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The Gentrification of Sneaker Culture

A qualitative research into the gentrification process of sneaker consumer culture

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Abstract

The term ‘gentrification of sneaker culture’ has been applied in popular news articles, to describe a shift in sneaker culture, namely from a unique consumer subculture, into a mainstream consumer culture. Drawing from Contemporary Gentrification Theory and by adopting a lens from the Consumer Culture Theory research domain, this research builds empirical knowledge on how gentrification processes emerge in sneaker culture. This research addresses key limitations in prior Gentrification Research and in prior Consumer Culture Research, by including the empirical study of the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes, in the context of sneaker culture. With data from both netnography and in-depth interviews, this research identifies a three-phase gentrification process in the context of sneaker culture. The findings show that sneaker market trends (phase 1) have initiated fundamental changes in the sneaker culture and community (phase 2). This research also finds that original sneakerheads, affected by the gentrification process, both perceive negative as well as positive consequences and sentiments related to the gentrification process (phase 3). This study empirically shows that gentrification processes are applicable to consumer culture contexts. Furthermore, the finding that those affected by the gentrification process have a nuanced view on this process, enables interdisciplinary theoretical implications for both gentrification theory as well as consumer culture theory. Finally, the study also reveals how marketing, retail and design approaches of sneaker brands are perceived by original sneakerheads, affected by the gentrification process of sneaker culture, leading to practical recommendations.

Key Words: Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), Consumer Identity Projects, Displacement, Gentrification Theory, Market Place Cultures, Sneaker Culture

Preface

Before you lies the Master thesis “*The Gentrification of Sneaker Culture*”, which was written in order to fulfil the graduation requirements of the Masters’ program in Business Administration, specialization Innovation and Entrepreneurship, at the Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University.

This research took place in the context of the sneaker consumer culture. Although I had little prior knowledge on the sneaker collecting, before starting this research I was fascinated by how passionate sneakerheads were about collecting sneakers and I also found it fascinating how sneakers could be adopted as investment tools. In the preliminary research on these elements, I found out that these two elements appeared to be in conflict with each other, this intrigued me and formed the basis for this research.

At the end of this thesis trajectory, I can sincerely say that I have enjoyed immersing myself in this research topic. I especially very much enjoyed conducting interviews with original sneakerheads. I was moved by the stories the interviewees shared on how they perceive sneaker culture and how the changes in this culture personally impacted them. Also, I was touched that the interviewees were very open about their experiences. Therefore, I found it important to successfully convey the stories told by the interviewees in this thesis and this very much motivated me in the research process. Therefore, I sincerely want to thank the interviewees for taking the time to participate in this research and for openly sharing your stories.

Also, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr. Paolo Franco. I was truly amazed by the support and guidance, I received throughout the research process. Your enthusiasm on both the research topic and on conducting qualitative research in general was very contagious! Also, I very much appreciated that I could always approach you for feedback and could always ask my list of questions during our meetings. Finally, I found it quite special that you always emphasized that ‘*there is no thesis, without good mental and physical health*’. Thank you for having such a positive influence on my thesis process.

Finally, I also want to thank my family and friends for the support given during this thesis process.

I hope you enjoy your read.

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1. Introduction

Sneaker culture has evolved from a unique consumer subculture, of special interest to sneaker enthusiasts, into a multi-billion-dollar industry (Lux & Bug, 2018). With the rise of sneaker culture, the global sneaker market was valued at approximately \$78.59 billion in 2021 (Lux & Bug, 2018; Statista, 2021). Furthermore, it is expected that the industry will continue to grow rapidly, as it is forecasted to be worth \$102 billion in 2025 (Statista, 2021). Companies in the global footwear market are profiting from this growth, with revenue numbers steadily rising. For instance, Nike, the market leader in the sneaker industry, has generated approximately \$23.31 billion in revenue with their footwear section in 2021, compared to \$11.52 billion in revenue in 2010 (Nike, 2010, 2021).

Despite this positive growth trajectory, concerns have been raised that the increased demand in the industry is negatively affecting sneaker culture (Battle, 2016; Lux & Bug, 2018). Chances to purchase sneakers on primary markets, have slimmed due to the increased demand and soaring prices, (Battle, 2016; Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). Furthermore, re-selling platforms, such as StockX, have gained immense popularity, providing the opportunity to make high profits from sneaker re-selling, making collecting sneakers a big business opportunity (Lux & Bug, 2018). In an internal meeting, Nike Vice President Jon Faris raised concerns about the market inequality caused by these trends, stating that the company fears losing its *‘most obsessed sneaker consumer’* to smaller independent sneaker brands (Dunne, 2021). Furthermore, the director emphasized the need to change its sneaker launching approaches, saying: *“We’re going to shape the marketplace to reflect the community we serve, especially in Black and Brown communities and Asian communities, so that we actually show and we give equity and inclusion to the communities that have been gentrified out and alienated by the resale market.”* (Dunne, 2021).

The term *‘gentrification of sneaker culture’* can be found in popular news media articles to describe the displacement of original members of the sneaker consumer subculture, caused by the commercialization of the sneaker industry (Mehl, 2020). The term gentrification originated as a specific technical term to describe the process of the displacement of lower-class populations of neighborhoods into more affluent ones (Glass, 1964; Shaw, 2008). However, the term has undergone semantic change and is more often applied to describe similar processes in other contexts, such as the displacement of original members of sneaker culture (Helbrecht, 2018; Mehl, 2020). It is interesting to study consumer culture topics under the lens of gentrification theory, as it sheds new light on the reconstruction of identity categories in consumer culture groups. Furthermore, it can give new insights into how consumption practices of different social classes in society can create inequality, as with classical gentrification theory (Halnon and Cohen 2006).

In the paper “Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos,” Halnon and Cohen (2006) open new empirical terrain to study gentrification theory under a consumer culture lens, by exploring how gentrification processes are applicable to *“symbolic neighborhoods in popular culture”*. These authors thereby take a

novel approach to gentrification theory, by referring to consumer culture groups as the symbolic terrain, compared to geographical terrain as with classical gentrification theory. Their article explores how three symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class masculinity, namely bodybuilding, motorcycles, and tattoos, have transformed into representations of middle-class distinction. Drawing on gentrification theory, Halnon and Cohen (2006) explore the transformation of these consumer culture groups, by illustrating a process of investment, invasion, transformation and displacement. These stages explain how consumption activities of middle-class men have changed the symbolic neighborhoods of the lower-class, into representations of middle-class men. In the article, the gentrification process is thus approached by taking the perspective of the gentrifiers; it is researched how their consumption practices, can cause gentrification processes in symbolic consumer culture neighborhoods.

Halnon and Cohen (2006) have, however, not empirically studied the gentrification process. Furthermore, in the research, the consequences for and the sentiment among those affected by the gentrification process, have not been included. Contemporary gentrification research, outside of the marketing scholarship, argues that in order to fully comprehend gentrification processes, it is imperative to include the perception of those affected by gentrification processes (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). However, the consequences for and sentiment among those affected by gentrification processes have been largely understudied (Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

Most contemporary gentrification research has namely focused on researching gentrification processes through the eyes of the gentrifiers. (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). To advance gentrification theory, researchers call for taking a more holistic approach, by studying the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes. By studying how the gentrification process is perceived by those who are affected by it, a more nuanced and broad understanding of gentrification theory is created. Furthermore, it can better explain the complexities and distinctions in the gentrification process (Doucet, 2009; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This research will build this understanding by empirically studying the subjective experiences and sentiments of the consumer groups affected by gentrification processes. This holistic approach will advance gentrification theory, as an understanding is built on how gentrification processes are perceived by those affected by them, an understudied domain in gentrification research (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

Furthermore, by studying this process in the context of consumer culture groups, this research also advances Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Insights into how gentrification processes occur in consumption subcultures, can build knowledge of how both individual and collective identities are built and maintained, when this consumption subculture is undergoing a gentrification process (Halnon & Cohen, 2006; Larsen & Patterson, 2022). In particular, this research takes an integrative approach by empirically studying the subjective experiences and sentiments of this group in the context of the sneaker consumption subculture. In doing so, this research will also provide a basis for practical recommendations, for companies operating in sneaker context, such as Nike, and

companies operating in other consumer subcultures, where elements of gentrification processes are also observed. This research will lead to a better understanding of how brand approaches, such as sneaker launching tactics, are tied to gentrification processes and how these approaches are perceived by those affected by gentrification processes. Furthermore, it will give insights into how these brand approaches, can create inequality in consumer cultures and may influence consumer wellbeing (Daskalopoulou, 2014).

In conclusion, the goal of this research is to build knowledge on gentrification processes in the context of the sneaker consumer culture and to gather insights into the subjective experiences and sentiment of those affected by these gentrification processes. In doing so, this research enables interdisciplinary theoretical contributions to existing consumer culture theories and gentrification literature. Moreover, this research offers organizations managerial implications. These implications explain how organizations' activities can be tied to gentrification processes and how they are perceived by those affected by gentrification processes, and impact upon their consumer wellbeing.

This goal will be attained by answering the following research sub-questions:

- 1. How does the process of gentrification in the sneaker consumer culture emerge?*
- 2. What are the subjective experiences and sentiment of those affected by a process of gentrification in the context of the sneaker consumer culture?*

To answer these questions, a qualitative approach is taken. In this research, two different research methods are applied, namely a non-participatory netnography (Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Kozinets, 2020) and conducting interviews (Myers, 2019). Applying two different techniques to gather data, ensures triangulation in this research and leads to a rich data set that can provide insights into the sentiment and experiences of those affected by the gentrification process in the sneaker consumer culture (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019; Symon & Cassell, 2022).

This research will first elaborate on the academic and social relevance of this research, by discussing the theoretical background. Secondly, it will discuss how the methodology applied will answer the research questions proposed and attain the research goal. Then, in chapter 4 the research findings of both the interviews and netnography research are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn and answers to the research questions of this study are given in the final chapter, where a conclusion and discussion of the results can be found.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter provides the theoretical background for this study. First classical and contemporary gentrification theory is discussed, moving to the review of the understudied urban gentrification research on the effect of gentrification processes on the displaced. understudied displaced population groups in urban gentrification theory. Building on that knowledge, it is then outlined how gentrification theory can be studied under the lens of the Consumer Culture Theory research tradition, advancing both gentrification research and consumer research. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing Consumer Culture Theory, the approach that is adopted in this research to studying gentrification processes in the context of the sneaker consumer culture.

2.1 Classical and Contemporary Gentrification Theory

Gentrification is a term first coined by the British socialist Ruth Glass in 1964 in the work *London: Aspects of Change* (1964), stating:

“One by one, many of the working-class quarters have been invaded by the middle class - upper and lower ... Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed” (Glass, 1964, p. 17).

Introduced as a precise technical term, in its origin, Gentrification Theory describes the process of displacement of lower-class neighborhoods residents and the change of the whole social character of a neighborhood due to the entry of more affluent middle-class residents (Butler & Robson, 2003; Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Holm & Schulz, 2018; Shaw, 2008). The fundamental concepts of ‘*displacement of the working class*’ and ‘*the change of the whole social character of the neighborhood*’ formed the main themes in classical gentrification research (Butler & Robson, 2003; Glass, 1964; Holm & Schulz, 2018). However, contemporary gentrification theory encompasses a much more comprehensive research domain, moving away from its original definition (Butler & Robson, 2003; Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Shaw, 2008). Contemporary gentrification research has been generalized, as it takes on various forms, occurs in different settings, includes different groups of people, and incorporates various socio-spatial dynamics (Davidson & Lees, 2005; Shaw, 2008). Davidson and Lees (2005), explain that the processes that caused traditional gentrification appear to have changed, as these processes now operate in the economic, cultural, social, and political environment of the 21st century. This has sparked the debate of how gentrification should now be defined, moving away from the original definition of Glass (1964) (Davidson & Lees, 2005; Holm & Schulz, 2018; Shaw, 2008).

Lees and Davidson (2005) propose a new definition, arguing that the defining characteristics of contemporary gentrification should involve in the broadest sense: “(1) *the reinvestment of capital*; (2)

the social upgrading of locale by incoming high-income groups; (3) landscape change; and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups". (Davidson & Lees, 2005, p. 1170). Butler (2007) further builds on the generalization of gentrification, stating that gentrification needs to be viewed as an all-encompassing term that functions to understand processes related to "*the mediations between global processes and flows, on the one hand, and the construction of identities in particular localities, on the other*". This definition views gentrification theory as a way to understand the connection between geographical and sociological approaches and the actions of those involved in gentrification processes. Butler (2007) perceives that the impact of social class and income to explain cultural, social and spatial gentrification has declined, and this should therefore be omitted from the definition.

As both of these approaches to gentrification theory are highly reputable, often cited, and provide the opportunity to take gentrification theory in a broader context, this contemporary generalized approach to gentrification theory is adopted in this research paper.

2.2 Holistic Approach Contemporary Gentrification Theory

The direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (4) has received renewed attention in recent gentrification studies. It is argued that the gentrification debate so far has been fairly one sided. The debate is frequently centered on the gentrifiers, studying how the choices and activities of this group causes gentrification processes in neighborhoods. However, with this sole focus, the consequences of this process for original neighborhood inhabitants have been largely overlooked. Few studies have focused on researching the extent and nature of the consequences for displaced neighborhood populations in gentrification processes (Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015; Slater, 2011). A plausible explanation for this is that it is often challenging to locate displaced neighborhoods inhabitants after a gentrification process has taken place (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Those who are displaced by urban gentrification processes, have had to physically move out of their neighborhood. This makes it difficult to locate them and practically study the effect of the displacement on this groups. However, Helbrecht (2018), argues that this methodological issue is not the only reason for the lack inclusion of the displaced population in gentrification studies. It is argued that in urban research the consequences of displacement for original neighborhood residents are often underestimated (Helbrecht, 2018). However, to fully understand gentrification processes comprehensively recent research has urged to broaden the focus and include the consequences for the displaced people in the research (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

Shaw & Hagemans (2015) attempted to include a more holistic perspective in their gentrification research. They studied the effect and sentiment of gentrification processes on original neighborhood residents, who managed to continue their residence in two gentrified neighborhoods in Melbourne, Australia (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Thus, residents that were affected by gentrification process, but not displaced. The paper sheds light on the sentiment felt among these residents, stating that although

these residents managed to stay in their neighborhood, the gentrification process still negatively affected them. The paper explains that this group experienced a sentiment of grief and loss of place identity; through the gentrification process the neighborhood community and landscape has changed in such a way that it no longer feels familiar to original inhabitants. This has led this group to question whether they still belong and are still entitled to live in that neighborhood (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This research showed that, original neighborhood residents, even when not directly displaced, are still negatively affected by gentrification processes. Therefore, the case was made that not only the consequences and the sentiments among the directly displaced should be studied. However, a holistic approach should be adopted where the consequences and sentiments of all those affected by gentrification processes should be researched (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

Doucet (2009) also argues that gentrification research needs to take on a more inclusive approach, stating that the gentrification debate often takes a “black-and-white approach”, categorizing residents involved in the gentrification process as either the gentrifiers or as the displaced. In this classical debate, the gentrifiers are often portrayed as ‘*the winners*’ and the displaced as ‘*the losers*’ (Doucet, 2009, p. 300). By studying the subjective experiences and sentiments of residents that lived through the process of gentrification in their neighborhood but who could neither be classified as the gentrifiers nor the displaced, Doucet (2009) also adopted a more holistic viewpoint in the gentrification debate. This study revealed that this group of residents often had mixed views about the gentrification process; while being cautious of the fast changes in the neighborhood community, residents simultaneously welcomed some of the neighborhood changes caused by the gentrification process, such as an improved neighborhood image. This research suggests that there are complexities and nuances in gentrification processes, that are often overlooked when taking a classical view to gentrification process (Doucet, 2009). Therefore, Doucet (2009), also argues the importance of taking a holistic approach when studying gentrification processes.

