer, the brand and the product when influencing each other during the construction of the idea of exclusiveness. More attention will be given to the consumers’ perspective in order to determine how they contribute in creating this concept and how they are themselves influenced by the products and the brands.

3 - *What are the dimensions of exclusiveness in the sneaker market?*

The theoretical knowledge previously explored is narrowed down and applied to the sneaker market. By means of that, different typologies of sneaker consumer are identified and analysed.

4 – ‘*Inveniendum’* exclusiveness in the sneaker market: seeking the truth

The aim of this section is to determine and to discuss how exclusiveness is actually present in the sneaker market from a qualitative and quantitative point of view.
Methodology

The methodology of this study is qualitative and tries to give a quantitative dimension to the investigated concept as final conclusion. The purpose of the study is to understand the role that ‘exclusiveness’ plays in the consumption of sneakers. In order to achieve that, the concept of ‘exclusiveness’ was dissected to reveal internal and external components of it. Subsequently the consumer point of view is investigated to fathom the internal and external factors that can potentially trigger the purchasing decision. Finally, the academic research is applied for the design of a questionnaire to qualitatively understand the phenomenon of exclusiveness in relation to the sneaker market. As a final step, a statistical examination is given in order to provide a quantitative dimension to the investigation.

The first half of this study, namely the first two sub-questions, was dedicated to collecting theoretical and academic knowledge which is applied afterwards. The knowledge collected derived from: articles, journals, websites, thesis, reports, conferences, documentaries and books. The second half of the thesis is the operational phase, videlicet applying the theoretical insight in relation to the sneaker market and then for the design of a framework for the discernment of the concept of exclusiveness.

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1999) as a mean for the interpretation of primary and secondary sources. The empirical data as well will be analysed through CDA but with the aid of Mosainder & Vailtones (2006) and Kozinets (2010) ethnographic and nethnographic methods. On the one hand CDA helps for the analysis of the multiplicity of meaning of text and their mutual interaction. On the other one, ethnography and nethnography focus on groups makes possible to understand how certain markets create their own cultural dynamics.

The nethnographic data was collected in an online streetwear community on Facebook, namely ‘Drug Fashion Club’, composed by about 30k members. The interviewees for the questionnaire were mostly males between 15–45 years old. Each question was designed via a previously gained academic knowledge and is based on a specific sociological and scientific theory. The survey took place from January 2018 to late February 2018. For further information the questionnaire is available in the Appendix of this dissertation.

Reliability of the study
Reliability and validity are fundamental in qualitative research. A valid ethnographic/nethnographic research has credibility, transferability and confirmability\(^3\) which determine trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003) (Bryman, 2012). According to Hokkanen (2014) and Bryman (2012) trustworthiness is central for stating validity and reliability in research. Credibility is connected to internal validity (Hokkanen, 2014), in other terms, there needs to be consistency between the researcher’s observations and the theoretical ideas that follow it (Bryman, 2012).

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\(^3\) there is also dependability according to Bryman (2012) which was not considered in this case.
In order to be internally valid, in each question I provided examples to participants for the purpose of having a correct understanding of the specific question when read by them.

Transferability is linked to external validity, in other terms it refers whether or not the finding can be applied to other social contexts. Even if in this case the research is mostly qualitative, the fact that is meticulously detailed makes it potentially applicable to other environments (Bryman, 2012) (Hokkanen, 2014). In addition to that, its theoretical background is versatile and virtually applicable to other areas of fashion. All of this is reinforced by the statistical analysis which provides more solid foundations.

Confirmability means objectivity. In order to avoid subjectivity, the interviews were based on theory without any clue of personal interpretation in the design of the questions. The conclusions were drawn on statistics which leave small room to a personal view. Since the goal was to comprehend the social world from the perspective of consumers, there had to be a culturally influenced knowledge of the researched topic. The investigator is an Italian citizen who has lived in the Netherlands for six years and has a point of view influenced by a Judeo-Christian Western background. Furthermore, the academic knowledge was based on the marketing and consumer behaviour courses attended at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute. All the relevant sources were about postmodern consumer culture, consumption, brand relationship, identity construction, brand symbolism and streetwear. All of this determined the writing of the thesis, the questionnaire and the interpretation of the field of investigation.

**Limitations**

Exclusiveness in fashion is everywhere nowadays (Rai, 2018) (Hracs, et al., 2013), thus for the sake of practicality this thesis limits itself to one specific area: sneakers. Although the arguments and models treated here could be applied to other areas of fashion, there is no room for them within the extent of this study. Furthermore, exclusiveness could be seen from different perspectives even in regards of sneakers: consumer’s one, which is more deeply treated here, brands’ one and product’s one. The attention will lie on the consumer perspective as a matter of choice and for the sociological and psychological aspects more easily attributable to it. Being mainly consumer centered leaves managerial and technical approaches out of the scope, consequently choosing one of those methods would have determined a completely different dissertation.

Lastly, it has to be underlined that the consumer’s perspective is analysed through the framework of Vigneron & Johnson (1999) which is modified, extended and adapted to this context. Ergo, there could have been other frameworks and concepts potentially applicable to the study of this issue.
1 - What is exclusiveness in a product and what does it involve nowadays?

1.1 – Introduction to the concept

Everyday fashion consumers are bombarded directly and indirectly by brands online and off-line. In these situations, consumers cannot escape the process of building their own ideas and final choices are an inescapable option (J. P. Sartre). Pounded from any kind of direction (e.g. social networks, brand ambassadors, publicity, etc.) during their daily lives, “consumers rarely go through deep processes of choice, instead they often rely on quick mental shortcuts, or general heuristic rules, to guide their attitudes and behaviour (Chaiken, 1980)” (Schins, 2014). Cialdini (2001) calls this psychological principle as ‘click’ and explains it as the propensity to behave naturally without being fully conscious. The aforesaid mental reactions happen when consumers bump into various internal and external signals during their daily lives. The internal signal is any item characteristic belonging to the product itself (e.g. certain materials) while the external one is not constitutional to the item itself. Therefore, the external one is attributed to the product (e.g. price, brand, packaging shape, availability, etc.) (Verhallen & Robben, 1994). By using this division, a proper description will be given to the concept of exclusiveness which will be used to see how it triggers consumer’s purchasing behaviour. Yet first, we need to understand what we are dealing with.

1.2 - What is exclusiveness exactly?

The origin of the word exclusiveness comes from the Latin word excludēre, which is made by the suffix ex- ‘out’ plus claudere ‘to shut’, in other words ‘to shut out’ something or somebody from a certain place, physical or figurative. If we go further with the semantic research, it is easy to find on authoritative dictionaries such as the Oxford dictionary or the Thesaurus dictionary clear definitions about exclusiveness which can immediately be connected to the fashion sector. Exclusiveness can be real (intrinsic) or induced (extrinsic) and thus different appellatives for the different sub-types can be defined. As found out by Veronesi (2011), who re-elaborated the research of Caniato et al. (2009) the following key factors have been pointed out by marketing researchers as critical elements belonging to the concept of exclusiveness used in fashion.

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4exclusiveness comes from the verb exclude, which means to keep out; prevent from entering to reject or not consider; leave out.
1.2.1 - Intrinsic features (Schins, 2014)
They are objective qualities of the product and its components, consequently they are restricted to the object itself.

1 - Scarcity
Exclusiveness sought through the use of naturally scarce materials, limited editions, limited production runs, selective distribution and sometimes a creation of a waiting list (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999); (Phau & Prendergast, 2000); (Kapferer, 2001); (O’Cass & Frost, 2002); (Catry, 2003) (Hanna, 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009). “The term ‘Special Edition’ or ‘Limited Edition’ when used in marketing management, intends to give the product something new and previously unseen in the regular edition” (Alexander, 2016).
“Limited Edition items carry a sense of immediacy and exclusivity as the products would only be available for a short time and/or in limited numbers “ (mbaknol.com, s.d.).
The material can be a central characteristic of an exclusive item. In opposition to materials such as plastics, there are materials that are “commonly identified with a higher value in an inter-categorial comparison such as gold, silver or diamonds” (Schmitz-Maibauer, 1976) (Heine, 2012). Nonetheless, these correlations and the “minimum requirements for materials depend on the product category. E.g.: in an intra-categorial comparison, wool might be an adequate material for the exclusive segment of scarf, but the minimum requirement for exclusive jumpers is rather virgin wool or cashmere (Kisabaka, 2001) (Heine, 2012).

2 - Peculiarity
Exclusiveness connected to particular raw materials, metal components, fibers, shapes, etc. (Nueno & Quelch, 1998); (Lamming, et al., 2000); (Catry, 2003); (Caniato, et al., 2009). E.g.: a particular cotton canvas produced in Japan which afterwards it is used to make a special pair of sneakers.

1.2.2 - Extrinsic features (Schins, 2014)
They are subjective qualities determined by the consumer’s perception or other external entities which make a fashion product exclusive.

1 - Quality
2 – Symbolicity
Characteristic of being able to represent something; e.g. a lifestyle, which can be recreated in everyday life by possessing special luxury and fashion products (Nueno & Quelch, 1998); (Phau & Prendergast, 2000); (Reddy & Terblanche, 2005); (Caniato, et al., 2009).
Here the concept of Postmodernism and consumer-tribes can clarify the uniqueness of certain items. For instance, the ownership of a product can give to the possessor “a ticket” to enter and being a part of group (e.g. movement, club, tribe, etc.) as a symbol for something.

3 - Design
Design and style can make a product recognisable in terms of exclusiveness even without seeing an evident proof (Catry, 2003); (Hanna, 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009).
In that case, these fashion products are for connoisseurs and do not even try to compete for “high awareness beyond their relatively narrow target group of select insiders. Connoisseur items are often also network products, which are recommended by word-of-mouth between friends (Heine, 2012) (Belz, 1994).”

