‘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

Alessandro Pane
Amsterdam Fashion Institute,
Hogeschool van Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – The steadily expanding sneaker market has reached the point where it needs an explanation in regards to concepts and values innate in this world which are being progressively jeopardised and subverted by brands’ and consumers’ actions. One of this core aspects is exclusiveness, which plays a pivotal role in the contemporary sneaker market as a central defining element of consumers’ identity. The constantly increasing diffusion of exclusive releases requires a redefinition of the concept of exclusiveness which takes into consideration its constitutive elements and the community of consumers who contribute in shaping this concept. The intention of this paper is to research how exclusiveness is currently present in the contemporary sneaker market and then question it.

Design/methodology/approach – Academic research and nethnographic methods, such as participant online observation and ontological interviewing, helped to identify the contemporary defining elements of exclusiveness within the sneaker community. By utilising qualitative and quantitative methods, the goal is not a mere broad investigation but instead a theoretical redefinition which will show the current status of the concept.

Findings – Six typologies of sneaker consumer have been determined. This study shows how they diverge and, in some cases, cross each other for their similar characteristics.

Research limitations/implications – This thesis phenomenologically analyse exclusiveness and avoids considering consumers solely from a socio-demographic perspective. A major emphasis is given to a qualitative dimension which can more accurately describe the constantly in flux consumer behaviour.

Social implications – This paper recommends a change of the perception of exclusiveness from both the sneaker consumer and the brands. A shift which can provide a true experience of exclusiveness and so on it can help in releasing more meaningful goods. This study also provides more insight in regards to the increasingly denaturalisation of the concept of exclusiveness.

Originality/value – To the author’s knowledge, this is the first paper investigating the concept of exclusiveness in the sneaker market for a scholar and professional audience through both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

Keywords: Exclusiveness, Sneaker market, Sneaker World, Conspicuous consumption, consumer behaviour

Paper type: Research paper
Introduction

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’ 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, is the one that mainly is responsible for making 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 individual and if and how this phenomenon will survive (Sanchez, 2016) in the future.

(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 product/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.

The following paper aims to achieve its goal through qualitative and quantitative perspectives. 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.

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1 “A sports shoe enthusiast” (Oxford dictionary)
2 see p1 in the Appendix.
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 be possible to see this concept from different perspectives.

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 made 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’.

1. 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 claudēre ‘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.

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.)

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1'exclusiveness comes from the verb exclude, which means to keep out; prevent from entering to reject or not consider; leave out.
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. A further category, namely price is borrowed from the concept of luxury and added as another defining element due to its affinities with the main topic (Heine, 2012).

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 part of a 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 model worn by Martin McFly in Back to the Future II (1989).

5 - Craftsmanship
Craftsmanship can make each product unique and different from others because it is handmade instead of being machine-made (Catry, 2003); (Antoni, et al., 2004); (Hanna, 2004); (Caniato, et al., 2009).
6 – PDO (Protected Designation of Origin)
In other terms, association with a country of origin (Nuño & 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.

7 – Price
It is the “most objective and the easiest to measure criteria to evaluate the luxuriousness of a product” and so on its exclusiveness (McKinsey, 1990) (Meffert & Lasslop, 2003; Mutscheller, 1992)” (Heine, 2012). It is an externally given economic value.

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<tr>
<th>Intrinsic features</th>
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Fig.14 – Characteristics of exclusiveness
2. Exclusiveness & the sneaker consumer

After having analysed 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) which talks about interpersonal vs personal dimensions of the consumer behaviour when he/she seeks prestige, a concept which has similarities with the one of exclusiveness since they both share values such as symbolism and hedonism (Gilles & Kapferer, 1985). In other words, it means a consumption derived either from internal motivations or from the external context. A method also inspired by Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss (1975) who define two typologies of self-conscious people: (1) privately self-conscious who are more attentive on their inside thoughts and feelings, and (2) publicly self-conscious people are principally concerned in regards to how they appear to others. 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.

2.1 – The sneaker consumer & the society

A consumption activity influenced by the external environment 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)⁴; (2) exclusivity (The Snob Effect); and (3) fitting in by social norms (The Bandwagon Effect)⁵. 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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⁴ Many writers contested Veblen’s theory but for this paper the limitations of it are circumscribed to the use done by Vigneron & Johnson (1999).
⁵ 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.1) by Kanye West (fig.2), released in 2014 for $245, now has a resell price of about 5500$. 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.

Fig.1 - Air Yeezy 2 “Red October”

Fig.2 – Kanye West a pair of Air Yeezy 2 “Red October”

* 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 PDO\(^7\) 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.3-4) and Air Max 1 x Parra ‘Albert Heijn’ (fig.5). 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).

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\(^7\) ‘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.6-7), 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.

Fig.6 – Yeezy Boost 350 V2

Fig.7 – example of processional moth
2.2 – 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.8-9), 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.

Fig.8 – Wings 2.0 “Cutout”
Fig.9 – Wings 2.0 “Gold Black”
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.10-11), 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.
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-concept8 (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. 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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1 This typology of consumers use products to enhance their self-concept or reward themselves.
Consumption of exclusiveness in the sneaker market, inspired by Eastman & Eastman (2015)

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
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 timelessnes 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). 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. 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.

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 summarise and define how exclusiveness is overall conceived in the sneakers world. Firstly, an exclusive sneaker as ‘scarce 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 the purpose of gaining social prestige. 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.
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- Fig.7 - https://i.pinimg.com/originals/52/0f/b0/520fb0808fddb9827e9c5cad91382b69.jpg
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- Fig.10 - https://www.flightclub.com/air-max-1-black-black-university-red-800572
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- Fig.12 - http://nikeremelab.com/?p=20692
- Fig.13 - https://www.instagram.com/p/BTZJVGwlXUk/?taken-by=gullyguyleo
- Fig.14 – Characteristics of exclusiveness, inspired by Heine (2012)