Building on this research, this research paper will adopt to the above discussed inclusive and holistic approach in gentrification theory, opposed to the “black-and-white” approach. It will study the sentiments and consequences for those *affected* by gentrification processes in the context of the consumer culture of sneakers. This is done by analyzing the sentiment and experiences of original ‘inhabitants’ of this consumer culture group, namely original sneakerheads. As this is a symbolic neighborhood, where the gentrification process does not lead to physical displacement. This study has the advantage that it can both incorporate the sentiments and consequences of original sneakerheads that are affected but not displaced, but also of those that might be displaced by this process. Therefore, this research will advance the empirical analyses of Doucet (2009) and Shaw and Hagemans (2015), who have not been able to do so due the methodological issue of the displaced being difficult to locate. Furthermore, this holistic approach will provide a more nuanced and broad understanding of gentrification theory, accounting for more complexities in the gentrification process in a new context, namely in sneaker culture (Doucet, 2009; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

2.3 Gentrification Theory in New Domains

As mentioned before, contemporary gentrification theory encompasses a comprehensive research domain (Butler & Robson, 2003; Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Shaw, 2008). Research by Mehl (2020), furthermore, reveals that the term Gentrification has undergone a sematic generalization, meaning the term is applied to a broader context, less bound by theory specifics in modern-day use. An analysis of mainstream online news texts revealed the normalized use of the term gentrification outside of the urban geographical domain of neighborhoods' (Mehl, 2020). An example of this broader application is, for instance, to speak of 'the gentrification of football clubs', to describe the inability of lower-income football fan bases to attend matches bases due to increased ticket prices (Castilho et al., 2017; Dubal, 2010). As exemplified in the following statement, from research analyzing the consequences of the 2014 Football World Cup on the Brazilian football scene:

“Currently, Brazilian football is undergoing a clear “gentrification”, which compromises an important part of the cultural formation of the country’s population... The big losers seem to be the working-class fans who are not able to acquire the tickets. (Castilho et al., 2017, p. 710)”.

As mentioned before, this research will study the '*gentrification of sneaker culture*', a term that can be found in popular news media articles to describe the displacement of the original sneaker consumer subculture community caused by the commercialization of the sneaker industry, under a consumer culture theory lens (Mehl, 2020).

Halnon and Cohen (2006) open new empirical terrain for gentrification research, by explaining how gentrification processes are applicable to a new domain the 'symbolic neighborhoods' in popular culture. The paper elaborates on the transformation of three '*symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class masculinity*', from lower- to middle-class distinction (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). This is done by examining how symbolic neighborhoods of Body Building, Motorcycles, have been subjected to a gentrification process of investment, invasion, transformation, and ultimately displacement. Halnon and Cohen (2006) take a novel approach to classical contemporary gentrification theory, as discussed before, by referring to '*relatively elusive symbolic terrain dispersed across popular consumer culture today*', in comparison to specific geographical terrain as with classical gentrification theory. By doing so, Halnon and Cohen (2006) contribute to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), a broad research domain that studies the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the market place and cultural meaning namely through analyzing how consumption practices of middle-class men can lead to the disintegration of consumer cultures of lower-class men and can reproduce inequality. The following subsection will elaborate on this.

As earlier discussed, gentrification research is often focused on understanding the gentrifiers; researching how the choices and activities of this group causes gentrification processes. Halnon and

Cohen (2006) also adopted this viewpoint, by analyzing how consumption practices of middle-class men, the gentrifiers, causes gentrification processes in symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class men. However, the consequences and sentiments of this process for the affected consumer culture groups, who may be displaced by the consumption practices of the middle-class men, have not been empirically studied in this paper. As mentioned before, contemporary gentrification theory calls for a holistic approach in gentrification research, where the consequences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification process are included. This approach leads to a better comprehensive understanding of gentrification processes, and accounts for studying the complexities and nuances in this process. Halnon and Cohen (2006) acknowledge this limitation in the research stating the importance of including the effect of the gentrified to advance Consumer Culture Research:

“Finally, while our study did not focus in any empirical way on the ultimate disposition of the displaced, we must end by emphasizing the value of renegade symbols for the disenfranchised, and the possible effects of expropriating ‘their’ symbols.”.

This study addresses this weakness in prior gentrification research by empirically studying the experiences and sentiments of those affected, by processes of gentrification in the context of the sneaker consumer culture. This holistic nuanced approach advances both contemporary gentrification theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), as well as Consumer Culture Theory.

2.4 Consumer Culture Theory

As mentioned before, Halnon and Cohen (2006) contribute to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research tradition, by researching how consumption practices of dominant members in society can lead to gentrification processes of symbolic consumer culture neighborhoods. It investigates how symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class distinction have transformed to representations of the middle-class distinction. Halnon and Cohen (2006) frame this transformation of consumer culture groups by a process of investment, invasion, transformation and displacement. Hereby, they aim to show that openness and fluidity among consumer consumption practices is not reflective of the social class system in society being obliterated. However, it is a rather a strategic way of reconstructing classes, with middle-class men invading the symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class men. Hereby, Halnon and Cohen (2006) contribute to the research of how consumption practices of dominant members in society can procreate inequality in society (Halnon & Cohen, 2006).

However, in this research the effect of this gentrification process on the affected consumer culture groups of the symbolic neighborhoods of lower-class men has not been included. Taking that approach could further enhance CCT, by building an understanding of how the disintegration of consumer culture groups, through gentrification processes, is experienced and perceived by original members of that consumer culture group. CCT is broad research disciplinary, that is adopted to describe

the growing importance of consumption as a social, cultural and economic activity and studies the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the market place and cultural meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022). In this research domain, it is studied how consumers' lived experiences and social relations are mediated through consumption and markets (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022). There are various approaches and lenses in this research domain, however, most relevant to study under a gentrification process lens are: *Consumer Identity projects and Marketplace Cultures*.

The *consumer identity projects* domain views the marketplace as a way through which consumers construct narratives of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It addresses that people are actively involved with the formation, improvement, transformation and upholding of a sense of identity (Belk, 1988; Kravets et al., 2022). Consumption, in this domain, is seen as a means for people to achieve and express particular identity positions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022). Research suggests that, in the context of identity created through consumption, individuals operate in a conflicting environment. Individuals seek to distinguish themselves from the masses and create an authentic identity. However, at the same time seek out to create this authentic self through consumption practices in an increasingly market-mediated world. (Larsen & Patterson, 2022). This paradox, is titled the '*stigma of conformity*', and describes that individuals in search of creating an authentic identity, are on a relentless quest for non-conformity in their consumption practices in a market mediated-environment. (Larsen & Patterson, 2022). However, the effect of the stigma of conformity on existing consumer culture groups that are conformed and the response to this conformity by original members of these consumer culture groups needs further research. Larsen and Patterson (2022), suggest that in search of maintaining their authentic identity, elements of resistance might be portrayed by consumer culture groups, when their consumption culture is conformed. However, this has yet to be studied. This research addresses this key limitation in CCT identity research, by studying how those affected by gentrification processes in the context of the consumer culture group of sneakers, namely original sneakerheads, respond to and feel about this process of cultural change.

Consumption also serves as a way for individuals to connect to collective identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022). These collective identities are studied in the *Marketplace Cultures* domain of CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In general, this research domain within CCT addresses how consumers through common consumption are cultural producers, develop social relationships and form feelings of collective solidarity. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019). Different forms of co-consuming groups have been studied in this research domain, namely: subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes (Kravets et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019). Although, these different types share great similarities, for this research the co-consuming group of subcultures of consumptions is most relevant (Kravets et al., 2022). A subculture of consumption, refers to a distinct group of people who are united by a common interest and commitment to a particular set of consumption products or consumption activities (Kravets

et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019). In this research, the subculture of the consumption of sneakers and the activity of sneaker collecting is studied, under the lens of gentrification processes. The consequences and sentiment among members of consumption subcultures, when gentrification processes of this consumption subcultures are at place, have yet to be studied (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). Therefore, this research contributes to this CCT research domain, by building an understanding of how consumption subcultures are affected by and respond to gentrification processes.

In sum, this research, building on Gentrification Theory and Consumer Culture Theory, creates an understanding of how the sneaker consumer culture group, is affected by the process of gentrification. An empirical review of the experiences and subjective sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes in consumer culture advances both Gentrification Theory and Consumer Culture theory (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). First of all, by taking a holistic approach and studying all those affected by the gentrification process, this research contributes to creating a comprehensive understanding gentrification processes (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw, 2008). Furthermore, by adopting a CCT lens, this research examines how consumers of the subculture of sneaker consumption, respond to gentrification processes, in relation to Consume Identity Works and Marketplace cultures, herby building further knowledge in these research domains (Halnon & Cohen, 2006; Larsen & Patterson, 2022) . Moreover, it will also provide a basis for practical recommendations for sneaker companies such as Nike, to better understand how their approaches are tied to gentrification processes and how their approaches are perceived by those affected by gentrification process.

To build this knowledge, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1. How does the process of gentrification take place in the context of the sneaker consumer culture?*
- 2. What are the experiences and subjective sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes in the context of the sneaker consumer culture?*

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology and ethical considerations of this research are explained. Firstly, this chapter will elaborate on the choice of the research context, namely: the sneaker consumer subculture. Secondly, the research approaches will be outlined. Finally, the research methods of netnography and interviews will be explained in depth, including the approaches for data collection, data analysis, and for guaranteeing high ethical research standards.

3.1 Research Context

The term ‘gentrification of sneaker culture’ has been applied in popular news articles, to describe a shift in sneaker culture, namely from a unique consumer subculture, into a global trend and a mainstream billion-dollar industry (Lux & Bug, 2018; Mehl, 2020). Therefore, the consumer culture group of sneakers is a relevant context, to study gentrification processes under the lens of consumer culture theory. In order to comprehend the application of the term ‘gentrification of sneaker culture’ in popular news articles, it is imperative to understand the history and the evolution of the sneaker consumer subculture. Furthermore, a thick case description, where the context and situational setting of the study is elaborated on, will improve on the qualitative research criteria of transferability (Symon & Cassell, 2022; Tracy, 2010). Therefore, this subchapter will give context to the sneaker consumer subculture.

In the sneaker consumer subculture, sneakers are sought out, worn and collected as valuable collectibles (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). Members of this consumer subculture are often referred to as ‘Sneakerheads’ (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021; Matthews et al., 2021). A sneakerhead can be defined as an individual with a strong passion for sneakers, who collects, wears and/or admires sneakers (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021; Matthews et al., 2021). Furthermore, most sneakerheads are knowledgeable on the history of sneakers and are passionate about the nostalgic features sneakers possess (Choi & Kim, 2019; Matthews et al., 2021).

The sneakerhead consumer subculture has seen rapid growth since the 1980s. During this time the perception of sneakers changed; sneakers were no longer perceived as just practical sport shoes, but were now seen as elements of cultural value and style (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). The rise and popularization of culture is often attributed to the emerging youth subcultures of that time (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008; Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). Sneakers were closely associated with the subcultures of hip-hop and basketball (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). The prominence of sneakers within these growing subcultures, increased the popularity of sneakers and made sneakers elements of cultural value (Denny, 2021). Furthermore, it were especially marginalized men from poor urban backgrounds that drove sneakers beyond its practical utility. (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008; Denny, 2021). For these men sneakers were not only a way to express style and association with certain subcultures, but were also a relatively affordable way to communicate economic wealth and social status (Denny, 2021). The sneaker hype was further cultivated by the exclusive

launching strategies of sneaker brands, meaning certain sneaker models were only scarcely available (Denny, 2021). Therefore, it became a quest for sneakerheads to acquire a particular pair of sneakers and purchasing sneakers often involved travelling far and camping out in front of stores (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021).

Hype and scarcity are still elements that sneakerheads are all too familiar with nowadays (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). Growing to a billion dollar industry, in 2021, the global sneaker market was valued at approximately \$78.59 bn USD (Lux & Bug, 2018; Statista, 2021). Furthermore, due to the growing popularity and the limited availability of sneakers in past 10 years, the secondary sneaker market has grown tremendously. The sneaker resell market was estimated to be worth \$6 billion in 2019, and is predicted to rise to \$30 billion by 2030 (Lux & Bug, 2018; Wade, 2020). Through this high market growth and commercialization, over the past decade sneaker culture has evolved from a niche consumer subculture, into a global trend (Lux & Bug, 2018; Matthews et al., 2021).

The sneaker market has also evolved with the digitalization of society (Choi & Kim, 2019; Lux & Bug, 2018). Sneaker brands have switched their release strategies, from offline to online. Nowadays most sneakers are released online via a ‘first come, first served’ online raffling systems, rather than being made available at physical retail stores (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). These raffling systems are often bugged by purchasing bots. These are purchasable computer programs that outsmart the raffling system and can automatically acquire large number of sneakers (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). Furthermore, today also sneaker culture is expressed through online sneaker communities. Here, sneakerheads share their sentiment on sneaker releases, share purchasing strategies and more general talk about their passion for sneakers (Choi & Kim, 2019).