4 - Reputation
Exclusiveness due to the reputation of a brand’s item or of a certain product (Nueno & Quelch, 1998); (Phau & Prendergast, 2000); (O’Cass & Frost, 2002); (Antoni, et al., 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009). E.g. Possessing a pair of self-lacing Nike Air Mag as the ones worn by Martin McFly in Back to the Future II (1989).

5 - Craftsmanship
Craftsmanship (Catry, 2003); (Antoni, et al., 2004); (Hanna, 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009).
Craftsmanship can make each product unique and different from others because it is handmade instead of being machine-made.

6 – PDO (Protected Designation of Origin)
In other terms, association with a country of origin (Nueno & Quelch, 1998); (Catry, 2003); (Okonkwo, 2007); (Caniato, et al., 2009). E.g. A pair of sneakers ‘made in Italy’ and its tradition of making good quality footwear.

As stated in the previous chapter, exclusiveness in fashion goes hand in hand with the concept of luxury which will be mentioned and investigated as well to have a more complete understanding of the main topic of this dissertation. Luxury can be used as a conceptual bridge between fashion and exclusiveness since it shares features with the latter one.
1.3 - Exclusiveness and the relationship with luxury

The decision for exploring the concept of luxury is due to the fact that it shares many characteristics with the phenomenon of exclusiveness, as well in the sneaker world, therefore letting a solid analogy possible. By exploring this concept new facets of exclusiveness will be revealed and understood. Hence, it is important to mention a brief historical overview by Veronesi (2011) about how luxury which will clarify why and how exclusiveness and luxury became so relevant for today fashion and so on for the sneaker market.

Primarily we will talk about Okonkwo (2007) and Thomas (2008) who said that, historically, the term luxury referred to rare and scarce products (Nueno & Quelch, 1998) available only for a minority of people. Paradoxically through the recent years, luxury and exclusiveness became much more attainable, goods once reserved to an élite became more available to a broader public. According to Crane (1997), the same pattern seems to take place also for fashion products. In fact, the fashion industry experienced a paradigmatic evolution from tailor made clothes, to haute couture through ready-to-wear to the current availability of industrial apparel. This evolution shows a passage from extremely exclusive products to less expensive and less rare ones. Moreover, Fernie et al. (1997) observed that many fashion companies decided to produce and distribute (Nueno & Quelch, 1998) (Moore, et al., 1997) both the “haute couture” products and “diffusion lines” to be able to increase their customers’ base.

In the second place, nowadays in developed countries, middle-class household with growing incomes have begun shopping for brands that were previously seen as out of reach (Catry, 2003). The purchasing decision is, therefore, influenced by aspiration, the sense of what is deserved and how the customers want to be perceived (Priest, 2005). According to Hayes and Jones (2006), the same pattern seems to take place also for fashion products. In fact, they suggest that increasing incomes are the key to increased economic activity and purchase determinants in the fashion market (clothing, shoes and accessories). As a result of this, clothing and fashion purchase decisions are based on “want” rather than “need” (Jones & Hayes, 2002)” (Veronesi, 2011).

From those passages, we can see that the idea of luxury and exclusiveness are increasingly spreading in fashion. It is certainly worthy of attention to give a deeper analysis to luxury in order to have a better idea of what exclusiveness is in its purest form.

1.3.1 - What is luxury?

Luxury is defined as “an inessential, desirable item which is expensive or difficult to obtain” (Oxford Dictionary). As we can see, the aspect that immediately catches the eye is the hard availability of it. In addition to this another definition by Kapferer (2010) helps us to see the proximity with the concept of exclusiveness. He says that luxury is not more of premium, or beyond premium or more expensive than premium quality items, it is elsewhere. Luxury as “Janus”, has two indissoluble faces:

1 – A sociological face: it represents and publicly incarnates social stratification. In this way, it ‘excludes’ groups of people one from another by making each one of them unique and so on excluding each other.

2 – A psychological face: it gives to oneself a pleasure and dream of exception. In other words, being unique and excluding oneself from others.

Substantially luxury has exclusiveness as central feature which enables it to be a ‘status maker’. The focal point here is to indicate that the owner occupies a certain position in a specific group. In fact, the
exclusive luxury product works as status symbol by being socially desirable (Blumberg, 1974), but at the same time, “the product's ability to function as a status symbol for a certain group rests on the extent to which the majority of the group's members make similar status attributions from the product” (Dawson & Cavell, 1987).

Going deeper, we could ask ourselves: what are the elements of luxury which makes it so connected to the concept of exclusiveness? What are the common elements? Can we say that exclusiveness and luxury are the same nowadays? Or that exclusiveness and luxury do not exist anymore? We will find it out and see how they overlap each other.

1.3.2 - The components of luxury
According to Heine (2012, p.62) and Kapferer et al. (2016) the luxury features considered by the majority of consumers are the following ones: price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and a high degree of non-functionality.

(A) Price is the “most objective and the easiest-to-measure criteria to evaluate the luxuriousness of a product (McKinsey, 1990) (Meffert & Lasslop, 2003; Mutscheller, 1992)” (Heine, 2012).

(B) Quality is achieved when timeless top-of-the-line fashion products are made. “Products which won’t be disposed of even after long utilization or defect, but rather repaired and which often even gain in value over time” (Heine, 2012). Quality is determined by the following characteristics (Heine, 2012, p.73-80):

I - Manufacturing Characteristics
Expertise of manufacturer is fundamental. Customers consider “the manufacturers of luxury products as the leading experts with a strong “creative power” in their area of excellence and high technical and stylistic competences (Mutscheller, 1992)” (Heine, 2012). Their expertise even places luxury manufacturers in a “position of superiority with respect to its clients, which is a necessary condition for the richest and most powerful people to crave for luxury [products]” (Kapferer & Bastien 2009, p. 314) (Heine, 2012).

II - Concrete Product Characteristics: Product Attributes
Special materials and components are central in defining luxury and the construction and function principles of the item as well. For instance, a functional part of a product, such as the sole of a pair of sneakers which makes them luxurious and exclusive.
“A luxury product requires absolute perfectionism in workmanship with a zero-tolerance for flaws. In some cases, luxury products also feature some “planned imperfections” as a result of handmade manufacturing, which do not reduce, but rather prove the quality of these products” (Heine, 2012). Furthermore, luxury products usually have more features than normal items which makes them more exclusive and unique (e.g. after sale reparation and product personalisation).

III - Abstract Product Characteristics: Product Benefits
The abstract product features rely on a combination of concrete product characteristics. For instance, superior materials and a perfect design make a pair of shoes comfortable to wear but functional at the
(A) (comfortability and usability benefits). In addition to that, concrete characteristics can make an item durable and valuable since it becomes more reliable throughout time.

Connected to that, luxury products have a superior functionality, which means that they “just do their job better” (Heine, 2012:77) (B)(functional and performance benefits).

Another component of luxury is the (C) aesthetic. Not unexpectedly aesthetic product design is one of the most important strategies of manufacturers of luxury products to differentiate themselves from mass market manufacturers (Kapferer 2001, p. 321). Ergo, a unique aesthetic of a product can make it exclusive.

Furthermore, luxury products are by definition not ordinary, but rather (D) a rarity (Kisabaka 2001, p. 96). Rarity makes them unique and exclusive. From Heine’s (2012) survey, one of the respondents explained: “I was the only one with this bag – and that adds a great additional value”. Another respondent argued: “I have already had this bag for a year and now everyone is walking around with one – so I’m going to get rid of it soon”. Here it is even more evident how exclusiveness and luxury go hand in hand.

A fashion product can be rare due to its (1) extraordinariness caused by natural limitations (e.g. limited availability of components such as in the case of noble metals). Furthermore, artificial limitations can be created by producing special editions. “These limited editions can be improved further towards the ideal of a unique piece by individualisation. This includes intended irregularities via hand-made manufacturing by using natural materials or by artificial variations” (Heine, 2012). Referring to sneakers, this could include, for instance, labeling a certain shoe with a specific serial number or stitching it with an uncommon technique. By means of personalisation the consumer can increase as well the product’s rarity and please his/her taste (Kisabaka 2001, p. 97 et seqq.), a clear example for this is NikeID initiative. Another aspect of rarity is (2) symbolism. On one hand mass market products are primarily known for their functionality, while one the other one, luxury products generate numerous non-functional, abstract associations. “Mortelmans (2005, p. 505) argues that “every notion of functionality is reduced as far as possible.” In fact, there is no other product category with a similar relevance of symbolic benefits, which often even exceeds its functional benefits” (Heine, 2012). The symbolic meaning refers to a considerable part of human values and lifestyles (Vigneron & Johnson 2004, p. 490), consequently the symbolism of brands is represented by the concept of brand personality, which was adapted to the luxury segment by Heine (2009). According to Heine there are five major dimensions of the luxury brand personality: modernity, prestige, sensuality, understatement and eccentricity (all categories attributable to exclusiveness).

To conclude, luxury products do not symbolize anything in particular, but just as with their aesthetics, “they need to comply with the worldview and taste of the upper class” (Heine, 2012). In fact, Kapferer & Bastien (2009, p. 314) argues that “the DNA of luxury is the symbolic desire to belong to a superior class”. Ergo, luxury items need to possess a high level of prestige, “which they also have to symbolise at least to some extent” (Keller 2009, p. 291).
Taking into consideration the above-mentioned components of exclusiveness and luxury, we should ask ourselves: when exclusiveness is actually exclusive? And why is an exclusive product more attractive than regular alternatives?

In the next chapter a further clarification will be given to this by investigating the social environment in which exclusiveness operates.
2 – How exclusiveness is connected to consumers, brands and products in the purchasing process?

After having ‘dissected’ the concept of exclusiveness, it is time to investigate how it operates in the consumption environment.