3.2 Research Approach

In order to attain the research goal of building knowledge on how the gentrification process in sneaker culture is experienced and subjectively perceived by those affected it, a qualitative approach is adopted. A qualitative approach is most suitable for building an in-depth understanding of a particular subject; to gather insights into people, their experiences, actions, and motivations with the inclusion of the broader context in which they find themselves (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). Furthermore, it allows for exploratory research on topics that are relatively new or understudied (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). As this research aims to build a large understanding of how gentrification theory can be applied in a new domain, namely that of consumer culture theory, by studying the subjective experiences of those involved in the process of gentrification, a qualitative approach is thus most suitable.

The research philosophy that this paper adopts is that of constructivism. Constructivism views social reality as subjective and co-constructed through people’s own experiences and interpretations; it views qualitative research as a means to: “interpret, explore and discover new concepts and constructs” and adopts flexibility in how qualitative research is conducted (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Mik-Meyer &

Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). As this research aims to gather subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by the gentrification process in sneaker culture, thus studying the respondent's view of reality in this process, a constructive perspective is suitable. Furthermore, the data method of interviewing, which will be discussed in the following section, studies the respondent's view of gentrification processes through dialogue, thus being socially constructed. Despite, studying this through existing. In line with this qualitative and constructivist approach, the research quality criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are adopted to evaluate the research choices in this chapter (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019).

Furthermore, this research takes an inductive approach, applying the grounded theory method. This method seeks to develop a theory that is grounded in data, that is systematically gathered and analyzed. Furthermore, it suggests that there should be iterative interaction between data collection and analysis (Myers, 2019; Suddaby, 2006; Symon & Cassell, 2022). It is well suited for exploratory research, such as this, as one does not rely on theory to test hypothesis, but instead begins with the area of study and allows what is relevant to that area to emerge (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Symon & Cassell, 2022). As this research takes a novel approach of empirically studying gentrification theory under a consumer culture lens, grounded theory is most suitable to identify themes and build theory in this domain. It namely allows for capturing the story portrayed through natural dialogues with sneakerheads in interviews and through the study of dialogues in real settings with the netnography research (Suddaby, 2006).

One could argue, that since this study adopts lenses from prior literature, namely of gentrification theory and consumer culture theory, the grounded research method with inductive analysis is not suitable (Suddaby, 2006). However, Suddaby (2006) argues that this is a misconception, explaining that while the grounded theory method entails building formal theory from data, prior knowledge or substantive theory can be seen as an asset in this process. Prior knowledge can namely give initial direction to the research and is useful for the development of initial categories and properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006; Symon & Cassell, 2022). In this research, for instance, prior knowledge on gentrification theory and consumer culture theory, facilitated the establishment of themes for the interviews and netnography research. Furthermore, this research draws from two substantive research areas instead of just a singular one. Therefore, it is avoided that this research adheres too closely to one substantive research area. This minimizes the risk that adopting prior research will lead the researcher to hypothesis testing instead of directly observing (Suddaby, 2006). Furthermore, as reflected in this paragraph, the researcher was aware of the possibility of being influenced by prior knowledge and was critically reflective of this throughout the research, which is also advised (Suddaby, 2006).

3.3 Research Design

This research applies two different research methods, namely a non-participatory netnography and conducting interviews. Applying two different techniques to gather data, ensures triangulation in this

research (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019) . This is important, as it allows for studying a topic from different angles and helps to paint a fuller picture of a phenomenon and its context (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). Furthermore, data triangulation contributes to adhering to the qualitative research criteria of credibility and dependability (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). This ensures that the research findings reflect the perspective of the participants in the research and thus are credible. Furthermore, triangulation of methods also contributes to the research findings being consistent and repeatable, thus dependable (Tracy, 2010). This subsection outlines for both of the research methods, how data is collected and analyzed in order to attain the goal of this research. Furthermore, it elaborates on how ethical considerations and standards are guaranteed in this research, for both methods.

Non-participatory Netnography

The first research method applied in this research is that of a non-participatory netnography. This technique was first coined by Robert Kozinets and is an online application of the research method of ethnography (Kozinets, 2020). It allows for the study of culture through digital-mediated communication and is suitable to study online communities and cultures that are also expressed through online social interactions online (Kozinets, 2020). It is important to acknowledge, that sneaker culture is also expressed through digital mediated communications, for instance through blogpost and online communities (Choi & Kim, 2019; Kozinets, 2020). Therefore, in order to build an in depth understanding of sneaker culture, this research aims to triangulate between both online and offline data collection, reflected in the two research methods adopted (Kozinets, 2020; Myers, 2019).

The netnography research entails studying the gentrification process and the subjective experiences of those affected by this process, through online sources on sneaker culture. This was done by studying blogposts, popular news articles, and threads on online communities such as Reddit. In total 18 online communities were studied, containing posts or comments of 58 participants. These online data sources are relevant to this research, as sneaker culture nowadays is portrayed largely in the digital sphere and through online communities (Choi & Kim, 2019). The relevant data was gathered through searches on various platforms and online communities, such as Reddit and google. Hereby, terms a like: '*the decline of sneaker culture*' and '*exclusion sneakerheads*' were adopted to identify the relevant online articles, blogs and communities. As the research progressed and more insights were gathered on the gentrification processes and sentiments of those involved, the search terms were further narrowed down, and more specific search terms were adopted such as '*loss of community feeling sneaker culture*'.

It is important to note that as the method of non-participatory netnography was applied, the researcher was not involved and did not participate in the online communities, for instance by actively posting messages and questions themselves (e.g., Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Cova & Pace, 2006). This was method was deliberately chosen, as this research aims to study the subjective experiences of participants portrayed in online community and aims to portray the story as it emerged from these online

communities, rather than take an active involvement in it. Non-participatory netnography allows for capturing the natural interactions and dialogues in the online sneakerhead community, and minimizes researcher steering (Alavi, 2010; Kozinets, 2020).

The data collected from online articles and blogposts, was imported into the analysis software ATLAS.TI for the analysis process. This software allows for a systematic coding procedure, with advantages of organized coding, data linking and ordered data display (Myers, 2019; Symon & Cassell, 2022). The data was coded using the grounded theory approach; starting with open coding, moving to axial coding and finally theoretical coding (Myers, 2019; Symon & Cassell, 2022). As mentioned before, in this research a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis is adopted, allowing for in-depth exploration of a phenomena in its context (Myers, 2019; Symon & Cassell, 2022). The themes that were identified through the netnography research, were applied and further investigated in the second research method, namely that of interviewing.

During the netnography research, special attention was paid into ensuring high ethical standards. Netnography is a relatively new research method, which means that the ethical guidelines of this methods are still under consideration (Lehner-Mear, 2020; Tuikka et al., 2017). One of the ethical considerations discussed, is whether researchers should make it apparent to participants of online communities, that their statements are used for research purposes and whether informed consent needs to be asked (Lehner-Mear, 2020; Tuikka et al., 2017). Lehner-Mear (2020), studying ethical considerations in non-participatory netnography research, concludes that open-access forums, can be considered as a public context and therefore problematic breaches of participant privacy are unlikely. Kozinets (2020) makes a similar consideration, namely if online communities are accessible without having to make an account, they can be considered as public context. Both conclude that in open-access online communities, there is no need to disclose the research and ask for informed consent (Kozinets, 2020; Lehner-Mear, 2020). In this research, it was therefore decided to adhere to this ethical consideration and in the research only open-access online communities were studied. In addition to this ethical consideration, anonymity for participants of the online communities studied, is also guaranteed in this research, in line with ethical guidelines (Kozinets, 2020; Lehner-Mear, 2020). Finally, it should be noted that offering withdrawal of data is complicated in netnography research, because content of online communities can be adjusted or deleted post data collection (Lehner-Mear, 2020). Ethical guidelines conclude that it is not expected of researches to return to the online communities, to see if participants have adjusted or deleted their earlier statements (BERA, 2018; Lehner-Mear, 2020). However, the data is considered to be reflective of the time that it was gathered at (BERA, 2018; Lehner-Mear, 2020). In line with this reasoning, the statements of participants in online communities are dated at point of data collection, noted down in this research as 'Blog X, Month/Year' (BERA, 2018)

Interviews

Complementing the netnography research, interviews were conducted. The method of interviewing allows for gathering rich data on people's subjective experiences and helps to focus on the understanding people's worlds. Thus, it is a suitable method for this research to gather insights into the experiences and sentiments of those affected by the gentrification process in sneaker culture. By collaborating with the research team of sneaker culture thesis circle, 18 interviews were conducted. Guest et al. (2006) have researched the number of interviews needed to reach data saturation and conclude that within a sample size of 12 interviews data saturation is reached (Guest et al., 2006). This research states that for most research topics, 12 interviews are sufficient in order *'to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals'* (Guest et al., 2006, p. 79). For this research 18 interviews were conducted with original members of the sneaker community. This group can be considered relatively homogenous in the context of this research. Furthermore, the number of interviews exceeds 12. Therefore, it is assumed that data saturation of the interviews is obtained in this research (Guest et al., 2006).

The interviews were held with 18 original sneakerheads, of which key demographic details can be found in Table 1. As mentioned above a sneakerhead can be defined, as members of a distinctive consumer culture community with a strong passion for sneakers. The definition of an 'original' sneakerhead is ambiguous, as this could refer to the sneakerheads who created sneaker culture in the 1980s. However, keeping in mind that sneaker culture market has changed tremendously over the past decade, with demand and reselling platforms surging (Choi & Kim, 2019; Lux & Bug, 2018). It was decided that for this research an original sneakerhead is defined as someone who has been involved with sneaker collecting and sneaker culture for approximately the past decade and a with a minimum of five years. It is expected that this group has experienced the market and cultural changes in sneaker culture and therefore are able to share their subjective experiences and sentiments of this process.

The original sneakerheads were sought out for the interviews, by first contacting sneaker stores and asking whether they are in touch with original sneakerheads. This method proved to be successful, the sneaker stores referred to sneakerheads that were well known and long part of the sneaker community. Furthermore, the snowballing method was applied, which entailed asking interviewees for recommendations of other possible interviewees that they feel can contribute to the research (Myers, 2019).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which can be found in Appendix B. The themes that emerged from the netnography research, formed the basis for the interview questions, ensuring relevant questions are asked (Suddaby, 2006). Semi-structured interviews involve the use of some pre-formulated questions, but there is no strict adherence to them (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). This ensures that interviewees are given the opportunity to add their own new insights during the interview, while at the same time providing some focus to ensure the important knowledge is gathered (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and imported to the analytics software Atlas.ti. Just as with the netnography research, the

interviews were coded using the grounded theory approach, starting with open coding, moving to axial coding and finally theoretical coding (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019).

During the interview process, again, special attention was paid to adhering to the ethical code of conduct for qualitative research (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019) in the following ways. First of all, before participating in the research, interviewees received a Plain Language Statement with information on the research purpose and information on their role in this research (Myers, 2019). Before starting the interview, it was checked if the interviewees had any questions regarding this Plain Language Statement and whether everything was clear to them. Furthermore, interviewees were also asked to sign a Participant Consent form. This form served as an agreement between the researcher and research participant outlining the roles and responsibilities they both take in the research process (Myers, 2019). First of all, this form asked formal permission of the participant for the interview and the audio recording of the interview. Secondly, the concept of voluntary participation was explained, stating that the participant can withdraw from the research at any given time (Myers, 2019). Thirdly, it was outlined how their personal data, the audio recordings, and the interview transcriptions would be securely stored and eventually destroyed. Also, the strategy for protecting their identity was explained, in the research namely participants will not be named, but pseudonym's will be used. Finally, participants were explained that they can receive a copy of the final research report, if they would like. Again, before starting the interview, it was checked if the participant had signed the form and whether everything was clear to them. Both the Plain Language Statement and the Participant Consent Form can be found for review, in Appendix A.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Association subculture	Still collecting
Participant 1	Male	45	Owner Sneaker Store	Skateboarding	No
Participant 2	Male	24	Sneaker Photographer	HipHop	Yes
Participant 3	Female	24	Intern Sneaker Blog	HipHop	Yes
Participant 4	Male	27	Pharmacy	Skateboarding	Less
Participant 5	Female	24	Student	No Association	Less
Participant 6	Male	24	Student	Basketball	Yes
Participant 7	Female	24	Student	No Association	Yes
Participant 8	Female	24	Student	Basketball	Less
Participant 9	Male	24	Student	Basketball	Yes
Participant 10	Female	21	Student	No Association	Yes
Participant 11	Male	26	Graduate	Basketball	Less
Participant 12	Male	24	Student	No Association	Less
Participant 13	Male	28	Student	Basketball	Less
Participant 14	Female	23	Student	Basketball	Yes
Participant 15	Male	22	Retail	No Association	Yes
Participant 16	Male	20	Horeca	Skateboarding	Yes
Participant 17	Male	23	It	HipHop	Less
Participant 18	Male	23	Army	No Association	Yes

4. Findings

In this chapter the findings of the research are discussed. The gentrification process of sneaker culture is divided in three phases, namely: *Sneaker Market Trends*, *Changes in the Sneaker Community and Culture*, and *Consequences and Sentiment among the gentrified*. These phases together provide an in-depth view into the gentrification process in sneaker culture and together form the definition of sneaker culture gentrification. However, to fully understand the impact of this gentrification process for the gentrified, it is also imperative to include findings on what original sneaker culture means for this group and which elements of this culture are most valued. Understanding the original culture contextualizes the gentrification process theorized in this research, in particular, the changes that have unfolded in this consumer culture. Therefore, the subchapter *Original Sneaker Culture* gives insights into the valued cultural elements of the original sneaker culture. The gentrification process and the phases are presented in Figure 1. This chapter will discuss the findings for each of the phases in the subsections below, leading to an explanation of the formed definition of gentrification of sneaker culture.

4.1 Original Sneaker Culture

To fully understand the impact of the gentrification process on original sneakerheads, it is first of all important to grasp what original sneaker culture means for this group and which cultural elements are valued. During the interview process, questions were asked to original sneakerheads such as: ‘*Can you describe sneaker culture for me?*’ and ‘*What does this culture mean to you?*’ (Appendix B: Interview Guide) Furthermore, for the Netnography research, blogs and forums were sought out on the topic on original sneaker culture. Stemming from the data analysis, three themes emerged that describe sneaker culture through the eyes of original sneakerheads, namely: Community Feeling, Heritage and Subcultures. This subsection will give insights into each of these elements, in order to paint a full picture of original sneaker culture.

Community Feeling

What became apparent from both the interviews and the netnography research is that for sneakerheads the sense of belonging and community is one of the most valued aspects of sneaker culture. The research participants agreed that sneaker culture entails meeting people with whom you share the same experience, with examples given such as: “*Sneaker culture means meeting new people, talking to people who have the same interests and mainly sharing the same experience collectively*” (participant 3) and “*The connections of people I made through sneakers are abundant. I’m so thankful for sneakers because it allowed me to build relationships with people from all races and ethnicities.*” (Blog 3, April 2022). Furthermore, the shared interest in sneaker collecting has also built a level of a common understanding among sneakerheads, most clearly explained by participant 14:

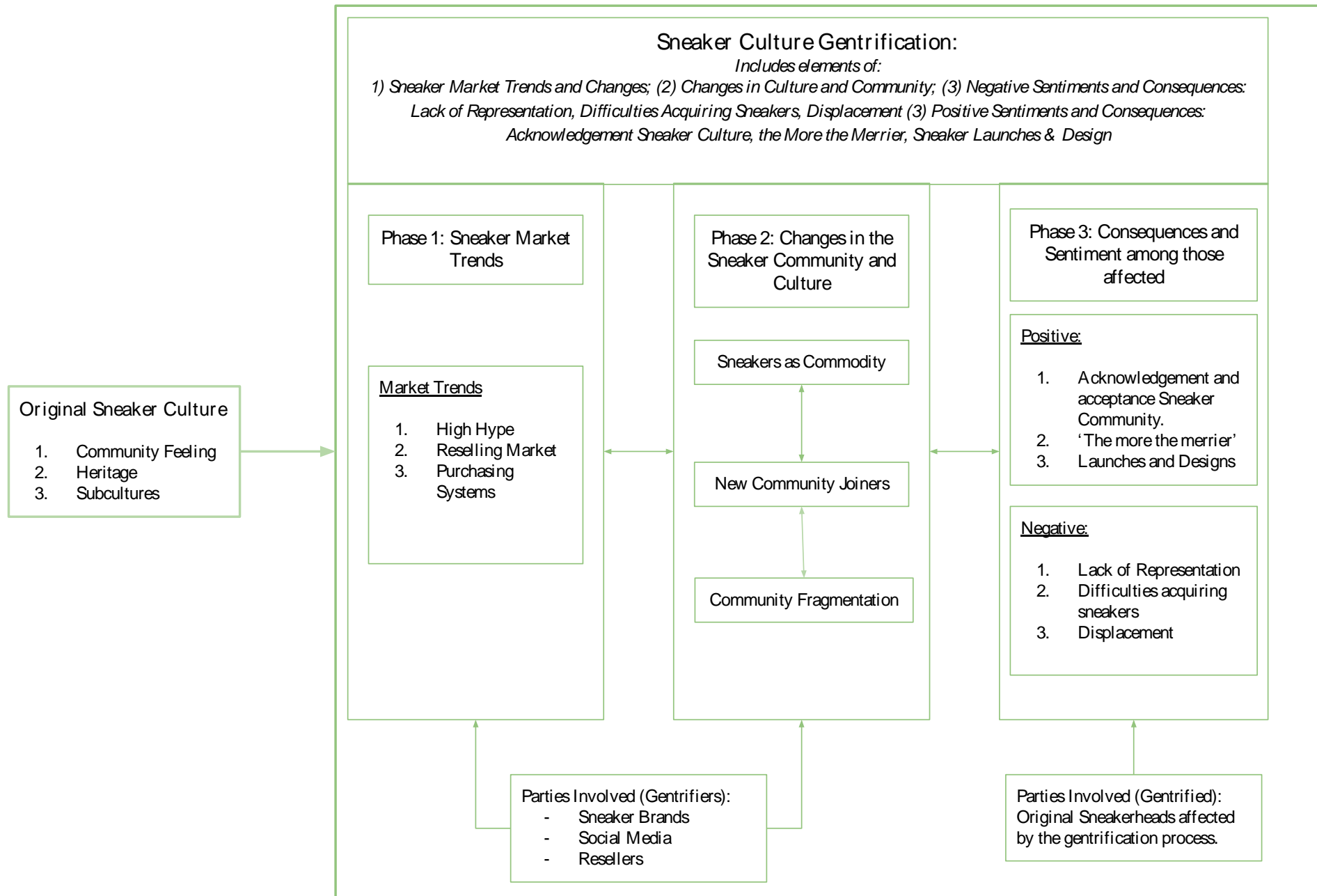


Figure 1: Gentrification Process Sneaker Culture

“When you see somebody with a special pair of sneakers, true sneakerheads, will give each other a nod without saying anything. That nod says it all” (participant 14). Also, examples were given of more direct benefits of being included in the sneaker community, for instance, it being easier to acquire pairs of sneakers through the community network. Participant 4 explains that this goes beyond sneakers stating: *“What's great about the sneaker community, for example, I was able to buy my PlayStation 5 through the sneaker community for just a retail price. So, once you know people, things are really granted to you.”* (Participant 4).

Furthermore, it appears this element of community is sometimes a more valued aspect of sneaker culture than the actual sneaker in itself. It also became apparent that because of this value, sneakerheads actively seek out events where they can experience this community feeling. Participant 4, for example, explains that sneaker culture is not only about the sneakers and shares that he visits sneaker events in order to perceive the community feeling:

“It's about more than just sneakers. It's also about getting together with friends. For example, you have Sneakerness, which is a festival in Amsterdam. And I really don't go there to buy sneakers; I go there to see people I know, to have a nice chat with them and eat a pizza, to drink some beers, there is nice music, and that's more than sneakers. It's the community feeling [...] Suppose you are on your own in the world and you live in the middle of nowhere, in that case you don't have to have these sneakers. It's about sharing and showing.” (Participant 4).

Thus, the data showed that for original sneakerheads a valued aspect of sneaker culture, is the sense of community. This community feeling is built by collectively sharing the same experience and by sharing and receiving advantages with other ingroup members of sneaker culture. Furthermore, this community feeling is actively sought out by coming together with other sneakerheads at various sneaker events.

Subcultures

It is also important to note that sneaker culture is closely tied to other subcultures. The data showed that most sneakerheads are introduced to sneaker culture through subcultures related to sneaker culture (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). The subcultures that emerged from the data analysis are Skate Culture, Hip-Hop Culture, and Basketball Culture.

It was observed that most respondents were first involved with one of these three subcultures, which then led them to sneaker culture. Which is explained in the following quote from a blog post: *“And thus begins the discussion of how he became interested in sneakers in the first place, which sounds a lot like every discussion with any of us. It's usually a combination of basketball and hip-hop that starts the obsession.”* (Blog 2, April 2022). The interview data gives the same insight. Respondents gave examples that they were exposed to sneakers, through their earlier hobbies: *“It was hard finding my place but I fell in love with basketball which made me fall in love with the sneaker game.”*, (Participant 17) *“I kind of rolled into the sneaker world from the skateboard scene.”* (Participant 4) and *“I think I*

can link sneaker culture to hip-hop, I used to dance in competitions and I danced hip-hop. So, I was already a little bit in that community, because they also had very cool shoes on while dancing competitions.” (Participant 3).

Also, it became clear that there is a cross-over between these subcultures and sneaker culture (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). Various respondents gave examples that these cultures are mixed and very much linked. Participant 2, for instance, explained, that for him sneaker culture is linked to hip-hop culture, stating: *“Well for me sneaker culture is really linked to hip-hop so to speak. Those are really for me the trendsetters, that's the culture.”* (Participant 2). While, for example, for participant 1 it is more about the connection with skate culture: *“So there is very much a crossover between the sneakerheads and the skaters. It totally went into the mix, so to speak. I always tried to keep that a little bit mixed so to speak. That it's not purely for just skateboarders or just sneakerheads.”* (Participant 1).

In sum, it can be observed that sneaker culture is connected to and integrated with various subcultures, through which sneakerheads are often introduced to sneaker culture.

Heritage

Another valued element of sneaker culture for original sneakerheads is the heritage of the culture, often tied to one of the above-discussed subcultures. It became apparent that certain sneakers represent stories of heritage and history, and this is what makes them special to original sneakerheads. Sneakers hereby serve as a way, for sneakerheads to connect to special moments in history (Denny, 2021). The following blogpost for instance explains, that certain sneakers are connected to special moments in the subcultures of basketball and hip-hop. By purchasing these sneakers, sneakerheads feel connected to these historical stories:

“For those of us bitten by it, each sneaker is a story, a Proustian journey through a youth spent idolizing the rappers and NBA players we saw on TV. The sneakers themselves end up as shorthand for life experiences, and the stories that come with them: Flu Game 12s, Concord 11s, Banned 1s. They're pieces of history. History that, conveniently enough, you can purchase.” (Blog 2, April 2022)

From the data it emerged that for original sneakerheads, these element of history and heritage can also be found in their own memories. Original sneakerheads share that they remember when certain pairs of sneakers were first launched, from when they were a child. When these pairs are now relaunched, they are extra special, as they remind sneakerheads of these memories and their earlier admiration for sneakers. Participant 1, for example, explains:

“So, I do have a love for those old sneakers, you know. This is the Nike 90 Airmax (Picture X) That's when I first saw them come out, in high school. This one was totally new, because then the air window, ran all the way through. So, you could also look through it, that was really just magical. And yes, when a retro like that comes out again,

you get the sense of wow man, I must have it [...] And of course it also conveys something. A retro like that is something through which you show, yes, I lived through that time and I wore those shoes, and I still wear them with pride.” (Participant 1)



Picture X: Nike Airmax 90 Participant 1

Thus, the data showed that the element of heritage is important to sneakerheads, and can both be found in history of the subcultures or the memories of sneakerheads themselves. Therefore, sneakers serve as a way to connect to a time and place in history, that is of value to these sneakerheads.

Thus, it appears that several elements in sneaker culture, are of high value to the original sneakerheads namely: Community Feeling, Subcultures and Heritage. These valued cultural elements of sneaker culture are important, in order to build an understanding of the impact of the gentrification process on the original sneakerheads.

4.2 Phase 1: Sneaker Market Trends

The first phase of the gentrification process of sneaker culture, represents sneaker market trends. Stemming from the data analysis three sneaker market trends were identified, namely: high hype, reselling market and purchasing systems. Data on this topic was gathered by asking original sneakerheads questions such as: ‘*What has changed for you in the sneaker market in the last 5 or 10 years?*’ and by searching on the topic of sneaker market trends in online sneaker communities. This section will discuss the three identified market trends in depth and also explain which groups are involved in these market trends. It is important to discuss these market trends, in order to understand what factors, initiate the gentrification process of sneaker culture. The market trends influence and mutually reinforce the other phases of the gentrification process. The sneaker market trends described in this first phase influence and initiate the changes in sneaker culture and community (*Phase 2*). Thereby, the market trends discussed in this chapter can be perceived as the initiating factors of the gentrification process in sneaker culture.

High Hype

The data showed that one thing that has impacted sneaker culture significantly over the past decade, is the increased interest and demand for sneaker collecting, often called the high hype of sneaker collecting (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). Both in the online communities studied and in the participant interviews, the same picture was painted: sneaker collecting has transformed from a unique consumer subculture, tied to niche subcultures, to a more mainstream one, caused by high levels of hype (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). Participant 4, for instance, explains that sneaker culture has gone mainstream:

“I think precisely because of the hype. 10 years ago, or 8 years ago, it was less mainstream and really a scene unto itself. Then you had the gothics, the skateboarders and the emo’s. And now everyone and their mother is wearing Nike’s.” (Participant 4)

This emerged level of high hype is often linked back to the introduction of social media in sneaker culture, increasing the visibility of sneaker culture and therefore the interest in this culture. This influence of social media, is well explained in the interview data and the netnography data, with examples such as: *“The web was blowing up, social media was in its infancy, and a boom of sneaker culture emerged from the depths of the digital world.”* (Blog 3, April 2022), or *“social media is much more of a thing now than it was a few years ago, it’s now a lot about: look what I have. Which makes others think I want those too. So, there’s a lot more demand.”* (Participant 2). Furthermore, the data showed that this influence of social media on high hype is both a significant trend in sneaker culture and in turn also influences the marketing and launching strategies of sneaker brands, explained by the following blogpost: *“Previously hype came from streetwear enthusiasts who knew what was cool before anyone else. Currently, social media is a driving force in what is seen as hype-worthy. There’s debate on if this is hurting or helping, but it has changed the way sneaker trends work – how sneakers are marketed, sold, and made accessible in the marketplace.”* (Blog 18, May 2022).

Besides social media taking blame for these new levels of high hype in sneaker culture, the data also showed that the marketing strategies of sneaker brands are often held responsible for further increasing the hype around sneakers. Various examples were given by original sneakerheads, that they believe sneaker brands deliberately create extra hype. This is done, by emphasizing the earlier discussed valued cultural elements in a pair of sneakers. Participant 1 explains this, by giving examples of how Nike’s marketing strategy of exclusivity and heritage stories, influences his purchasing decisions:

“[...] And you know, Nike is laughing its ass off, of course, because they release several pairs a week. And then they say these are all limited or exclusive. And their marketing machine, yes, it’s running and it’s just almost unstoppable, so to speak. [...] I also fall for it myself when a shoe launches and you think, wow that’s really cool, there is a special story behind it. They do that more often, make up a whole story. And then you think, that’s really cool, so you get carried away [...] and despite the fact that you know it’s being hyped and that there is a marketing machine behind it, at first you think ‘oh

well, whatever', but at a certain point you think 'oh well, it's actually kind of cool'. You don't want to go along with it, but it happens secretly. And then you think, I want them anyway and yes you try to buy them.” (Participant 1)

Furthermore, participants share that this high hype is further increased by the strategy of sneaker brands of limiting sneaker production numbers, explained by participant 2:

Certain brands do make it so hyped because they only make a certain percentage of each shoe. Which makes the run on that shoe much harder. Nike is very good at this in that they don't make Nike Airmax for a long time. And then as soon as a few pairs come out again, everyone wants them, so they're basically gone all the time. It does create extra interest, but it's a shame that they are hyping it up so much within Nike. (Participant 2)

In sum, the data showed that over the past decade high hype has characterized the sneaker market, leading to increased demand. This high hype around sneakers is often linked to the introduction of social media and the deliberate marketing strategies of sneaker brands.