In order to do so, it was taken inspiration from a model developed by Vigneron & Johnson (1999). Going into details, the model was originally a conceptual framework for the analysis of prestige-seeking consumer behavior which was adapted in favour of an application of the concept of exclusiveness in the shopping process. The framework contains the work from Leibenstein (1950) who examined three external consumer effects on demand (interpersonal dimension) and the one from Vigneron & Johnson (1999) which is more about internal dynamics (personal dimension). The personal and interpersonal concepts were made more practical by using the idea of self-consciousness as the representation of the consumer responses to social influence (Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986). In addition to this, it was used the perspective from Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss (1975) who define self-consciousness as the consistent tendency of people to direct attention inward or outward. According to this theory there are two typologies of self-conscious people: (1) publicly self-conscious people are principally concerned in regards to how they appear to others, and (2) privately self-conscious people are more attentive on their inside thoughts and feelings.

After this brief digression, we have to bear in mind that, although the concept of prestige analysed by Vigneron & Johnson is theoretically different from the concept of exclusiveness, they both have certain dimensions in common such as the "symbolic" and "hedonic" value” (Gilles & Kapferer, 1985). This can be a starting point to examine from a qualitative point of view the relationship between the trio consumer, brand and product in regards to exclusiveness. Furthermore, the concept of involvement will be investigated in order to develop a better understanding about the consumer attachment to goods. This concept will be used to gain extra insight and so on further data later on during the test phase. Sneakers, in particular, are investigated in this thesis as an object which embodies the idea of exclusiveness involving consumers and products. In sum, this chapter aims to describe the relation consumer-exclusiveness.

2.1 - Interpersonal effects

Interpersonal reasons to consume for status aim the attention at the social effects of possessing exclusive products instead of emotional benefits or inner values and consequently they have a significant role in determining exclusiveness externally (Shukla, 2011) (Amatulli & Guido, 2012). Mason (1992) in his study affirms that products can be purchased for their symbolic value and social value in lieu of their functionality. As his other colleagues, he sees products as a signal to others of wealth and success, exclusivity and/or personal identity (Berger & Ward, 2010) (Hudders, 2012). By virtue of this, the model mentioned in the beginning of this chapter proposes three main interpersonal effects on status consumption: (1) conspicuous consumption (the Veblen Effect); (2) exclusivity (the Snob Effect); and (3) fitting in by social norms (the Bandwagon Effect)5. Important to mention it is the fact that for all the interpersonal effects symbolism plays a pivotal role. Solomon (1983) affirms that members of a community assess persons based on the products they consume; this psychological transfer is used to create an individual’s own social identity. By means of the process of consumption consumers “integrate

5 needless to say that consumers can shift to different categories.
self and object, thereby allowing themselves access to the object’s symbolic properties and these properties can serve to classify consumers to build affiliations and/or enhance distinctions” (Christodoulides, et al., 2009) (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012) (Holt, 1995, p. 2) (Eastman & Eastman, 2015). The symbolic purpose of status product is double: “1 - It expresses social standing, wealth and status as part of signaling group membership (e.g. socio-economic success); and 2 - as self-expressive symbols to represent one’s unique qualities and to signify interpersonal relationships” (Dittmar, 1994) (self-enhancement to look better to others and a desire for membership in a superior group) (Vickers & Renand, 2003).

A - The Veblen Effect - Perceived Conspicuous Value
By reading the studies from the 50s (Bourne, 1957), the ones from the 80s (Mason 1981 and 1992; Bearden & Etzel 1982) and the contemporary ones, it is possible to observe an increasing influence of reference groups in brand consumption. The above-mentioned authors noticed that conspicuousness of a product is certainly connected to reference-group influence. These small, elitist groups were seen as a model to imitate and have similar peculiarities with. Hence exclusive products may convey wealth and power and be considered a status symbol in a societal context. O’Cass & McEwen (2004) and Truong et al (2008) define conspicuous consumption as the ostentatious, public display of wealth to indicate status. Often in this effect price can play an important role in defining the perception of quality and so on exclusiveness (Erickson & Johansson, 1985) (Lichtenstein, et al., 1988) (Tellis & Gaeth, 1990) (e.g. price as a surrogate for exclusivity). In the Veblenian motivation, price is an indicator of exclusivity because a higher price cannot be paid by everybody and is a show of ostentation to others (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999).
In sum, Veblenian consumers ascribe central importance to price as main feature of exclusiveness since their primary objective is to impress others.

B - The Snob Effect - Perceived Unique Value
The second external effect described by Vigneron and Johnson (1999), which is based on the previous research by Leibenstein (1950) is the Snob Effect. Crucial to mention it is its double origin which derives from interpersonal and personal dimensions. As a matter of fact, this effect involves personal and emotional aspects when seeking and buying exclusive products whereas at the same time it is influenced by other individuals’ behaviours (Mason, 1982).
For the sake of simplicity, the Snob Effect may arise in two cases: (1) in case of a launch of an exclusive product, the Snob will obtain the item as soon as possible to benefit from the limited number of consumers at that stage. (2) When “status sensitive consumers” start to reject a particular product whereas they notice it is consumed by “the general mass of people” (Mason 1981, 128).
Looking things a priori, a perceived limited supply of products makes the item exclusive. In fact, according to Verhallen (1982) and Pantzalis (1995) a perceived limited supply of products enhances the consumers’ value and preference for a certain brand, along with the opinion of Solomon (1994, 570) who says that “rare items command respect and prestige”.
These assumptions are coherent with psychologists Snyder and Fromkin (1977) who studied situations in which persons express a “need for uniqueness”. This need is the result of a constant process of comparison in a social environment (Festinger, 1954) where always a person’s desire has to be perceived as special and different from the ones of other people. Clearly what is above stated endorses the idea that the inbuilt limited supply and exclusiveness of fashion products would fulfill a need for uniqueness.
To conclude, Snob consumers have an inner oriented purchasing behaviour and they would identify price as a signal of exclusiveness and non-conformity. A logical consequence, and premise of this, is their habit of warding off popular brands in order to keep being unique (Mason, 1992) (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999).

C - The Bandwagon Effect - Perceived Social Value
The Bandwagon effect can be imagined as preceding the snob effect or co-existing with it (Rogers, 1983) (Miller, et al., 1993) (Berry, 1994). This quote from Dubois and Duquesne (1993) is emblematic for the description of this typology: “Even though snobs and followers buy luxury products for apparently opposite reasons, their basic motivation is really the same; whether through differentiation or group affiliation, they want to enhance their self-concept”.

It is worthwhile to mention the Belk’s (1988) notion of *extended self* to have an even better understanding of this typology. Belk’s (1988) notion of extended self may be useful to interpret the prestige value which fosters the bandwagon effect. He defines “the individual body as a part of the collective body”. In other terms, a prestige value (e.g. obtaining an exclusive pair of sneakers) which extends the owner’s identity by projecting it in a certain social group and making it part of it. The consumer’s ambition to acquire exclusive items can lead to a figurative acquisition of a coat of arms of group membership: “People who are concerned with social acceptance and conformity with affluent reference groups may value possessions that are more socially visible and expensive” (Eastman & Eastman, 2015).

As a result of this, the Bandwagon Effect can cause an individual to conform with exclusive groups in order to be different from non-exclusive reference group. In fact, it is important to consider in this case the reference theory as well in the analysis of consumer behaviour since it seems to have a central role in the exclusiveness consumption. The consumer can feel the problem of being under pressure of his/her own group standards and attracted by those ones from another reference group (Holt, 1995) (Hyman, 1942) and so on initiating a process of identity shift.

Festinger (1954) has proved that people tended to conform with the majority’s opinion of their membership groups when forming their own attitudes. Therefore, an individual may wear a certain model of sneaker during the week, to fit in his/her working environment, and use a lavish pair of shoes during the weekend, to match social standards of his/her group of friends. Hence, bandwagon shoppers may use the perceived extended-self value of exclusive brands to reinforce their self-concepts. If we look further through Kelman’s (1961) theory of opinion change, we notice that the absence or presence of reference groups could totally change the behaviour of the exclusiveness-seeker to ‘no-effect’ (internalisation) and total effect (compliance). Ergo, an actual exclusiveness of choice experienced in the former case and lack of it in the latter one.

The purchase of exclusive products is connected to a typology of materialistic consumer behavior in which consumers see exclusive items as indicators of personal or others’ exclusiveness. While materialism can give us a more general perspective on this topic, as we observed in chapter one, there are many reasons that can explain the purchasing decision of consumers in relation to exclusive products (e.g. superior quality, exclusiveness in terms of craftsmanship, etc.)

To conclude, Bandwagon consumers give less emphasis on price as a marker of exclusiveness, although they would give more importance to the impression that they make on others when, for instance, wearing exclusive shoes.
2.2 - Personal effects

Personal reasons to consume for status deal with the involvement of intrinsic values and preferences rather than the matters of the social environment. (O’Cass & Frost, 2002) (Tsai, 2005). Hence, there will be explained the emotional benefits or inner values of possessing exclusive products when dependent or independent from the consumption of other people. In particular, this internal examination of the consumer dynamics is based on the work of Vigneron & Johnson (1999) and O’Cass & Frost (2002). According to them there are three typologies of personal motivations originating from: (1) hedonism, (2) perfectionism and (3) self-reward.

A - The Hedonic Effect - Perceived Emotional Value

The research of Dichter (1960) was fundamental for questioning the idea that consumers’ decisions can be influenced by non-cognitive and unconscious motives. Thus, hedonistic consumers are motivated by a desire to acquire emotional benefits or to satisfy emotional needs.

If we have a look at luxury consumption, which is strictly related to exclusiveness, it is possible to see how luxury items are prone to give subjective intangible benefits to the possessor. Instead of buying for functional characteristics, individuals buy for subjective reasons, pleasure and a gratification of senses (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999) (Vickers & Renand, 2003) (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

For example, Dubois and Laurent (1994) talk about the emotional value deriving from the perceived utility acquired through luxury products: "... a vast majority subscribes to the hedonic motive ('One buys luxury goods primary for one's pleasure') and refutes the snobbish argument" (Dubois and Laurent, 1994, 275). Furthermore, it can also be said that emotional effects of consumption come from a sensory pleasure, i.e. its aesthetic beauty or the excitement of buying (Allérès, 1990) (Benarros-Dahan, 1991) (Fauchois & Krieg, 1991) (Roux & Floch, 1996).