Reselling Market

Another trend observed in the sneaker market through the data analysis, is the surging reselling market (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). The data showed that this trend can be linked back and connects to the above discussed trend of high hype, explained in the following quote:

[...] And actually I think it changed mainly because of social media, the hype was created and that a lot of people saw this and thought wow, this is cool, I need to be in on this. And then others noticed, if so many people want to have this shoe. If I buy it, I can sell it again for a lot of money. So then reselling started to happen. (Participant 1)

From the interview data and netnography data it became abundantly clear that the reselling market is now an undeniable part of the sneaker market, with quotes like: “The resale game is at an all-time high.” (Blog 4, April 2022). Furthermore, reselling platforms, such as StockX, are thriving:

StockX is a company out of Detroit that provides an online marketplace for individuals to buy and sell rare streetwear and sneakers. The hook for the platform is that it mimics a stock market: you can track how a specific item is trending in overall sale price over time and make judgments on whether it's a good time to buy, sell, or hold. [...] the appeal for the consumer is undeniable—more than \$2 million worth of gear is bought and sold on the site each day (blog 2, April 2022).

Purchasing Systems

Finally, that data showed that the purchasing system of sneakers has fundamentally changed over the past decade, reflecting the digitalization of society (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). Whereas

sneakerheads used to camp out in front of stores to acquire their pair of sneakers, most purchases now happen online through raffling lotteries (Denny, 2021). Furthermore, these new online purchasing approaches are impacted by the use of purchasing bots. These bots are bought and used mostly by resellers, in order to automatically win raffles and acquire multiple pairs of one sneaker (Choi & Kim, 2019; Denny, 2021). Participant 2, among others, explained this:

"Yes, it's obviously becoming much more digital. It's not like you're standing in front of the store camping out for a shoe anymore, it's online raffles. That's really changed though. And you have bots, which make it difficult to get a particular shoe." (Participant 2)

Furthermore, it appears that sneaker brands over the past decade have relied more on their own distributing and purchasing systems, such as their own websites and stores, rather than distributing sneakers to independent sneaker stores, with the following examples given on Nike's retail strategy:

"Nowadays Nike is going to sell more through their own online systems, rather than that they bring it to retail stores." (Participant 14), and "Nike is now pretty selective with retailers too. Ideally, they want as few retailers as possible because then they can sell directly to consumers, through nike.com, through Nike stores and through their SNKRs app." (Participant 1)

In sum, the data showed several sneaker markets trends over the past decade, namely: High Hype, Reselling Market and Purchasing Systems. These trends are linked to the retailing and marketing decisions of sneaker brands. Furthermore, it appears the emergence of social media also plays a role in these market trends. These trends indicate that the market structure underlying sneaker culture has changed fundamentally. In turn this influences sneaker culture and the sneaker community. The market trends can therefore be perceived as the initiating forces in the gentrification process of sneaker culture.

4.3 Phase 2: Changes in the Sneaker Community and Culture

The discussed market trends have had a significant impact on the sneaker community and culture. Various statements in the data indicate the magnitude of this impact: *"We've seen something that we love change before our eyes."* (Blog 3, April 2022), *"There has been a change in the nature of collecting sneakers."* (Participant 10), *"I think the community and culture has changed so much now."* (Participant 3). Thus, it can be concluded that the market trends have changed sneaker culture and the sneaker community.

During the research original sneakerheads were asked questions relating to how the trends in the sneaker market they identified themselves, have influenced the sneaker community and culture. Furthermore, online communities and forums were sought out on the topic of sneaker culture change.

The data analysis showed three connected themes that have influenced sneaker culture and the sneaker community, namely Sneakers as Commodity, New Community Joiners and Community Fragmentation (Figure 1). These three themes are influenced by the three earlier discussed market trends of high hype, reselling market and purchasing systems. In short, these three market trends have commoditized sneaker collecting and this has attracted a new customer base. Due to this new customer base a fragmentation is observed in the sneaker community, between original community members who purchase sneakers out of love for the shoe and new community members who see sneakers as an investment tool. It is important to note that phase 1 and phase 2 mutually reinforce each other. For instance, with seeing sneakers as a commodity and with the entrance of a new customer base, the market trends of high hype and the reselling market are further intensified. This subchapter will discuss these three themes in connection to the earlier discussed market trends.

Sneakers as Commodity, New Community Joiners, Community Fragmentation

From the data it became clear that sneaker culture has changed due to the perception that sneakers can be used as a commodity and this has brought on a new clientele that collects sneakers for profit, the resellers. This new clientele has caused a fragmentation in sneaker culture between original sneakerheads and new community entrants.

This theme builds on the earlier described market trend of high hype, leading to a surging reselling market. In the research many examples were given of new entrants of resellers who collect sneakers to make a profit, such as *“Now there's people in the game that only want to make money.”* (Blog 10, May 2022) *“Many people buy sneakers not out of liking, but to make money.”* (Participant 10), *“Now some people will collect sneakers for profit, not just for hobby.”* (Participant 5), *“[...] it's love for money not for sneakers”* (participant 16).

From the data it became clear that this theme is very influential in the changing social character of the sneaker community. Many examples were given that this new sense of collecting sneakers for profit cannot co-exist with original sneaker culture: *“you can have commerce or you can have culture, you can't have both”* (blog 2, April 2022), *“[...] it's no longer a culture, they call it a “game” now.”* (Blog 17, May 2022) *“The second sneakers became an “instant investment” (aka reselling) the game was already done.”* (Blog 12, April 2022). This could be explained by the notion that seeing sneakers as a commodity, intersects with elements of original sneaker culture that are most valued, namely the sense of community and heritage.

First of all, as discussed, from the data it emerged that the sense of community is of high importance for original sneakerheads. Participant 3, explains, that due to this profit seeking element and the new community joiners of resellers, the community has now changed. She explains, that the element of awarding fellow sneakerheads favors is less prominent: *“Also, because the community has changed a lot, because now it's really about reselling and making money, whereas before it wasn't about that at all. And now for example friends are asked for extra money on a shoe and before it was just yes, we'll*

trade. You know, no problem. And now it's all more difficult." (Participant 3). Participant 4 also acknowledges this situation, explaining a friend tried to sell him a pair of sneakers for a high mark-up: *"One time someone wanted to resell me a shoe for 400 euros, that he bought in the outlet a few years ago and that was a friend of mine."* (Participant 4).

Secondly, seeing sneakers as a commodity appears to interject with the appreciation of heritage and the history of sneakers. Participant 3 explains, that now sneakers are often selected based on how much they are worth, rather than on the shoes themselves and heritage behind them: *"No, I think they really just see, oh yeah that shoe is worth a lot of money, so then that's the one I should buy. But it used to be really like oh yeah, the color is really cool or the material is really cool and really the story behind the shoe, that's all kind of gone now."* (Participant 3). Furthermore participant 3 explains that this also has changed her personal experience with the sneaker community: *"In the past, a lot of people would ask me for advice on which shoes are cool and which ones can I get. [...] Now I am asked about which shoe is worth a lot of money and they are not even interested in the shoe itself."* (Participant 3).

The sense that the new community joiners care less about the original elements of value in sneaker culture is shared by the interviewees and in online communities. It appears that the difference between original sneakerheads and the new client base of resellers, has caused a fragmentation in the sneaker community. Original sneakerheads appear to distinguish between community members who collect sneakers out of real interest and those who collect sneakers to make profit, this 'us-versus-them' sentiment is exemplified by the following statements: *"It highlights a new class of sneaker consumers who treats the sneaker not as an item of cultural relevance, but a "pandemic-proof" financial product [...] not caring about the Staple Pigeon, MF DOOM, Wu-Tang, or what the SB in Nike SB's stands for."* (Blog 12, April 2022) or *"I don't think they know the story behind the sneaker, they just think the sneaker is good or profitable."* (Participant 10).

A participant of an online community further underlines that the distinction can be made between a 'true sneakerhead' and those who do not recognize the sentimental value of sneakers, stating:

"I'm the type to sniff out a true sneakerhead and a "#sneakerhead". There's nothing wrong with being new or getting a shoe because it's hot but it is just the pure disregard for any type of emotional attachment to shoes. The reselling, rocking and "refurbishing" to sell, buying for a pic on social media ect. kind of disgusts me." (Blog 7, April 2022)

Thus, the market trends of the high hype and reselling market, have commoditized sneaker collecting and this has attracted a new customer base that perceives sneakers to be an investment tool. Due to this new customer base a fragmentation is observed in the sneaker community, between original community members who purchase sneakers out of love for the shoe and new community members who see sneakers as an investment tool. As mentioned before, phase 1 and phase 2 of the gentrification process mutually reinforce each other. For instance, with seeing sneakers as a commodity and with the entrance of a new customer base, the market trends of high hype and a surging reselling market are

further strengthened. In this way, a vicious cycle is created where the market trends and community and cultural change mutually intensify each other. The next chapter will discuss in greater depth how original sneakerheads feel about and respond to this community and cultural change.

4.4 Phase 3: Consequences and Sentiment among those affected

The final phase in the gentrification process relates to the perceived consequences of earlier discussed market trends and the linked cultural and community change. This stage explains how the gentrification process is subjectively experienced by original sneakerheads, who are affected by this process. The data showed, that original sneakerheads both perceive negative as well as positive sentiments and experiences relating to the gentrification process. This subchapter will discuss the negative and positive consequences and sentiments, in relation to the earlier phases of the gentrification process.

Negative Sentiment and Consequences

The data showed that there are negative consequences associated with the gentrification process for original sneakerheads. As to be expected, these negative consequences led to negative sentiments among original sneakerheads about the gentrification process (Shaw, 2008). In this subchapter the three negative consequences and sentiments that emerged from the data are discussed namely: Difficulties Acquiring Sneakers, Displacement and Lack of Representation.

Difficulties Acquiring Sneakers

First of all, from the data it became clear that due to the phase 1 market trends, and phase 2 culture and community change, it has become increasingly difficult for original sneakerheads to acquire the sneakers they would like to have. The earlier discussed online purchasing systems of raffles, that are bugged by purchasing bots, combined the high hype and the entrance of the reseller clientele, has made original sneakers feeling like they simply do not have a chance anymore of acquiring the pair of sneakers they want. Respondents share a sense of disappointment and also share examples of them blaming the new community joiners of resellers for harming their chances in the sneaker market, for instance explained by these participants:

“OG sneakerheads, they're like: I used to be able to buy it all and now all of a sudden, I cannot. Because there are so many hijackers on the coast and so many others who buy it, to resell it. I think they are really bummed out about it, yeah.” (Participant 1) and “I don't think it's a good thing, but there are a lot of people who make money from sneakers and live off it. People who then really like sneakers can't get the sneakers they love [...] I can't get the sneakers I like, for the shoe dealers to make money. I don't think there is any benefit to this process.” (Participant 12).

This feeling of disappointment of original sneakerheads is further enhanced by the sense that now the only way to acquire sneakers, is by buying them on the resell market and paying a high markup. In that

way, original sneakerheads are supporting the group of resellers. The resellers, that are actually the one's that make it more difficult for original sneakerheads to buy on the primary market. Participant 2, explains that now they have to pay this high price stating:

“And that's kind of a problem with the times we live in now, that the people who really want them, can't get them anymore, because of the bots, the buyers and the resellers. And if they do want to purchase them, they have to pay a lot of money for them. And you really notice that, it's unfortunate and annoying. The people who actually don't really care for them, they get all the money.” (Participant 2).”

A blogpost shares the same sentiment, explaining that now in sneaker culture a prosperity gap is at play. Richer people are able to buy sneakers through adopting expensive purchasing bots and make profit of it by reselling, while the less affluent are left behind: *“But in this community, the means were traditionally unconventional. You made friends with the employees at the boutique, or had a friend of a friend who knows the owner of a shop or works at Nike. Now that the means conventionalized by tech “disruption,” the market is playing out the way every other market ever has, with wealth begetting wealth and those without being left behind.”* (Blog 4, April 2022). Participant 14 acknowledges this as well, and explains this also has consequences for their ability to collect sneakers: *“And that is also kind of killing the culture of the people who just uh want to buy it for their collection so to speak. Because yes not everyone who collects has the money to buy a sneaker for resell prices every time. It's much nicer to buy your sneakers through retail.”* (Participant 14). The sense that it is now more difficult for original sneakerheads to acquire sneakers and live out their hobby of collecting sneakers, could indicate that displacement is a result of the gentrification process, discussed in the next subsection.

Displacement

From the data analysis it became clear, that due to the difficulties of acquiring sneakers original sneakerheads also experience displacement. Meaning that original sneakerheads, due to the earlier discussed market trends and community and cultural changes, are alienated out of the sneaker market and might therefore decide to stop their hobby of collecting sneakers, all together. In the research various examples were shared of displacement of original sneakerheads, caused by the gentrification process.

First of all, examples were shared by original sneakerheads, that they are growing tired of the new culture of seeing sneakers as commodities, and their original passion for collecting sneakers is fading. Explained in the following blogpost: *“A culture lives and dies with the passion it inspires in its participants, and the passion is draining from the most devoted.”* (Blog 2, April 2022). Participants of various online communities share this sentiment and explain that it might lead to the original sneakerheads being phased out of the market:

“I dunno, man. Sometimes I get home and I'm just kicking these things off, or putting them back in the box without even wiping them down first. Like, it's just a shoe. You're

supposed to wear it. Sometimes I think, a few more years of this shit, and I'm going to be tired of it." (Blog 2, April 2022), "I'm tired of having to either pay \$100 over retail or not get anything at all. The people that really influence this sneaker shit are getting phased out, and that's what the brands don't get." (Blog 4, April 2022).

Furthermore, examples were shared of sneakerheads being less interested in buying sneakers nowadays. For instance, participant 1 explains that feels like he is being alienated out of the market and therefore actually does buy less sneakers: *"But I have this feeling myself, that I'm really being pushed out of the market. Maybe you're not fully aware of it, but I really buy less, too."* (Participant 1). Also, examples were shared by participants of their friends leaving sneaker culture, a direct indication that displacement of original sneakerheads occurs. Participant 1 explains that he sees people around him quitting sneaker collecting: *"Yes, actually I do. And I also see this happening with the people around me. They also really stop, because at a certain point it's been enough. I don't want to spend so much money, even though I used to queue for it. [...]"* (Participant 1). Participant 3 also shares this experience and explains that this is also due to the community change: *"I do notice that a lot of old sneaker freaks from the past, they've stopped doing it now. Also, because the community has changed a lot, because now it's really about reselling and making money, whereas before it wasn't about that at all."* (Participant 3).

Finally, some participants shared, that they themselves feel like they do not want to participate in sneaker culture anymore. Again, a direct indication that displacement of original sneaker members occurs, as a result of the gentrification process. Participant 18 for instance explains that he does not want to participate anymore, because now even the non-hyped shoes get bought up: *"Yes, look you have a shoe and it's actually not that special at all, and now even that gets bought up. Then I think, f*ck it. And then it is really that I just do not want to participate and be a part of it anymore."* (Participant 18). Participant 10 also strongly states that she feels like she's pushed out of the market: *"I'm one of the original sneakerheads that is being pushed out of the market."* Examples like these clearly indicate displacement of original sneakerheads occurs, due to the market trends and community and cultural change, outlined in phase 1 and phase 2 of the gentrification process.

Lack of Representation in Sneaker Culture

With it becoming increasingly difficult for original sneakerheads to acquire sneakers with displacement as a result, the data shows that sneakerheads also feel less represented in the sneaker market. It appears that the gentrification process had had its effect on the elements most valued by original sneakerheads, discussed in chapter 3.1, such as: sense of community and heritage. Furthermore, many examples were shared that original sneakerheads are not feeling heard by sneaker brands and they feel like these brands should take responsibility in the gentrification process.

First of all, it became clear that due to the market changes, sneakerheads feel less represented in the market, as elements of community and belonging are now less apparent, explained in the following statement: *"What has become a cash grab for many, has arguably led to the exclusion of those most*

passionate about sneakers. Streetwear has long been an expression of identity for those that deviated from mainstream society's standards. It has provided a sense of community and belonging, especially amongst marginalized groups." (Blog 6, April 2022).

The interviewees were asked about whether they still feel represented in sneaker culture. Most would disagree and would link this lack of representation to the marketing and purchasing strategies sneaker brands adopt. Examples were shared that sneaker brands, do no longer care about elements original sneakerheads find important, such as community feeling, but are rather focused on creating hypes, explained in phase 1. As a result, negative sentiments were shared on sneaker brands and their strategies. Participant 1, explains that he does not feel heard by sneaker brands anymore. He states that he feels sneaker brands do not truly care about original sneakerheads, because their strategy is mostly focused on making profit. He also explains that sneaker brands will adjust their image to appear inclusive to original sneakerheads, but this is merely a façade:

"You know what I said, those big brands, they have their strategy ready anyway. As an individual, or as a store in Nijmegen, not in a big capital with a community of thousands. Yes, then you're really nothing to them. So no, I think all those brands determine their strategy anyway. And of course, they will adjust their image to that, so that OG sneakerheads will continue to find them cool. So, they will think about their image, but they will not specifically listen to sneakerheads so to speak. [...] At the end of the day Nike is just a publicly traded company and they just want to make as much money as possible. So, uuhh, yes this is just all just strategy." (Participant 1).

Participant 2 shares the same sentiment that sneaker brands are more focused on making profit, rather than helping original sneakerheads with the problems they now face in the market. He explains, that sneaker brands could provide the solution for purchasing bots, but choose not to, because they also sell many shoes when purchasing bots are used:

"Yes, those very brands can keep it from being bought up. If Nike sells it to retailers and they sell it to people, you can eliminate the bots. And they can also start working with passwords and stuff. And that would work against bots. [...] But yeah, I think especially Nike and so on just want to make money, and they do it this way with bots. And it costs them a lot of time and money to add those security checks through. So, they try to find a middle ground that they do say they're doing it and protect their image. And they will do so a little bit. But they also like to sell things quickly. So, it's really that middle ground" (Participant 2).

Furthermore, multiple examples were shared, by sneakerheads that they hope that sneaker brands do not continue the trend of taking over all retail themselves, but continue to use independent sneaker stores for their retail. It became apparent from the data that these sneaker stores are both important for the sense of community, but also gives sneakerheads the chance to admire sneakers. Participant 1, for instance, explains this and states that he hopes that sneaker brands will give equity to sneaker stores:

“Also, I think they also need to keep good stores and make them important. Because they can sell everything through Nike.com and the SNKRS apps, but people also want to hold the shoe and see it in real life. And not just see a picture. How cool is it when you can walk into a store and you just see cool sneakers. If that is only possible in Amsterdam, and not in smaller cities. Yes, then it is not so much fun for the consumer anymore.” (Participant 1).

Participant 3 explains that this is also the way to exclude bots from the purchasing process, “[.] *The bots will always be there. Only way, in which you prevent it, is to get it physically in the store.*” (Participant 3). Participant 2 states that the very stores that sneaker brands are excluding now are the ones that also helped build the brands and hopes that at least sneaker events will still happen: “*I think a lot of big shoe brands are going to do all the retail themselves, and not sell them in store anymore. Then they make more money and everything can be done online. Hopefully the sneaker events will stay on. And this would be a shame for the stores, and Nike may have gotten big because of the stores too.*” (Participant 2).

In sum, negative consequences are associated with the gentrification process for original sneakerheads. First of all, it has become increasingly difficult to acquire sneakers, which has led to elements of displacement being at place. Furthermore, original sneakerheads indicate that they do not feel represented in the sneaker market anymore and this is often linked to the marketing and retail strategies of sneaker brands.

Positive Sentiments and Consequences

The data showed that sneakerheads do not only perceive the sneaker market trends and the connected change in culture and community negatively, but also see positive elements in this process. The three main positive reflections that emerged from the data are: Acceptance and Acknowledgement Sneaker Community, ‘the More the Merrier’ and Sneaker Launches and Designs. This subsection will discuss these elements. It can be noted that for this subsection mostly data from the interviews is used, explained by the following researcher field note:

“It appears that the sentiment about the state of sneaker culture on internet forums and online communities is way more negative, than the sentiment portrayed in interviews, which paints a more nuanced picture. Perhaps this can be explained, by either the target groups of sneakerheads that are actively involved in online communities on sneaker culture or by the level anonymity the internet brings.” (Researcher field note, 20-04-2022)

Acknowledgement and Acceptance Sneaker Community

First of all, it became apparent that the market trend of high hype and the high levels of attention towards sneaker culture could be perceived as a positive thing by sneakerheads. Interviewees gave examples that

sneaker culture used to be a niche subculture, that sometimes would be perceived as a bit weird. Now the culture has gained a wide acceptance, caused by the market trend of high hype. Participant 4, for instance, explained that it used to be ‘not done’ to wear Nike’s to his pharmacy job, but now because of the mainstream acceptance, this is not a problem anymore. This is a consequence of the gentrification process that he considers to be nice:

“It's kind of nice that it has grown. And it's also, I work in a pharmacy and if I had walked in 20 years ago wearing my Nike's. I really couldn't work there. And it's kind of accepted nowadays. It's just more mainstream accepted. Nike was just a sports company. All Jordans are basketball shoes, Airforce one is actually a running shoe. They're really just athletic shoes, but they're now mainstream accepted as fashion and that's nice of course.” (Participant 4)

This view that the sneaker community is nowadays more accepted and supported is shared by other participants as well with statements like: [...] *the fact that sneaker culture is being embraced by more and more people also shows that sneakerheads are getting more and more understanding and support.* (Participant 11), *“The world has begun to pay attention to sneaker culture.”* (Participant 5). Furthermore, here also the link can be made with the acceptance of the earlier discussed tied subcultures to sneaker culture and the acknowledgement of sneaker culture. As, for instance, both participant 1 and participant 17 explain that now they also gained acceptance in skate culture:

“On the one hand it's nice because, it's nice that there is recognition for sneaker culture and that it has become a thing, in the past it was crazy to walk around as a skaterboy and now it's a hype.” (Participant 17) and “At least it's a bit more accepted than in the 90's, then you were really an outcast, huh skating? Then you were really looked at weird. And now it's like oh cool, you skate? Yes, those are things that have changed and that can be positive.” (Participant 1).

‘The More the Merrier’

As mentioned before, due to the new community joiners of resellers, the chances of original sneakerheads to purchase sneakers have drastically decreased and this has caused the sentiment that original sneakerheads are being alienated out of the market. However, despite this consequence and sentiment, from the data it became clear that original sneakerheads are actually really open to including new community members. This is perceived positively under the explanation of ‘the more the merrier’ explained by the following statements, *“No on the one hand it is super nice of course, the more souls the merrier. And of course, it's great if more people share your hobby, right?”* (Participant 18) and *“it's also kind of fun to actually broaden and extend sneaker culture. To all over the world actually.”* (Participant 3). This warm welcome was also perceived by the researcher herself explained in the following fieldnote:

“I am an outsider to sneaker culture and do not collect sneakers myself. However, during the interview process the sneakerheads interviewed were very welcoming and were encouraging me to start collecting sneakers as well. They would enthusiastically share tips on which sneakers I should acquire first and even invited me to sneaker events such as Deadstock and SneakerNess. This warm welcome and openness really was quite special” (Researcher Fieldnote, May 2022)

However, this warm welcome is mostly meant for new culture members who are interested in sneakers and not in reselling, explained by participant 4: *“It’s not that we are this elitist group that no one is allowed to join, it’s very nice if more people like sneakers, but not with the wrong intentions, reselling and so on. Resellers really are the slumlords of the sneaker world.”*

Furthermore, the entrance of community members is also perceived positively, as the sneaker community can gain diversity in this way explained in the following statement of participant 8: *“I think this change is good, because when cultural diversity increases, it can accommodate different elements and attract more people.”* (Participant 8). Participant 6 also shares the same view and explains that sneaker culture can also grow through higher levels of diversity: *“First of all, I agree that sneaker culture will become a mainstream culture. In fact, a person who loves to collect sneakers, collects different types of sneakers with different colors and functions. Therefore, it can reflect more of that sneaker culture, when it accommodates different people, including different genders, different sexual orientations, etc.”* (Participant 6).

Sneaker Launches and Designs

Another element that is perceived as a positive consequence of sneaker culture gaining high hype and recognition, is that this may have urged sneaker brands to launch more sneakers, and to launch sneakers that are more special to original sneakerheads. Explained by statements such as: *“Over the last decade, sneakers styles and color schemes have changed, becoming more numerous and varied than before.”* (Participant 11).

Participants in online sneaker community blogs explain that high hype may have led sneaker brands to be more creative and bolder with their sneaker designs: *“On the upside- more people getting involved means manufacturers become more courageous with collabs and tech [...]”* and *“Cool that there seems to be competitive nature from the brands regarding creativity”* (Blog 16, May 2022). This sentiment is also shared by participant 10, explaining that sneaker designs are more imaginative and novel nowadays:

“Now the design of sneakers is becoming more and more imaginative. In the past, the style of sneakers was mainly changed in color, just like Nike Air Jordan 1 has a variety of different colors. But over the years, I have found that many people have put a lot of effort into the style of shoes, and they will add some cultural elements, which make people feel refreshing. [...] The design of sneakers has become more and more novel, and more and more joint models have appeared.” (Participant 10).

Furthermore, original sneakerheads also gave examples that sneaker brands understand the value of heritage in sneaker models and therefore are bringing back more retro sneaker models. Which is largely appreciated by original sneakerheads, explained by participant 1:

“For sneaker culture Nike brings back quite a lot of retros, quite a lot of good sneakers, from the 90's/80's, into their collection, that maybe otherwise wouldn't have come back at all. That they thought, you know we should, I don't know. I don't know exactly their strategy, but they do bring back a lot of good stuff. So, in some ways, they're still keeping that sneaker culture alive.” (Participant 1)

In conclusion, from the data it emerged that original sneakerheads also perceive positive elements with the gentrification process, namely: Acceptance & Recognition Sneaker Culture, ‘the More the Merrier’ and Designs and Launches. Thereby, it can be concluded that the subjective experiences and sentiment of those affected by gentrification processes in sneaker culture, are nuanced, with both positive and negative elements portrayed.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks:

In this final chapter, the key findings are discussed, and the conclusions to the research questions are summarized. Following this, the theoretical contributions to both gentrification theory as well as consumer culture theory are discussed. Thirdly, the practical implications and recommendations for market players in the consumer context of sneaker culture are discussed. Finally, the thesis concludes by considering the limitations of the study.

The aim of this research is to build knowledge on the subjective experiences and sentiment of those affected by gentrification processes in the context of the sneaker culture. In order to investigate this context, a dual research method was adopted. Firstly, 18 sneakerheads were interviewed in order to build knowledge on how they experience the gentrification process of sneaker culture and what their subjective sentiments were. This was supplemented by netnographic fieldwork, where online communities on the topic of sneaker culture and gentrification processes in this culture, were studied. Together, these sources generated a rich data set from which the research questions can be answered. This subsection, will summarize the main findings of this research, in order to answer the research questions and draw the main conclusions.

1. How does the process of gentrification in sneaker culture emerge?

The research has shown that the gentrification process of sneaker culture can be divided into three phases. The first two phases that emerged from the data analysis, provide an answer to the first research question as they speak to how the gentrification process in sneaker culture has developed.

Phase 1 of the gentrification process in sneaker culture discusses three market trends observed in sneaker culture through the eyes of original sneakerheads. The three identified market trends are: high hype, reselling market and purchasing systems. These trends are often linked back to the growing importance of social media and retailing and marketing decisions of sneaker brands. These trends indicate that the market structure underlying sneaker culture has changed fundamentally. So much so, that the culture and community has changed, responding to these trends. The market trends are hereby viewed as initiating forces in the gentrification process of sneaker culture.

Original sneakerheads shared their experiences with these market changes and elaborated on how they felt these market changes influence the sneaker community and culture, reflected in phase 2: Changes in the Sneaker Community and Culture. Three main themes were found in the data for this phase, namely: sneakers as commodity, new community joiners and community fragmentation. In short, the underlying market trends have commoditized sneaker collecting and this has attracted a new customer base of resellers. Due to this new customer base a fragmentation is observed in the sneaker community, between community members who collect sneakers out of pure interest and new community joiners who perceive sneakers as a commodity. It can be concluded that phase 1 and phase 2 mutually reinforce each other. The changes in the sneaker community and culture, of perceiving sneakers as a

commodity and the attraction of a new clientele, namely reinforces the market trends of reselling and high hype, and vice versa. Thus, creating a vicious cycle.