In sum, the hedonic effect happens when consumers value the perceived utility acquired from an exclusive item to cause feelings and affective states (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999).

By virtue of this, hedonistic consumers are more focused on their own thoughts and feelings, consequently, for instance, they will pay less attention on price as an indicator of exclusiveness.

B - The Perfectionism Effect - Perceived Quality Value

We talk about “Perfectionism Effect” or “Quality Effect” when consumers consider the perceived usefulness of an exclusive product to offer superior product features and performance, namely a superior quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). The reason to buy exclusive items as an “assurance of quality as perfectionism” and that literally increases the value these products have (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999).

For instance, there can be cases in which consumers have pleasure before the actual purchase (e.g. queuing in front of a sneaker store in order to obtain the beloved pair of shoes). It should be kept in mind that quality is a sine qua non condition for this typology of consumer and that this continuous search makes the consumer extremely picky.

According to Groth and McDaniel (1993, 10) "high prices may even make certain products or services more desirable" due to the fact that persons identify higher prices as a clue of better quality (Rao & Monroe, 1989). Derived from these studies, it can be said that the perceived quality can be used by the customers to assess the level of exclusiveness of certain products.

Ergo, consumers who evaluate the value of exclusiveness in relation to the level of quality reassurance expected from a product may represent the perfectionist typology of consumers.
In sum, perfectionist consumers have a subjective perception of the product's quality, thus, the indicators of exclusiveness, such as the price, can vary and be an extra hint which supports the search for quality.

**C - Self-Concept leading to Self-Reward**

According to O’Cass and Frost (2002) a third internal reason to consume for status is to fortify one’s own self-image through self-reward. As Sirgy’s affirms in his conceptualisation (1982) about this topic, self-concept connects all the thoughts and feelings of a person in regard to himself/herself as an object and “there are different views of self” that are driven by different kind of self-concept reasons: (1) self-esteem reason and (2) self-consistency reason. Basically, consumers buy products which can enhance, define or represent themselves, and, by using these products, they can communicate their own self-concept to the external world. Solomon (1983, p. 323) gives an analogous point of view when he says that an individual’s self-concept is “a result of appraisals, both real and imagined by the self and others, of how one appears to others.”

As a common denominator of this double internal perspective, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) simply affirm that persons select products which are coherent with their own self-image (Tsai, 2005) (Fionda & Moore, 2009). We can insist even more on this and mention Kastanalis and Balabanis (2012, 1401) who reaffirm that “individuals have a perceived self-image relating to their self-concept and attempt to preserve, enhance, alter, or extend this image by purchasing and using products that they consider relevant”. Consumers who have a more independent self-concept⁶ (or self-product congruity) show their own personality by the typology of their purchases, whereas those ones with a more interdependent self-concept are more concerned with the social function of the consumption itself (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

**Conclusion**

What analysed so far in this chapter could be simplified by saying that individuals with internal motivations to consume for status may be more interested in quality, whereas those ones with external motivations may be more interested in status products and their meaning in the social context. In the next page, it is possible to see a diagram (Eastman & Eastman, 2015, 4) which recapitulates all the above-mentioned dynamics of status consumption.

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⁶ This typology of consumers use products to enhance their self-concept or reward themselves.
Fig. 2 – Conceptual model of status consumption by Eastman (2015:4)
2.3 - The Involvement concept

The concept of involvement will be studied and used as a tool that can help us to understand the relationship between consumers and products. By investigating the involvement construct we can discern the type and the level of attachment which consumers have towards goods and, in turn, see the causes of it. Along with that, it will possible to better qualify the purchasing motivations and so on explain the consumption behaviour through statistical analysis later in the test phase.

Understanding how involved consumers grow into the idea of possessing a pair of sneakers gives us a more accurate view in regards to the meanderings of consumer behaviour and the role played by exclusive sneakers in the market.

If we semantically analyse this word, the research is going to be even clearer. The Oxford dictionary defines involvement as “an emotional or personal association with someone (or something)”. Seen from this perspective, it is possible to introduce related concepts such as meaningfulness and relevance which help us to understand it from a broader perspective. According to what stated, involvement can be said to define how a certain product is relevant for consumers in regards to its meaningfulness. The ‘how’ is the extent to which the goods correspond to the consumers’ self-concept and view on life. In fact, the more brands and items are thought to be as an affirmation of the self, the higher the probability of repeat purchases of similar goods or from the same brand (O’Cass & Julian, 2001). If there will be changes in the level of involvement, they are usually caused by shifting values and needs in the consumer mindset (O’Cass, 2000:549). Kim (2005:208) affirms that distinctive typologies of product involvement can derive from the importance of purchasing a proper product for a specific circumstance or when certain product characteristics are “symbolic of one’s identity”.

As it was said, involvement is connected to different referential frameworks. Consequently, different types and levels of involvement can be distinguished when it comes to purchases of either functional or symbolic goods.

O’Cass and Julian (2001:2) talk about involvement as a construct used to describe the degree to which certain brands or product groups constitute engaging and focal activities for a person through showing his/her inherent needs, values and interests (Maltzahn, 2013) (Zaichkowsky, 1985:342). Furthermore, Perez Cabañero (2006:75), underlines that involvement is attached to an assessment of the importance of the stimulus received, thus, it also causes certain types of behaviour and agency.

A further analysis is required to understand the different typologies of involvement and so on to have diverse perspectives.

2.3.1 - Different categorisations of involvement (Maltzahn, 2013:24)

Maltzahn (2013:24) mentions different categorisations of involvement which are all displayed in the next paragraphs. Yet only the purchased related involvement will be used for the subsequent phase due to its easier applicability to the concept of exclusiveness in the sneaker market.

A - Purchase related involvement

Laurent & Kapferer’s classification (1985), refined by von Maltzahn (2013), enunciates four different dimensions of consumer involvement:

1) **Product Knowledge** - The perceived relevance of the product or the meaningfulness of it for the consumer. It concerns the extent to which consumers show attachment towards the concrete
product. In other words, it is about how much the consumer is motivated in acquiring a certain amount of information about the product and eventually proceeding with the final purchase of it. The logical consequence is that the more knowledge consumers are willing to gain in regards to a product, the higher their involvement towards it.

(2) Alternative Evaluation - The sensed risk connected to the acquisition of the product, which has two aspects (Bauer, 1967): (A) the perceived relevance of negative consequences in case of poor choice, and (B) the perceived probability of making such a mistake. In other terms, it concerns the extent to which consumers look for alternatives in the same market cluster. The more consumers are involved with a certain type of product, the more probable they are to compare different brands and products before the purchase of it. Hence, the more probable it will be an analysis of the purchased product a posteriori in order to make a better decision for the next product to buy.

(3) Perception of Brand Differences – It concerns the extent to which consumers effectively perceive differences between brands and make this diversity a sine qua non condition for the purchasing choice. In this dimension, there are high levels of involvement towards certain brands within a specific product group. By virtue of that, these brands are subject to a close examination and a firm conviction. Laurent and Kapferer (1985) define this typology of involvement as central for the symbolic value attributed by the consumer to the product, its purchase, or its consumption.

(4) Brand Preference – It concerns the degree to which consumers are devoted specifically to one or more brands or buy often several items from the same label. The higher the level of involvement is, the stronger the level of brand loyalty will be. In this dimension factors such as the hedonic value of the product, its emotional appeal, its ability to provide pleasure and affect play a pivotal role.

B - Time related involvement

Rothschild (1979:75) defines 3 different types of involvement: situational (SI), response (RI), and enduring involvement (EI). “SI and RI are temporary states of involvement while EI is also intrinsically motivated and related to a person’s cognition” (Maltzahn, 2013). By virtue of that, the latter type of involvement is the one that concerns this thesis since the goal in this circumstance is to understand the consumer’s purchasing behaviour when related to his/her perception of the concept of exclusiveness. Referring to enduring involvement, it describes the way consumers link individual needs, ambitions, and personal background to items as source of stimuli over a long time.

C – Brand involvement vs product involvement

A further distinction can be done between brand involvement and product involvement. While brand involvement relates to a brand-specific kind of involvement (e.g. Nike fan), product involvement considers an entire product category (e.g. sneakers, technical shoes, etc.). Hence, the consumer’s
attachment comes from “motivational states of interest and arousal which are evoked by internal factors (e.g. values, ego) and external factors (e.g. product design, situation, communication)” (Maltzahn, 2013).

**D - Looking good vs being fashionable** (Maltzahn, 2013)

Since we are digging into the sneaker culture, which is heavily based on the culture of ‘hype’, a further discrimination should be done between clothing involvement and fashion involvement. Maltzahn (2013:25-26) compares them to the dichotomy of “looking good vs being fashionable”. On the one hand ‘being fashionable’ expresses the desire of a person to keep up with external trends and it is driven by “the commonly shared interest within a specific cultural group” (Maltzahn, 2013:25). On the other hand, ‘looking good’, which can be influenced as well by the ambition to emulate present taste, focuses more on the intrinsic characteristics of the product before the final purchasing choice. This dichotomy of extrinsic vs intrinsic aspects of involvement can be easily linked to the one previously seen when the concept of exclusiveness was examined.
3 – What are the dimensions of exclusiveness in the sneaker market?

After the previous theoretical examination, it is time to find out how these academic concepts can be applied into the sneaker market which is the practical field of investigation of this thesis. Yet first, a brief story of the sneaker phenomenon is necessary.

How did we arrive at this historical moment?

The word ‘sneaker’ is credited to the American Henry Nelson McKinney who was an advertising agent and popularised the phrase way back in 1917. He used the word to name this kind of footwear whose rubber sole made the shoe sneaking and so on stealthy, but, for the sake of truth, the word has been used since approximately 1887. Initially the word “sneakers” indicated how noiseless the rubber soles were on the ground, in opposite to loud classic hard leather soles. People wearing sneakers could literally ‘sneak up’ on someone else for that time collective imagination, whereas persons wearing classic shoes could not. Since Marquis Converse founded his renowned company, sneakers have changed their use from the playground all the way to the contemporary runways ("Sneakerheadz", 2015).

At that time consumers had quite less options, mostly Converse and later on Pro Keds. All Stars were everywhere, in high or low top, and only made of canvas. Things changed when the German company Adidas, founded originally by the Dassler Brothers, introduced leather and suede sneakers into the market in the early 1970s. When professional basketball players in the famous Harlem Rucker Tournament started using them, a completely new era for footwear started. Sport influenced profoundly consumers since it stopped being along the way just about athletics, it became pop culture ("Sneakerheadz", 2015). People looked at sneaker culture and made it mean something more than just a shoe with functional features.

The early '80s saw the rise of brands like Reebok and Puma, but the real turning point moments for the world of sneakers happened in the middle of the 1980s. On September 15th of 1984, the first Air Jordan was launched and Nike, on one hand created a revolutionary new basketball shoe, on the other one made the sneaker market coming to the world. This new market was strengthened even more two years later, when the hip-hop trio Run-D.M.C. released their famous song “My Adidas” and during one of their concerts at Madison Square Garden encouraged about 16,000 fans to hold up their Adidas. Run-D.M.C. had the first endorsement deal for a non-athlete with a million-dollar contract with Adidas. Afterwards hip-hop started going mainstream, then what rappers wore started going mainstream and here we are. As well for Elliott Curtis, co-founder of Sneakerology and a sneakerhead himself, the origins of this phenomenon are definitely traceable to the growth of hip-hop which was one of the turning points. A watershed in a moment “where white kids in the suburbs didn't want to look preppy anymore and wanted to have a little more flavor because they loved the music” ("Sneakerheadz", 2015). As a result of this they started dress like their favourite artists and bought the same model of sneakers.

All these media events in this era contributed to the explosion of signature “kicks” which provided the necessary components to the birth of a community where the goal was to wear the freshest, hardest-to-find, limited edition styles that have become quasi-sacred objects.

Rob Dyrdek, skateboarder and important exponent of the sneaker culture, affirms that sneaker changed the world. “As hip-hop emerged and this new style culture that came along with the Jordans,

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1 The Boston Journal referred to "sneakers" as "the name boys give to tennis shoes" (Wikipedia, s.d.).
2 In sneaker culture argot "kicks" means sneakers.
skateboarding came along the same way and blended all aspects of design and street culture. Hip-hop, skateboarding, and sneakers have changed the world”. Athletes wanted to be rappers, rappers wanted to be athletes and later on many of them ended up having a clothing line and a record deal. Jon Wexler, vice president of Global Entertainment and Influencer Marketing at Adidas, said that those things are seamless now, they are all really merged. Music is playing a fundamental role in our cultural wheel so consumers pay attention to what musicians are doing and emulate them. They are idols and icons, hence for consumers buying a sneaker is basically having a piece of them that they can take home. History, technology, design, celebrities, retail, business, all packaged into one subject, one culture that a lot of people can relate to even if they are not collectors: the sneaker culture. What started as a subculture is everywhere nowadays.

Crossing exclusiveness with the consumer archetypes

In order to study the presence of exclusiveness in the sneaker market, the characteristics previously explained were adapted and applied to the different consumer’s dimensions which, in turn, generated six typologies of sneaker consumer, three molded mostly by the social context and three by the consumer’s inner values.

3.1 – Interpersonal effects – the sneaker consumer & the society

Here the consumption activity is influenced by the external environment and it aims the attention at the social effects of possessing exclusive products instead of the emotional benefits or inner values coming from them. Mason (1992), along with other scholars, sees products as a signal to others of wealth and success, exclusivity and/or personal identity (Berger & Ward, 2010) (Hudders, 2012). By virtue of the theories previously mentioned, three main categories were identified: (1) conspicuous consumption (the Veblen Effect)\(^9\); (2) exclusivity (The Snob Effect); and (3) fitting in by social norms (The Bandwagon Effect)\(^10\). In every of these interpersonal effects symbolism plays a pivotal role. As Solomon (1983) affirms that members of a community assess persons based on the products they consume, in turn, this psychological transfer is used to create an individual’s own social identity. In fact, the process of consumption let consumers “integrate self and object, thereby allowing themselves access to the object’s symbolic properties and these properties can serve to classify consumers to build affiliations and/or enhance distinctions” (Christodoulides, et al., 2009) (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012) (Holt, 1995, p. 2) (Eastman & Eastman, 2015).

In the next paragraphs you will see the first three externally shaped sneaker consumer profiles.

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\(^9\)Many writers contested Veblen’s theory but for this paper the limitations of it are circumscribed to the use done by Vigneron & Johnson (1999).

\(^10\)Needless to say that consumers shift easily to different categories.
1 - The Veblen effect – Perceived Conspicuous Value: ‘the peacock’

A typology interested in the social impact of their product consumption (Mason, 1981) (Mason, 1992) (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). The characteristics which are sought by these consumers are: symbolicity, design, reputation and price. As a consequence, these consumers are driven by a yearning desire for possessing a symbolical sneaker which evokes a superior social status. This high-class status is given to the sneakers by virtue of the fact that they have been worn by today idols/role models (e.g. artists, influencer, actors, etc). The design, chosen not for to hedonistic reasons, is a clear signal of distinction from the mass which the consumer does not want to belong to. The prestigious reputation of a certain shoe along with the high price contribute to enhance the social status of the owner and let him feel more exclusive and so on superior (Erickson & Johansson, 1985) (Lichtenstein, et al., 1988) (Tellis & Gaeth, 1990). For instance, the Air Yeezy 2 “Red October” (fig.3) by Kanye West (fig.4), released in 2014 for $245, now has a resell price of about 5500$\(^{11}\). This example embodies the typical shoe this consumer would look for.

In order to give a nomenclature to this typology of consumer we could compare him/her to the peacock, the well-known bird famous for its habit of showing off its feathers to impress its similars.

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\(^{11}\) For further information on the price check the following link: https://stockx.com/air-yeezy-2-red-october
2 - The Snob Effect - Perceived Unique Value: ‘the connoisseur’

This typology is interested in the uniqueness of their product consumption. They are driven by personal motives when seeking and buying exclusive sneakers and at the same time they are influenced by other individuals’ behaviours. This is due to a “need for uniqueness” (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) which causes a constant process of comparison in a social environment (Festinger, 1954). As a result of that, scarcity and peculiarity of a sneaker model would fulfill their need for uniqueness. In addition to that, they would look for a pair of the shoe whose design is recognisable for its exclusiveness even without seeing an evident proof (Catry, 2003); (Hanna, 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009). In fact, these consumers are connoisseurs and, most of all, they are truly aware of that, which in turn makes them looking down their nose at everyone else. As already said, they do not even try to compete for “high awareness beyond their relatively narrow target group of select insiders” (Heine, 2012). Due to this, they do not seek for values such as “reputation” or “symbolicity” but they are simply covetous to keep their level of exclusiveness high since they pursue uniqueness. Furthermore, it is important to mention that, since they have an inner oriented buying behaviour, price and PDO12 are seen as a marker of exclusivity and non-conformity. Ergo, buying, for instance, a pair of Nike which has a protected designation of origin, such as ‘Designed in Italy’ would be a perfect pair of shoes to aim to.

Further examples are two apparently classic models, the New Balance 999 “Kennedy” (fig.5-6) and Air Max 1 x Parra ‘Albert Heijn’ (fig.7). The former was designed by the infamous Frank the Butcher when he was working for Concrete and it was named after J.F. Kennedy as inspired his family and the Massachusetts's rich sailing history. The latter was designed by the famous Dutch designer Piet Parra for the local supermarket chain ‘Albert Heijn’ and produced in only 24 pieces worldwide. All of them rare shoes, with designed features only recognizable by connoisseurs and with clear associations with specific country of origin (i.e. Usa and the Netherlands).

---

12 ‘Protected Designation of Origin’
3 - The Bandwagon Effect - Perceived Social Value: ‘the processional moth’

This typology of consumers buys consciously or unconsciously for group affiliation in order to enhance their self-concepts (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993). The consumer’s ambition to acquire items can be a figurative coat of arms of group membership. “People who are concerned with social acceptance and conformity with affluent reference groups may value possessions that are more socially visible and expensive” (Eastman & Eastman, 2015).

Consequently, the Bandwagon Effect can cause an individual to conform with exclusive groups in order to be different from non-exclusive reference group. Thus, the individual can feel the problem of being under pressure of his/her own group standards and attracted by those ones from another reference group (Holt, 1995) (Hyman, 1942) and so on initiating a process of identity shift. They can achieve that through the acquisition of what-are-thought-to-be symbolical shoes such as the Yeezy Boost 350 (fig.8-9), famous for their design and their pure streetwear connotation. Since they follow trends and trendsetters, they were metaphorically named ‘processional moth’ as the insect which follows its leading counterpart during the journey of becoming a fully-grown moth.

If we look further through Kelman’s (1961) theory of opinion change, we notice that the presence or absence of reference groups could totally change the behaviour of the exclusive-seeker to ‘no-effect’ (internalization) and total effect (compliance). Ergo, an actual exclusiveness experienced in the former case and lack of it in the latter one, namely the case of the ‘processional moth’ consumer.

To conclude, Bandwagon consumers give less emphasis on price as a marker of exclusiveness, although they will put a greater attachment to the impression they make on others when, for instance, wearing exclusive shoes.
3.2 – Personal effect - the sneaker consumer & the self

Here, there will be explained the emotional benefits or inner values of possessing exclusive products when dependent or independent from the consumption of other people. According to Vigneron & Johnson (1999) and O’Cass & Frost (2002) theories, three typologies of inner-motivated sneaker consumer can be identified: (1) hedonic; (2) perfectionist and (3) self-rewarder. Hence, from those, three sneaker consumer profiles were delineated.