To conclude the gentrification process in sneaker culture emerged through three identified market trends, that have changed the underlying market structure of sneaker culture. This change in the market structure, impacted and changed the sneaker community and culture. This cultural and community change, in turn, reinforces the market trends, creating a vicious cycle.

2. What are the subjective experiences and sentiment of those affected by a process of gentrification in the context of the sneaker consumer culture?

The third phase of sneaker culture relates to the subjective experiences and consequences for original sneakerheads affected by the earlier discussed market trends and community and cultural change. This research has shown that original sneakerheads, affected by the gentrification process, have a relatively nuanced view, as both positive and negative consequences and sentiments emerged from the data.

Three negative consequences were outlined. First of all, it became clear that due to the high hype, purchasing systems of sneaker brands and high number of resellers in the community, it is now much harder for original sneakerheads to purchase the sneakers they would like. Furthermore, this research showed that original sneakerheads are growing tired of the difficulties of acquiring sneakers and of the new culture of seeing sneakers as commodities. As a result, their passion for collecting sneakers is fading. Furthermore, the research indicates that because of these reasons, some original sneakerheads have stopped collecting all together. This indicates that displacement occurs in the gentrification process of sneaker culture. Finally, this research shows that sneakerheads are feeling less represented in the market. This is mostly due to sneakerheads feeling they are not being heard by sneaker brands. Original sneakerheads shared the negative sentiment, that sneaker brands marketing and retailing approaches are focused on creating profit, over giving equity to original sneakerheads. For instance, the market trend of brands purchasing system, indicated that sneaker brands are more selective in their retailers and are emphasizing digital purchasing systems over in store availability. This approach is negatively perceived by sneakerheads, as it became clear that original sneakerheads value buying sneakers at sneaker stores. This namely means that they can fairly purchase sneakers, without purchasing bots disrupting the market and this also gives them a community feeling that they value.

However, it is interesting note that those affected by the gentrification process, also outline positive consequences and also share positive sentiments about this process. The first positive element outlined was sneaker culture acceptance and acknowledgement. It became clear from the data, that original sneakerheads valued that sneaker culture has gained attention and is now a more widely accepted culture, rather than a niche subculture. Furthermore, original sneakerheads were also positive about new community joiners, explaining that they like sharing their culture with others. However, it should be noted that this warm welcome is only extended to new joiners with love for sneakers and not for those who aim to make profit of sneakers. Finally, sneakerheads explained that due to the high hype

and attention on sneakers, sneaker brands are bringing out more imaginative sneaker lines and are bringing back popular retro lines. This is much appreciated.

Thus, it can be concluded that the gentrification process of sneaker culture includes in the widest sense: (1) *Sneaker Market Trends and Changes*; (2) *Changes in Culture and Community*; (3) *Negative Sentiments and Consequences: Lack of Representation, Difficulties Acquiring Sneakers, Displacement* (3) *Positive Sentiments and Consequences: Acknowledgement Sneaker Culture, the More the Merrier, Sneaker Launches & Design*

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Through the empirical review of the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes in consumer culture, this research contributes to both Gentrification Theory and Consumer Culture theory (Doucet, 2009; Halnon & Cohen, 2006; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). In contemporary gentrification research, the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes are largely understudied, due to methodological issues (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). The consequences and sentiment among those who are affected, but not displaced, has been included in contemporary gentrification, but only scarcely (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This research, by taking a holistic approach and studying all those affected, by the gentrification process, contributes to creating a comprehensive understanding gentrification processes (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Furthermore, by adopting a CCT lens, this research empirically examines how consumers of the subculture of sneaker consumption, respond to gentrification processes. This further builds insights into identity construction of market place cultures (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). Based on the research findings several theoretical contributions are made to these research domains.

Application of Gentrification Theory in the domain of Consumer Culture Research

Building on the prior work of (Halnon & Cohen, 2006), this study examines how gentrification processes apply to symbolic consumer culture neighborhoods. Halnon and Cohen (2006), layed the foundation for such research by drawing on gentrification literature to give insights into the transformation of symbolic neighborhoods in popular culture. However, as their research was not empirically based and did not include the consequences and sentiment for those affective by gentrification processes, the connection between gentrification theory and consumer culture theory had yet to be fully established. This research took a novel approach by empirically studying the gentrification process, and including the subjective experiences and the sentiment of affected consumer groups, as contemporary gentrification process calls for (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). By doing so, the findings of this research show that there are strong similarities between the studied gentrification process of sneaker culture and gentrification processes of neighborhoods studied in contemporary

gentrification theory. This research, thereby, strengthens the assumption of Halnon and Cohen (2006) that gentrification theory can be applied to explain transformation processes in consumer culture contexts.

Firstly, prior contemporary gentrification research outlines that gentrification processes of neighborhoods, entail a change of the whole social character and community of these neighborhoods (Butler, 2007; Davidson & Lees, 2005, p. 1170). This element of the change of the whole social character, is also observed in the gentrification process of the symbolic neighborhood of sneaker culture. The research showed that due to three market trends, the underlying market structure of sneaker culture has changed fundamentally. This as a result, impacted and fundamentally changed the sneaker community and culture as a whole. More specifically, this research outlined that the market trends have caused sneakers to be commoditized and this has led to an influx of new community joiners who aim to make profit of sneakers. With the influx of new community joiners who perceive sneakers differently than original sneakerheads, a fragmentation is observed in the sneaker community. Thus, both gentrification processes of urban neighborhoods, as well as the gentrification process of sneaker culture, entail a change of the whole social character and community.

Furthermore, contemporary gentrification research outlines that gentrification processes cause direct displacement for original inhabitants of urban neighborhoods (Butler, 2007; Davidson & Lees, 2005, p. 1170). Displacement of original sneakerheads also occur as a result of the gentrification processes of sneaker culture. The gentrification process of sneaker culture has made it increasingly difficult for original sneakerheads to acquire the sneakers they want. Furthermore, original sneakerheads feel less represented in the culture. These two factors, have led some sneakerheads to stop pursuing their hobby of sneaker collecting all together. This shows that as result of the gentrification process, displacement of occurs in the sneaker consumer culture, further strengthening the notion that there are strong similarities between neighborhood gentrification processes and gentrification processes in the context of consumer culture.

Contemporary research, argues that income and social class also plays a role in gentrification processes. This entails that less affluent neighborhood inhabitants are displaced out of neighborhoods, through strategic investment and the influx of high-income groups in the neighborhood (Butler, 2007; Davidson & Lees, 2005, p. 1170). Elements were found in the findings of this study that wealthier people now have better chances of acquiring sneakers than those who are less wealthy, as they are better able to pay the high resell prices for sneakers or buy purchasing bots to secure the attainment of sneakers. However, in this research income was not an element that was separately and thoroughly studied, so no strong conclusions can be drawn on whether income truly plays a role in the gentrification process of symbolic neighborhoods of consumer culture groups. Further research should, explore how income is related to gentrification processes in consumer culture groups, as this would build further knowledge on how gentrification processes are applicable in consumer culture contexts. A consumer culture group context that would allow for this research could, for instance, be the consumer consumption activity of

thrift shopping. It appears that this consumer culture group has undergone a gentrification process, as it used to be perceived as an activity for the less affluent, but now is a beloved activity of richer consumer groups (see Ronobir et al., 2020). Thus, making it a suitable context to study how income relates to gentrification processes in consumer culture groups.

In conclusion, this research has empirically shown that contemporary gentrification theory is applicable to the consumer culture group of sneakers. Just as described in contemporary gentrification theory, the gentrification process of sneaker culture entails a change in the community and culture, and ultimately leads to displacement of original sneakerheads. This finding empirically confirms the assumption of Halnon and Cohen (2006), that gentrification processes are applicable to symbolic neighborhoods in popular culture, such as the symbolic neighborhood of sneaker culture. Compared, to Halnon and Cohen (2006), this research took a novel approach by also including the empirical study of the subjective experiences and sentiment among those affected by this gentrification process. The theoretical contributions of this approach are discussed in the next subsection.

Nuanced perception of the gentrification process among those affected

By empirically studying the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes in the consumer culture context of sneakers, this study takes a novel approach to the study of gentrification processes in the context of consumer culture theory. Furthermore, also in contemporary gentrification studies the consequences and sentiment among those affected by gentrification processes in neighborhoods have been largely understudied (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). It is namely difficult to locate the displaced neighborhood inhabitants, after they have had to physically move out of that neighborhood (Doucet, 2009; Helbrecht, 2018; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This is less of a problem when studying gentrification processes in the context of consumer culture groups, as members of these groups are not physically displaced. Therefore, the findings of this research can both advance CCT research, as well as gentrification research.

The findings of this study show that the subjective experiences of those affected by gentrification processes, in the context of sneaker culture, are relatively nuanced. Original sneakerheads, affected by the gentrification process of their consumer subculture, share both negative and positive sentiments about this gentrification process. This is a surprising revelation in both gentrification research as well as consumer culture research.

As was expected, in line with earlier contemporary gentrification theory, original sneakerheads experience and perceive negative consequences due to the gentrification process of their consumer culture (Butler, 2007; Davidson & Lees, 2005; Shaw, 2008). The gentrification process, outlines that market trends in sneaker culture have fundamentally changed the sneaker community and culture. Original sneakerheads, have indicated that due to this gentrification process, they feel less represented in sneaker culture. These findings align with the earlier study of Shaw and Hagemans (2015) that found that original neighborhoods residents living through gentrification processes in their neighborhood,

experience a sense of grief, through the loss of familiarity and belonging in their neighborhoods (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

A surprising revelation of this research is that original sneakerheads also perceive positive elements in the gentrification process. Doucet (2009), previously suggested that the gentrification debate is more nuanced. In order, to fully comprehend gentrification processes, Doucet (2009) called for taking a holistic approach in further research, studying the subjective experiences of those affected by gentrification processes. This study adopted this holistic approach and found that positive sentiments were perceived by those affected by gentrification processes. Sneakerheads indicated that they value that their consumer subculture is now more widely accepted and recognized. Furthermore, it was perceived positively that they can now share their passion of collecting sneakers with more people.

Thus, by adopting a holistic approach and empirically studying how gentrification processes are perceived by those affected by these processes, this study revealed that the subjective experiences and sentiments of those affected by gentrification processes are relatively nuanced, as those affected by gentrification processes, both perceive negative and positive sentiments. This is not only surprising in the context of contemporary gentrification research, that has mostly assumed that those affected by gentrification processes predominantly perceive negative consequences (Butler, 2007; Davidson & Lees, 2005; Shaw, 2008), but also in the context of consumer culture research, as the following subchapter will elaborate on.

Consumer Response to the Conformity of Sneaker Culture

As previously discussed, consumption can be viewed as a way through which people pursue both individual as well as collective identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kravets et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019). The stigma of conformity, explains a paradox, that individuals in search of creating an authentic identity are on a relentless quest for non-conformity in their consumption practices in a market mediated-environment (Larsen & Patterson, 2022). Larsen and Patterson (2022), suggest that the conformation of consumer culture groups might be met with resistance of original consumer group members, as this level of conformity clashes in their search to create an original authentic identity (Larsen & Patterson, 2022). However, this had yet to be studied. This research, studied how those affected by gentrification processes in the context of the consumer culture group of sneakers, namely original sneakerheads, respond to and feel about processes of cultural change. The findings of this research both debunk that conformity of sneaker culture is met with resistance by original sneakerheads.

Sneakerheads indicate that they actually value that sneaker culture has grown from a niche subculture to a more mainstream, widely accepted subculture. Even if this indeed means that sneakers are now more hype items, described in in the market trends of phase 1. Furthermore, sneakerheads indicate that they like sharing their hobby and that new joiners are welcome in the sneaker community. This indicates that the conformity of sneaker culture is not negatively perceived and debunks the suggestion that the conformity is met with resistance by original sneakerheads.

However, it did become clear that this warm welcome is only for those who are genuinely interested in sneaker culture and not those who see sneakers as a commodity, explained in phase 2 community fragmentation. This could indicate, that sneakerheads do not mind the conformity of their consumer subculture, as long as general adoption of sneaker culture, preserves the authenticity of the original culture intact. This is an interesting finding. However, as this study is the first to research how original consumer culture groups respond to gentrification processes, in order to draw strong conclusions, this element should also be studied in other consumer culture contexts.

To conclude, this study has several theoretical contributions. First of all, it advanced the work of Halnon and Cohen (2006), by empirically studying how gentrification processes are applicable to consumer culture contexts. Secondly, it contributes to both gentrification theory as well as consumer culture theory, by finding that the subjective experiences and sentiments among those affected by gentrification processes are relatively nuanced. Finally, it contributes to consumer culture theory, by analyzing how original community members respond to the conformity of their consumer subculture and concluding that this is not met with resistance as long as the authenticity of the culture is maintained.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this research have several practical implications. This chapter will elaborate on these implications, leading to managerial recommendations.

As mentioned before, sneaker brands have acknowledged that there are problems in the current sneaker market and equity needs to be given to the original sneakerheads that shaped sneaker culture (Dunne, 2021). Nike, the sneaker market leader, has pledged to increase fairness in their purchasing systems, as a response to the growing concerns that original sneakerheads are being alienated out of sneaker culture (Dunne, 2021).

The findings of this study demonstrate that this concern is legitimate. This research shows that as a result of the gentrification process, original sneakerheads are having difficulties acquiring sneakers and no longer feel represented in the sneaker market and ultimately are being displaced out of the consumer subculture, outlined in *Phase 3 Negative Consequences and Sentiments*. These elements, can impact the consumer wellbeing of these original sneakerheads, as they are no longer able to acquire the sneakers they desire, no longer feel the same level of belonging in their consumer subculture as before, and ultimately might not be part anymore of their once beloved consumer subculture (Daskalopoulou, 2014). Furthermore, the displacement of original sneakerheads can also negatively impact sneaker brands. As it leads to sneaker brands losing their most loyal customer base of original sneakerheads, who build up sneaker culture (Dunne, 2021). It is also important to note that those affected by gentrification processes, do not perceive these sneaker brands to be innocent actors in this process. Rather, sneaker brands are held responsible for certain elements of sneaker culture gentrification process. Original sneakerheads shared that they feel overlooked by sneaker brands and express that sneaker brands should take greater responsibility for their influence on the gentrification process. From

the findings it became clear that original sneakerheads believe that the brands strategies are more focused on creating profit, rather than giving equity to original sneakerheads; portrayed in the distribution strategies, marketing strategies and launching tactics of sneaker brands.