1 - The Hedonic Effect - Perceived Emotional Value: ‘the hedonist’

Hedonist consumers are generally motivated by a desire to acquire emotional benefits or to satisfy emotional needs (Dichter, 1960). These emotions can originate from any sneaker which could potentially please them aesthetically (e.g. a certain design) but through other sources of aesthetic gratification (e.g. craftsmanship, peculiarity, PDO and symbolicity). Rather than buying for functional reasons, these consumers are driven by subjective motives which in turn give them a sense of pleasure and a gratification of senses. All these aspects are part of a subjective taste about beauty, a beauty arising from the aspects that the consumer could values as meaningful in relation to pleasure. As a result of this, hedonistic consumers can give more importance to the aesthetical part than to other features when choosing an exclusive pair of sneakers to buy. A blatant example of this case can be the case of the Jeremy Scott x Adidas Originals “Wings 2.0” (fig.10-11), where personal taste in regards of beauty clearly plays a central role in the acquisition of them.

In sum, the hedonic effect happens when consumers value the perceived utility acquired from an exclusive item coming from a subjective aspect of beauty, which, in turn, can cause feelings and affective states (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999).

By virtue of this, hedonistic consumers are more focused on their own thoughts and feelings, consequently, for instance, they will pay less attention on price as an indicator of exclusiveness.
2 - The Perfectionism Effect - Perceived Quality Value: ‘the zealot’
We talk about “perfectionism effect” when consumers consider the perceived usefulness of an exclusive product to offer superior product features and performance, namely a superior quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999) (e.g. premium materials, functional design and better production techniques, i.e. craftsmanship). The reason to buy exclusive sneakers as an “assurance of quality” literally increases the value these products can have for the perfection-seeker (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999) and consequently it was decided to name him/her zealot as to underline the fanaticism for these aspects. It should be kept in mind that quality is a sine qua non condition for this typology of consumer and that this continuous pursuing makes the consumer extremely picky.
The zealot would aim to buy a pair of sneakers with these extra features and would also pay attention to the price aspect as, according to Rao & Monroe (1989), persons identify higher prices as a clue of better quality. Derived from these studies, it can be said that the quality perceived feature can be used by customer to assess the level of exclusiveness of a certain pair of sneakers since not every sneaker can have this exclusive superior quality.
Ergo, consumers who evaluate the value of exclusive sneakers in relation to the level of reassuring premium quality may represent the ‘zealot’ typology of consumers.
A ‘perfect’ example of ‘superior quality’ sneakers could be the Nike Air Max 1 “Master” (fig.12-13), launched in spring 2017 for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Air Max 1. They were made out different premium fabrics coming from the most iconic Air Max 1s.
3 - Self-Concept leading to Self-Reward: ‘the insecure’

According to O’Cass and Frost (2002) a third internal reason for the consumer to buy is to fortify one’s own self-image through self-reward.

As Sirgy’s affirms in his conceptualisation (1982) about this topic, self-concept connects all the thoughts and feelings of a person in regards to himself/herself as an object since “there are different views of the self” which are driven by different kind of self-concept reasons: (1) self-esteem reason and (2) self-consistency reason. Referring to the object of investigation, consumers buy sneakers which can enhance, define or represent themselves, and, by using these products, they can communicate their own self-concept to the external world. Solomon (1983, p. 323) gives an analogous point of view when he says that an individual’s self-concept is “a result of appraisals, both real and imagined by the self and others, of how one appears to others.” Ergo, appraisals of buying sneakers which, in turn, give you a real and an imaginary experience via your own self and via other people’s reaction. One after another these experiences will help the individual in defining his/her own personality.

Finally, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) simplify this all idea, namely they affirm that persons select products which are coherent with their own self-image (Tsai, 2005) (Fionda & Moore, 2009). As a consequence, consumers who have a more independent self-concept (or self-product congruity) show their own personality by the typology of their purchases, whereas those ones with a more interdependent self-concept are more concerned with the social function of the consumption itself (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

From a bigger perspective, it is possible to notice that the common denominator of these perspectives, it is the consumer’s lack of self-confidence, an internal and external insecurity. Hence, it was decided to name this consumer ‘insecure’ to reflect his/her defining peculiarity. A good example of shoes that the insecure could buy would be the Nike x Supreme Uptempo (see fig.14-15). On the one hand they can embody this desire of self-enhancement by lifting up the social status of the owner due to the reputation of the brand Supreme. On the other one they would make the consumer feel part of an exclusive community of sneakerheads, hence its social position would be helped in being defined.

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This typology of consumers use products to enhance their self-concept or reward themselves.
Consumption of exclusiveness in the sneaker market

External dependence
- the Peacock (Veblen effect)
- the Connoisseur (Snob effect)
- the Processional Moth (Bandwagon effect)

Internal dependence
- the Hedonist (Hedonic effect)
- the Zealot (Perfectionism effect)
- the Insecure (Self-reward effect)

Consumption of exclusiveness in the sneaker market
- Public consumption
- Conspicuous consumption
- Private consumption
- Subtle consumption

Fig. 16 - Conceptual model of exclusiveness consumption in the sneaker market, inspired by Eastman & Eastman (2015)
4 – ‘Inveniendum’ exclusiveness in sneaker market: seeking the truth

The purpose of this study was to explore and question the concept of exclusiveness in the sneaker market. The investigation was done through a nethnographic study via a questionnaire posted on an online Facebook group, namely ‘Drug Fashion Club’. The previously mentioned community focuses its interest on streetwear with an additional attention for haute couture and luxury brands as embedded in today’s fashion streetwear scene. The group is an extremely active online community which counts 30k members within its ranks. The topics conversed on this forum range from general discussions about new releases to advices about outfits and buying/selling posts.

4.1 – Demographics

The total respondents were 579, within these 93,4% were males and 6,6% females. 64,4% was between 18-24 years old, 24,40% between 12-17 years old, 8,5% between 25-34 years old and only 2,5% was over 34 years old.

4.2 - How exclusiveness in sneakers is perceived

By virtue of the responses in regards to extrinsic and intrinsic features (Heine, 2012) of a sneaker we can draw interesting conclusions about the perception of exclusiveness. As we can see, exclusiveness is mostly perceived as something arising from external causes (see fig.15) which are not innate in the object itself but instead they are connected to its external image. In other terms, quality, craftsmanship, PDO and peculiarity are less important than features attributable to a social external context. Thanks to this, we could generally define an exclusive sneaker as ‘a limited-edition (scarcity 90%) shoe with a particular design (69,1%) and a high symbolical value (72,6%) which carries a specific reputation (74,8%) and is expensive (60,1%).

Scarcity is the most requested characteristic (90%), hence we could assume an extreme need for uniqueness of products. A self-referring uniqueness, innate in the object, since it is completely detached from other characteristics (e.g. PDO or quality), thus, we could posit the importance of an exclusive pair of sneakers merely because they are rare and can provide to the wearer a distinction from the ‘mass’. Connected to that, design is remarkably sought after by consumers (69,10%). Substantially design and scarcity are the most noticeable characteristics by a non-expert eye (e.g. a lavish sneaker rarely seen around), ergo it could show how important it is to appear unique and different in today’s fashion scene (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). These characteristics sought after by this ‘widespread conspicuous consumer’ could be argued to be demanded also by a niche consumer, namely the connoisseur, as his previously illustrated description showed.

Furthermore, the great importance given to symbolicity and reputation, both non-functional factors, can confirm that today’s sneaker consumer is shifting towards a more postmodern identity since in the purchasing choice the importance lies on the experience instead that on the product.
**Extrinsic features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>31.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolicity</td>
<td>72.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>69.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>74.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsmanship</td>
<td>56.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDO (Protected Designation of Origin)</td>
<td>47.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>60.70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intrinsic features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>90.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peculiarity</td>
<td>32.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3 – Which kind of consumer buys exclusive sneakers?

In the previous chapter, six categories of sneaker consumer were created by applying academic theory and ethno/nethnographic research (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). According to the former one, questions were designed ad hoc to delineate the archetypes of sneaker consumers who seek for exclusiveness on the basis of external or internal drivers. For the sake of precision, it must be mentioned that a consumer can often ‘change’ the reason of his/her purchase, in other words, he/she can skillfully switch his/her consumption identity, a fortiori in today’s postmodern consumption era with its unstable and constantly in flux identities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) (Goulding, et al., 2002).

Going into details (see fig.16), in relation to the external environment, consumers of exclusive sneakers were mostly *connoisseurs* (51.2%). This consumer category is the one that hypothetically most strongly strives for exclusiveness and might be the one that sets the trend for the *peacocks* (22.6%) and the *processional moths* (7.2%). The fact that the highest percentage is made of connoisseurs, the exclusiveness seekers par excellence, is a clear indicator of how craved is the “need for uniqueness” (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) in the contemporary streetwear scene. Yet in the next paragraph we will see how actually exclusiveness is truly sought after by each of these categories by means of a statistical analysis.

In relation to the self, we could argue that the need for exclusiveness and uniqueness related to style and image could be driven by insecurity and aesthetical reasons (respectively 67.90% for the *insecure* and 61.10% for the *hedonist*). On the opposite, the *zealots*, consumers who really care about the product and are less influenced by the social context, had reached only 14.3%. This major focus on building your own exclusive identity as an individual is corroborated by the small quantity of *processional moths* (7.20%), although we could argue that all the remaining types of consumers are as well the product of influencing forces and so on not so exclusive individuals.

As Agatha Christie used to say that one clue is a just a clue and two are a coincidence, what could we say about three clues? We simply have more probabilities that what we are assuming would correspond...
to the truth. Namely, if we consider the concept of involvement by von Maltzahn (2013) used for this survey as well, we can refine the profile of today’s sneaker consumers. The implementation of the above-mentioned theory shows that what makes exclusive a pair of sneakers is caused mostly by external factors and not internal ones, which are part of the product itself (i.e. best price-performance ratio 34.8% and uniqueness of features 51.6%) (Fig.17). In fact, it is noticeable a recurrent attention to either a specific brand (71.30%) or to a particular-exclusive model of shoe (92.5%). Ergo, we can argue how the sought-after exclusiveness is not intrinsically related to the product (92.5%) as an object but it could be more driven by the external environment which contributes to make the object unique (e.g. unique symbolical value). Furthermore, we can see how remarkably postmodern the consumer is in the pursue of exclusiveness in streetwear, i.e. experiential factors prevail over functional ones (i.e. brand fans) (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Fig.18 – Typologies of sneaker consumer resulting from the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In relation to the external environment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>22.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connoisseur</td>
<td>51.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processional Moth</td>
<td>7.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In relation to the self</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedonist</td>
<td>61.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zealot</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure</td>
<td>67.90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.19 – Typologies of sneaker consumer involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement (Maltzahn, 2013)</th>
<th>Interest in a specific model</th>
<th>Best price-performance ratio</th>
<th>Uniqueness of features</th>
<th>Brand fans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92.50%</td>
<td>34.80%</td>
<td>51.60%</td>
<td>71.30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4 – Testing the sneaker consumer archetypes

For the sake of truth, the previously postulated archetypes of sneaker consumer were tested as well in order prove their actual existence. The results of the consumer-related questions were crossed with the ones in regards to the product features, features which vary per each hypothesised category. As already said, the purpose was to see how each typology was actually matching the archetype. Each of the 579 respondents was singularly considered per single answer and so on included in a specific category.

**Hypothesis 1 – The peacock consumer looks for symbolicity, particular design, brand value and expensiveness when purchasing exclusive sneakers.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peacock (Q10)</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>22.63%</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>77.10%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>70.99%</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>79.39%</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matches hypotheses</td>
<td></td>
<td>69.85%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

symbolicity = 77.1%, design = 70.99%, brand value = 79.39%, price = 51.91%

average typology match = 69.85%

**Hypothesis 2 – The connoisseur consumer looks for particular designs, PDO, expensiveness, limited-edition and peculiarity when purchasing exclusive sneakers.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connoisseur (Q11)</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>51.06%</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>73.74%</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>59.51%</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>59.60%</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>96.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matches hypotheses</td>
<td></td>
<td>63.47%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

design = 73.7%, PDO = 50.5%, price = 59.6%, scarcity = 90.5%, peculiarity = 42.9%

average typology match = 63.47%
Hypothesis 3 – The processional mouth consumer looks for symbolicity, particular design and brand value when purchasing exclusive sneakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processional Moth</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7,25%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>90,48%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matches hypotheses: **81,75%**  
Correlation: Q13, Q2, Q4, Q3

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

symbolicity = 90,4%, design = 71,4%, brand value = 83,3%

average typology match = 81,75%


Hypothesis 4 – The hedonist consumer looks for symbolicity, particular design, craftsmanship and peculiarity when purchasing exclusive sneakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedonist (Q14)</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>61,14%</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>74,86%</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>72,03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matches hypotheses: **59,04%**  
Correlation: Q14, Q2, Q3

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

symbolicity = 74,8%, design = 72%, craftsmanship = 56,7%, peculiarity = 32,4%

average typology match = 59,04%


Hypothesis 5 – The zealot consumer looks for quality, particular design, craftsmanship and expensiveness when purchasing exclusive sneakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zealot (Q15)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14,34%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44,5%</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>78,31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matches hypotheses: **65,06%**  
Correlation: Q5, Q3, Q5

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

quality = 44,5%, design = 78,3%, craftsmanship = 75,9%, price = 61,4%

average typology match = 65,04%
Hypothesis 6 – The insecure consumer looks for symbolicity, brand value, limited-edition and peculiarity when purchasing exclusive sneakers.

Correspondences to the hypothesised definition:

symbolicity = 72,7%, brand value = 75,3%, scarcity = 92,6%, peculiarity = 32,5%

average typology match = 68,32%

Since all of the postulated categories had quite high average typology match values, the lowest was the hedonist (59,04%) and the highest the processional moth (81,7%), it is possible to affirm that the probability of their existence is high. For instance, we can affirm that there are good chances that the peacock (69,85%) would look for the specific hypothesised sneaker features.
4.5 – Factorial analysis

An analysis via a statistical software, namely SPSS, was done in order to establish specific latent behavioural patterns. By virtue of that, it was found out which are the components of each consumer category that contribute to define what exclusiveness is in relation to each one of them. Furthermore, it was found out which are the components that define exclusiveness overall as a general concept in the sneaker market.

All values > or = to 0.45 were taken into consideration for the definition of the object of investigation. Hence, after each table it is possible to read a definition which summarises the findings by using the most relevant values.

The peacock

Component 1: peacock, symbolical value, reputation (brand value) and price

C1 – “The peacock is a consumer who mainly looks for high symbolicity, high brand value (reputation) and expensiveness when buying a pair of sneakers with scarce interest in regards to the design of them”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 - I feel more confident with flashy sneakers since they are worn by high-class people.</td>
<td>.473</td>
<td>.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.</td>
<td>.640</td>
<td>.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - The brand value of sneaker brands or models makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of Air Yeezy 2 SP 'Red October' or of Balenciaga's 'Arena').</td>
<td>.636</td>
<td>-.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - The price of sneakers plays a central role in making them exclusive (e.g. a 700€ pair of sneakers, original/resale price, is particularly exclusive).</td>
<td>.585</td>
<td>-.110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The connoisseur

Pattern Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 - I buy sneakers whose exclusivity can be understood only by knowledgeable people (e.g. a special edition of Nike Air Max, apparently ordinary).</td>
<td>-1,131</td>
<td>0,609</td>
<td>0,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td>-0,027</td>
<td>0,719</td>
<td>-0,078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - The production of sneakers in a certain country makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of sneakers made in Italy vs a pair made China).</td>
<td>0,168</td>
<td>0,532</td>
<td>-0,163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - The price of sneakers plays a central role in making them exclusive (e.g. a 700€ pair of sneakers, original/resale price, is particularly exclusive).</td>
<td>0,806</td>
<td>-0,024</td>
<td>-0,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - The fact that a sneaker is hard to come by on the market makes it exclusive (e.g. a limited edition, a special edition, etc.).</td>
<td>0,733</td>
<td>0,069</td>
<td>0,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - The particular features of sneakers don't make them exclusive (e.g. a sneaker made out of a leather tanned in Scotland).</td>
<td>0,132</td>
<td>-0,197</td>
<td>0,833</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component 2: connoisseur, design, PDO
Component 3: connoisseur, peculiarity

C2 – “The connoisseur is a consumer who mainly looks for particularly designed sneakers with a specific origin of production. Furthermore he/she does not consider price, scarcity and peculiarity as indicators if exclusiveness”.

C3 – “Connoisseurs only focus on peculiarity of materials when buying a pair of sneakers without considering anything else”.
The processional moth

Pattern Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design</td>
<td>.258</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.</td>
<td>.734</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - The brand value of sneaker brands or models makes them exclusive</td>
<td>.590</td>
<td>-.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. a pair of Air Yeezy 2 SP 'Red October' or of Balenciaga's 'Arena').</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - My desire to buy a certain pair of sneakers is connected to the fact</td>
<td>.591</td>
<td>.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that my group of friends owns them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component 1: processional moth, symbolicity, brand value (reputation)

C1 – “The processional moth consumer looks for symbolicity and brand value when buying a pair of sneakers without really considering the aesthetical aspect”.
The hedonist

Pattern Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 - I buy sneakers purely for aesthetic reasons (e.g. a particular design makes my sneakers more exclusive).</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.</td>
<td>-.213</td>
<td>.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - The fact that sneakers are handmade makes them exclusive (e.g. made by expert artisans).</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td>-.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - The particular features of sneakers don't make them exclusive (e.g. a sneaker made out of a leather tanned in Scotland).</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>-.067</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component 2: hedonist, symbolicity, design

C2 – “The hedonist consumer looks for symbolicity and particular aesthetic when buying a pair of sneakers”.

47
### The perfectionist

#### Pattern Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 - I buy exclusive sneakers only for their superior performance.</td>
<td>0.592</td>
<td>-0.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - The quality of sneakers is related to their exclusivity (e.g. premium leather).</td>
<td>0.585</td>
<td>0.252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - The fact that sneakers are handmade makes them exclusive (e.g. made by expert artisans).</td>
<td>0.662</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - The price of sneakers plays a central role in making them exclusive (e.g. a 700€ pair of sneakers, original/resale price, is particularly exclusive).</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>0.950</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component 1: perfectionist, quality, design, craftsmanship

C1 – “The perfectionist consumer looks quality, particular designed and handmade shoes when buying a pair of sneakers”.
The insecure

Pattern Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 - A pair of exclusive sneakers can improve a person's self-confidence and happiness.</td>
<td>0.420</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.</td>
<td>0.629</td>
<td>0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - The brand value of sneaker brands or models makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of Air Yeezy 2 SP 'Red October' or of Balenciaga's 'Arena').</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - The fact that a sneaker is hard to come by on the market makes it exclusive (e.g. a limited edition, a special edition, etc.).</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - The particular features of sneakers don't make them exclusive (e.g. a sneaker made out of a leather tanned in Scotland).</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component 1: insecure\(^{14}\), symbolicity, brand value (reputation), scarcity

C1 – “The insecure consumer looks for high symbolicity, high brand value and limited editions when buying a pair of sneakers”.

\(^{14}\) For practical reasons, the insecure with a value of 0.42 was taken into consideration even if it was inferior to 0.45. Ergo, it could be argued that the subsistence of this component might require a further investigation.
Exclusiveness in the sneaker market

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern Matrix</th>
<th>Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - The quality of sneakers is related to their exclusivity (e.g. premium leather).</td>
<td>-,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.</td>
<td>,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).</td>
<td>,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - The brand value of sneaker brands or models makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of Air Yeezy 2 SP 'Red October' or of Balenciaga's 'Arena').</td>
<td>,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - The fact that sneakers are handmade makes them exclusive (e.g. made by expert artisans).</td>
<td>,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - The production of sneakers in a certain country makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of sneakers made in Italy vs a pair made China).</td>
<td>,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The price of sneakers plays a central role in making them exclusive (e.g. a 700€ pair of sneakers, original/resale price, is particularly exclusive).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The fact that a sneaker is hard to come by on the market makes it exclusive (e.g. a limited edition, a special edition, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The particular features of sneakers don't make them exclusive (e.g. a sneaker made out of a leather tanned in Scotland).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I feel more confident with flashy sneakers since they are worn by high-class people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I buy sneakers whose exclusivity can be understood only by knowledgeable people (e.g. a special edition of Nike Air Max, apparently ordinary).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>My desire to buy a certain pair of sneakers is connected to the fact that my group of friends owns them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I buy sneakers purely for aesthetic reasons (e.g. a particular design makes my sneakers more exclusive).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I buy exclusive sneakers only for their superior performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A pair of exclusive sneakers can improve a person's self-confidence and happiness.

Component 1: price, scarcity, aesthetic reasons
Component 5: peculiarity, self-confidence

C1 – “Scarce and expensive sneakers are bought for aesthetic reasons”.
C5 – “Peculiar sneakers are bought to improve one’s self-confidence”.
5 - Conclusion

The aim at the beginning of the paper was to investigate if exclusiveness was actually present in the contemporary sneaker world. In particular, via a constantly increasing bombardment of limited-editions and collaborations on the market in the last couple of years, it is becoming more difficult to properly shed light on such a contradictory issue. It was noticed the presence of a problem with the mass-use of exclusiveness which contemporary marketing does not examine sufficiently in favour of a focus on creating more innovative strategies to keep producing and selling exclusiveness.

Thence, once researched the constitutive factors of exclusiveness and afterwards the consumer behaviour dimensions, it was developed a framework which combines both and studies them from a qualitative and quantitative perspective. A method that looks at the sneaker market from an internal and an external point of view, for both the product and the consumer, thus giving a more detailed, realistic and objective definition of the researched concept.

Hence, it was discovered that although exclusiveness is actually present in the sneaker world and in the sneaker community as a factual element, it is merely ‘a copy’ of its ideal form. In other terms, exclusiveness is present but it is massively used which, in turn, makes it denaturalised and a mere copy or simulation of the real concept of exclusiveness. The ideal concept would strongly include intrinsic features and the extrinsic ones which have an empirical origin, ergo, for instance not symbolicty but PDO or craftsmanship. As it was seen, there is a partial attention on its real characteristics which are the ones that empirically constitute it. Furthermore, the main purpose for the purchase is shallow if we look at the general definitions of exclusiveness extrapolated via the statistical analysis:

(1) “Scarce and expensive sneakers are bought for aesthetic reasons” and (2) “peculiar sneakers are bought to improve one’s self-confidence”.

Ergo, there is no real seeking-immanence activity done by the sneaker consumer but just an activity aimed to cope with the issues of the moment.

Nowadays in the social media era values such as immediacy, fast consumption and most of all superficiality (i.e. lack of conceptual profundity and so on of meaning) are dramatically increasingly present among consumers. Thus, when creating a so-called limited-edition sneaker, elements from the current ‘zeitgeist’ are mirrored as well in the production of products. By virtue of this, models of sneaker are conceived and released by not embracing values such as heritage and timelessness but instead by accommodating the trends of the moment (e.g. Balenciaga Triple S).

The results of this study are blatant and testify a superficial approach to the concept of exclusiveness. As a matter of fact, it was seen that consumers buy exclusive sneakers mostly for reasons ascribable to self-improvement. A self-improvement mainly driven not by individual motivations but rather by social recognition. In fact, it was seen that the most sought after characteristics are the ones immediately and easily noticeable by the social community (i.e. symbolicty, design, reputation, price and scarcity) (see fig.15). Even connoisseurs, who should have an inwards directed shopping behaviour put first easily recognisable features, i.e. hedonistic elements such as scarcity, design and price (see p.41, H2). As well the hedonist buys not to pursue a general ideal of beauty but mostly driven by symbolic reasons, in order to feel part of something (see p.42, H4). Furthermore, through the concept of involvement (Maltzahn, 2013), it was noticed that consumers bought either because of being brand fans (71,3%) or by virtue of having interest in a specific model of sneakers (92,5%). Both of them are aspect potentially attributable to reputation, scarcity and brand value, opposite to more inner values of the product such as uniqueness of features and best price-performance ratio.
As already said, the pursuit of exclusiveness in the sneaker world merely for ephemeral reasons is corroborated also by the final statistical analysis through which two propositions were formulated to define how exclusiveness is overall conceived in the sneakers world.

Firstly, an exclusive sneaker as ‘scarcity and expensive shoe bought for aesthetic reasons’ and, secondly, an exclusive sneaker as ‘peculiar shoe bought to improve one’s self-confidence’. In the former proposition, all the constitutive elements are attributable to gain social prestige (see pp.50-52). In fact, it seems logic to think that a consumer would seek those features only if there would be someone external to please, otherwise why buying a more expensive and scarce shoe and focusing on aesthetic if there would be no external term of comparison?

On the latter proposition, even if it indicates a more acquainted knowledge about the product, still it can be indirectly ascribable to the external environment, an environment which push the consumer to improve his/her competitiveness.

The managerial implication of the study could be twofold for a marketing professional or any organism working in the public relations. Firstly, from a more pragmatic perspective, the marketer would be able to create communication strategies ad hoc for the launch of a sneaker since he/she would know where and how to leverage the consumer by using the parameters quantitatively researched. Secondly, from a more romantic perspective, a marketer could use this study to ‘cure’ and retrieve a product which has lost its original exclusive value.

To conclude and give an answer to the main research question, pure exclusiveness does not exist in the contemporary sneaker scene, or if so it is only conceived by a small minority of consumers. We could argue and define exclusiveness as a utopian value to aim to in order to feel special as to please the rest of the social environment with the end purpose of feeling part of it. A real exclusiveness, the one pursued by a minuscule minority of consumers, certainly includes hedonistic and boastful motivations yet at the same time it comprehends more profound reasons which lend value and so on meaning, a meaning authentically internally originated: the value innate in the shoe itself and not socially created.
Appendix

1 – “So, while hype and sales can help propel brands to success, those two simply aren’t enough. “I think at the end of the day, what will make a brand ‘successful’ long term is whether or not it has an ideology that people agree with. Does the product hold up over time? Do people like the product? Does it fit well? Is it high quality and do people feel that they’re getting what they’re paying for?” explains Schlossberg, retail reporter for Business Insider.

2 – Shown below the questionnaire submitted and its results:

Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to know your vision in regards to the sneaker market. It will take max 5 minutes in which you will be asked to express your opinion on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). There are no wrong answers and your data will be exclusively used in this circumstance to understand better the figure of the sneaker consumer.

I am Alessandro Pane, a 4th year student at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute, and this is part of my graduation project about the topic of “sneakers and consumers”. Hence, I am looking forward to knowing how you relate to your sneakers. If you have further questions you can contact me here alessandro.pane87@gmail.com.

Thank you

External sneaker features

1 - The quality of sneakers is related to their exclusivity (e.g. premium leather).

579 risposte
2 - The symbolical value of sneakers makes them exclusive.

579 risposte

3 - The exclusivity of sneakers is determined by their particular design (e.g. a specific color or a small design detail of the shoes).

579 risposte
4 – The brand value of sneaker brands or models makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of Air Yeezy 2 SP “Red October” or of Balenciaga’s “Arena”).

5 – The fact that sneakers are handmade makes them exclusive (e.g. made by expert artisans).
6 – The production of sneakers in a certain country makes them exclusive (e.g. a pair of sneakers made in Italy vs a pair made China).

579 risposte

7 – The price of sneakers plays a central role in making them exclusive (e.g. a 700€ pair of sneakers, original/resale price, is particularly exclusive).

579 risposte
Internal sneaker features

8 – The fact that a sneaker is hard to come by on the market makes it exclusive (e.g. a limited edition, a special edition, etc.).

579 risposte

9 – The particular features of sneakers don’t make them exclusive (e.g. a sneaker made out of a leather tanned in Scotland).

579 risposte
Consumer involvement

12 – Please rate on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) the following statements: “I buy a pair of sneakers because...”

A - ...I am interested in a particular model.
5 - Completely agree: 289

B - ...they are the best price-performance ratio model on the market.
3 - Either agree nor disagree: 196
12 – Please rate on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) the following statements: “I buy a pair of sneakers because…”

C - …that sneakers' brand is unique for that kind of feature (e.g. for running shoes I prefer Nike and for baske
4 - Agree: 198

D - ...I am a big fan of a certa
5 - Completely agree: 211
External effects on consumer

10 – I feel more confident with flashy sneakers since they are worn by high-class people.

579 risposte

11 – I buy sneakers whose exclusivity can be understood only by knowledgeable people (e.g. a special edition of Nike Air Max, apparently ordinary).

579 risposte
13 – My desire to buy a certain pair of sneakers is connected to the fact that my group of friends owns them.

579 risposte

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Internal effects on consumer

14 – I buy sneakers purely for aesthetic reasons (e.g. a particular design makes my sneakers more exclusive).

579 risposte
15 – I buy exclusive sneakers only for their superior performance.

579 risposte

16 – A pair of exclusive sneakers can improve a person's self-confidence and happiness.

579 risposte
Demographics:

17 - Sex:
579 risposte

18 - Age
579 risposte
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