However, original sneakerheads also see positive elements in the gentrification process, outlined in *Phase 3 Positive Sentiments and consequences*. Original sneakerheads feel that sneaker culture is more widely accepted and acknowledged, welcome new sneaker lover community joiners, and appreciate that sneaker brands are launching more imaginative and heritage sneaker models. The latter indicates that sneaker brands also bring positive elements to the gentrification process. This research thus gives insights into how the approaches of sneaker brands are perceived by those affected by the gentrification process of sneaker culture. This insight is important, as it creates understanding among sneaker brands on how their original client base perceives them and which actions, they could take in order to give equity back to those affected by gentrification processes. These findings therefore, lead to direct recommendations for sneaker brands. More specifically, this chapter will outline recommendations for managers of various sneaker departments namely for the retail departments, design departments and marketing departments.

First of all, the insights into how sneaker brands are perceived by those affected by gentrification processes in this consumer subculture, lead to direct recommendations for the retail strategies of sneaker brands. As mentioned before, the findings show that sneakerheads feel unheard and unrepresented by sneaker brands. This is largely due to the retail strategies that are currently adopted by sneaker brands. The findings and earlier discussed literature show that sneaker brands increasingly adopt selective distribution strategies and mostly offer sneakers online via their own channels, using a raffling system (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). These raffling systems can be bugged by purchasing bots, which negatively affects the chances of original sneakerheads to purchase the desired pairs of sneakers (Denny, 2021; Lux & Bug, 2018). The findings of this research show, that sneakerheads feel like brands can and should take greater responsibility in increasing the fairness in the purchasing systems. Sneakerheads share that sneaker brands can make a difference, if they do not adopt the current selective online distribution strategy but rather distribute sneakers to independent local sneaker shops. This has multiple advantages. First of all, sneakerheads shared that buying sneakers in physical retail stores serves as a way to exclude purchasing bots from the purchasing process, because sneakers now have to be bought in person at the store. Secondly, from the research it became clear that an important element of sneaker culture for original sneakerheads is the sense of community. The data showed that independent sneaker stores play an important role in facilitating this sense of community, here sneakerheads meet and admire sneakers. Furthermore, original sneakerheads gave examples that they even like camping out in front of stores, because here they perceive the sense of community too (Denny, 2021). Finally, sneakerheads shared that local sneaker stores can also be perceived as the creators and builders of sneaker culture, and equity needs to be given to them, rather than excluding them from retailing strategies. Thus, sneaker brands can have a positive impact on the gentrification process, making sneakerheads feel more heard

and increase fairness in the purchasing systems, by adopting a more inclusive retailing strategy. This retail strategy entails distributing sneakers to independent sneaker stores, rather than solely relying on sneaker brands own online selective distribution channels. This has three advantages, namely: the exclusion of purchasing bots in the buying systems, making sneakerheads feel heard and facilitating the sense of community, and finally giving equity to sneaker stores that helped build sneaker culture. Therefore, based on the findings, it is advised that managers of retail departments of sneaker brands re-evaluate their current distribution strategies and adopt more inclusive distribution strategy of independent local sneaker stores.

Secondly, the findings of this research also lead to managerial implications for the design teams of sneaker brands. Original sneakerheads, who are affected by the gentrification process, believe that the high hype around sneakers, may have resulted in sneaker brands launching more imaginative and daring sneaker designs. Furthermore, it is believed that there are more launches of sneaker models with a heritage element, such as retro sneaker design from the 90s. As discussed earlier, this element of heritage is of great value to original sneakerheads. Therefore, these launches are very well received by original sneakerheads and are viewed as a positive consequence of the gentrification process. Based on this finding, it is advised that design teams of sneaker brands, continue to launch sneakers lines that are either daring in their designs or represent heritage elements.

Finally, this study also shows that sneakerheads believe that sneaker brands are responsible for deliberately creating high hype around sneakers through their marketing strategies. As this high hype is considered to be one of the initiating factors (phase 1) of the gentrification process, this underlines that original sneakerheads believe sneaker brands are partly responsible for the gentrification process. Furthermore, sneakerheads feel unrepresented in the market as they believe the creation of high hype is more important to sneaker brands than giving equity to original sneakerheads. The findings show that sneakerheads believe that sneaker brands deliberately create high hype around sneakers by combining their promotion strategy, with small productions numbers. Sneakerheads explain that new sneaker models are often presented, by outlining elements original sneakerheads find special in a pair of sneakers. For instance, sneaker brands would emphasize that this new sneaker model can be linked to an important event in the history of sneaker culture, emphasizing the heritage element. However, original sneakerheads indicate that at the same time, sneaker brands would then produce very few pairs of this special sneaker, in order to create a high level of hype around the sneaker. This is negatively perceived by sneakerheads, as it creates the perception that sneaker brands do not care whether original sneakerheads can obtain the pairs that are special to them. It is important that sneaker brands are aware of how their current marketing strategy is perceived by original sneakerheads. It is, therefore, advised that this sentiment is taken into consideration when rethinking future marketing strategies. Marketing managers of sneaker brands could, for instance, look into the effect of increasing production numbers of pairs of sneakers that are special for original sneakerheads, in order to make it easier for them to acquire them. However, the effect of increasing the production numbers of sneakers on the availability

of these sneakers for original sneakerheads, taking into account the primary and secondary market, has not been studied in this research. As this is beyond the scope of the research, no strong advice can be given on increasing the production numbers and it is merely an assumption that this has a positive effect.

In conclusion, the findings of this research lead to direct managerial implications and recommendations for sneaker brands. More specifically, it is advised that sneaker brands rethink their approaches that are negatively perceived by original sneakerheads in gentrification process, by critically rethinking their retailing and marketing approaches. Furthermore, it is advised that sneaker brands further strengthen the elements that are actually positively perceived in the gentrification process by original sneakerheads, namely continuing to launch sneakers that are daring and sneakers that represent elements of heritage. In adopting these strategies, sneaker brands can make original sneakerheads feel more represented in the market and give back equity to those affected by the gentrification process. This is important as this research shows that original sneakerheads are being displaced out of sneaker culture, which leads to sneaker brand losing their most loyal customer groups.

5.4 Limitations

Regardless of the theoretical and social contributions, two caveats are in order. This subchapter will discuss the research limitations and discusses how future research could address these limitations.

Firstly, the theoretical and social contributions of studying gentrification process in the lens of consumer culture theory are based on the single case context of the consumer subculture of sneakers, impacting the transferability of the research. Methodological choices were made in order to improve the transferability of the research. First of all, two different research methods were applied, namely interviews and a netnography research. This resulted in triangulation of research methods, improving the transferability of the research (Mik-Meyer & Justesen, 2012; Myers, 2019; Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, a thick description of the case context was adopted; the consumer subculture of sneakers was described in detail. This, again improves the transferability of the research as the circumstantiality of this research data is accounted for (Tracy, 2010). However, due to studying a single case context, the results of this research are not directly and fully transferable to other consumer culture case contexts.

Therefore, it is recommended that further research empirically studies the emergence of gentrification processes in the context of other consumer culture groups. As discussed above, the consumer consumption activity of thrifting (Ronobir et al., 2020), would be a suitable context to study gentrification processes in, as it allows for the study of how wealth and social class play a role in gentrification processes in the context of consumer culture theory (see Ronobir et al., 2020). This would advance knowledge on how gentrification processes are applicable to consumer culture groups and further strengthen the findings of this research. Furthermore, further research could also include race or cultural ethnicity as a factor in the gentrification process. This could provide insights into how cultural appropriation and gentrification processes intersect in the context of consumer culture theory. A suitable

research context for instance would be the consumer culture group of K-Pop music fans (see Cruz et al., 2019). With a growing western fan base, it is said that this music style is becoming increasingly westernized. Again, studying this could further strengthen the findings of this research.

Finally, as this research was conducted by a single researcher, researcher subjectivity must be considered in this research (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Haynes, 2012). Throughout the data collection and data analysis process, efforts were made to be critically reflexive of the researcher's social position in the research. Research reflexivity entails an awareness of that the researcher and the research object mutually influence each other throughout the research process (Haynes, 2012). Here, the role of the researcher and their prior assumptions, is considered to be influential in the interpretation of data and the construction of knowledge (Haynes, 2012). In this research reflexive researcher awareness was shaped by keeping fieldnotes throughout the research process and discussing the research process and findings with fellow researchers and the research supervisors (Haynes, 2012).

In doing so, several reflections can be made regarding the researcher position in this research. The researcher took an outsider perspective to the context of this study, as she was not part of the sneaker consumer subculture and had little prior knowledge on the sneaker market. However, prior to the research the researcher did have her own assumptions on the research context. One of these assumptions, for instance, was that the researcher thought that the gentrification process in sneaker culture would only negatively impact those affected. It therefore, came as a surprise to the researcher that the research subjects also indicated that they perceived positive elements with the gentrification process. When this became clear from the preliminary netnography research and the first set of interviews, the researcher incorporated this element to the research. This was done, by including inquiring questions about the positive consequences of gentrification process in the interview guide and also including this in the netnography research search terms. Throughout the interviewing process and netnography research, the researcher was touched by stories told on how original sneakerheads perceive sneaker culture and the gentrification process. Therefore, the researcher was motivated in the research to tell their story, with the assumption that this group was underrepresented and equity needed to be given by them, by building knowledge on their experiences with the gentrification process. The researcher perspective, the prior assumptions and the motivations in undertaking this research, undoubtedly influenced the research process, the interpretation of data and the construction of knowledge in this research.

It can be considered a limitation that this research was conducted by a single researcher. Including multiple researchers in research can namely further embrace researcher subjectivity (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009). Including multiple researcher viewpoints can grow the interpretive approaches of the research, producing multiple and different accounts of a context (Bettany & Kerrane, 2016). For instance, in this context it would also be interesting to include the perspective of a researcher that self identifies with the consumer subculture of sneakers. This research, aimed to account for the limitation of a single researcher approach, by continuously discussing research approaches and research findings with fellow researchers and the research supervisor. In this way different researcher viewpoints

were included the research, broadening the interpretive possibilities of this work (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Haynes, 2012).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Plain Language Statement and Participant Consent Form



The Gentrification of Sneaker Research

This is a student research project contributing towards the fulfilment of the requirements of the Master Degree Innovation and Entrepreneurship, being completed by the student researcher, Ires van Hout. The research is part of a larger research on the Sneaker Consumption Culture, with as main researcher and supervisor Dr. P.J Franco. For this research, an interview will take place. The interview will take approximately 1 hour. The interview will be audiotaped and field notes will be made. Your contact data [name, email etc] will be securely stored by the student researcher. At any time during the data collection period, you can withdraw your participation, discussed in the Voluntary Participation section. Furthermore, the results of the research can be shared with you, if you would like to.

Name of participant:

Name: XX

Email: XX

Student Researcher:

Name: Ires van Hout

Email: I.vanhout@student.ru.nl.

Supervisor:

Dr. P.J Franco, Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands;

Email: paolo.franco@ru.nl)

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this research is voluntary. This means that you can withdraw your participation and consent at any time during the data collection period, without giving a reason. Even up to six weeks after participating you can have your research data /personal data/ contact data removed, by sending a request to I.vanhout@student.ru.nl.

More information

Should you want more information on this research study, now or in future, please contact I.vanhout@student.ru.nl. Should you have any complaints regarding this research, please contact the researcher or contact the confidential Advisors Academic Integrity via email: vertrouwenspersonen@ru.nl.

Consent:

1. I consent to participate in this student project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.

4. I understand that the data collected and analyzed in this project might also be used by the researchers in closely related research projects.
5. I understand that my participation may involve audio, photo and/or video capture if possible and appropriate, and may involve a period of discussion with the researcher over the interview recorded.
6. I understand that my participation includes:
 - This initial interview with the researcher(s).
 - A potential invitation for further interview(s) with the researcher(s). This is at my discretion.
7. I acknowledge that:
 - (A) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any data I have provided;
 - (B) the project is for the purpose of academic research;
 - (C) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
 - (D) I have been informed that with my consent the *interviews may be recorded and transcribed. Recordings* will be destroyed after transcription (but no less than 5 years after the fieldwork). The transcriptions will be retained indefinitely in safe storage;
 - (E) I am aware that all reasonable measures to de-identify my responses will be taken, including removal of personal information in audio transcripts and using a pseudonym instead of my real name while the interview is being recorded.
 - (F) Due to the small sample size of this study and in consideration of all reasonable measures to de-identify my responses, I have been informed that there is still a risk that my responses and I may be identified through the outputs of this study.
 - (G) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings can be forwarded to me, should I desire.

Participant signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant contact email: _____

Appendix B: Interview Guide

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>*Start recording*</i></p> <p><i>First of all, thank you again for participating in this research. Before we started this interview, you were sent a participant consent form, in which the purposes of this research and the details of your participation were explained. Prior to this interview, this form was explained to you and has been signed by you. In doing so, you have given your permission for your participation for this research and for the audio-recording of this interview. Could please, for the recording purposes, that you have indeed received this information and signed the form?</i></p>	
<p><i>Great! Thank you very much. I would then like to begin with the interview. I am going to start with some introductory questions about yourself, to get to know you a little better. I also like to learn a little bit more about how you started with collecting sneakers. Sometimes the questions may seem a little obvious, but are still very important to the research. Of course, if there are questions that you would not like to answer, let me know and we will not include them.</i></p>	
<p>Personalia</p>	<p>Could you please introduce yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name: • Age: • (gender): • What do you do for work/ study? • How would you describe your family situation, who lives with you at home? • Could you tell something about the town/ village you live in? • What do you do in your spare time next to collecting sneakers?
<p>Introduction to Sneaker Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe your relationship to sneakers? • How did your interest in (collecting) sneakers start? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Was it from seeing the trends, relatives, friends? • How did you start participating in the sneaker collecting? • Why do you (want to) collect sneakers?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think collecting sneakers can bring you? • What was a memorable sneaker for you? • Do you have a story participating about entering a raffle and what happened? • How much time/ money do you devote to sneaker collecting? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Do you get the feeling that collecting sneakers may have had an influence on your goals, for example study or work progress or may it have distracted you in planning/time?</i> • Based on which reasons or grounds do you choose for the shoes you have collected or planning to collect? (Price, looks, brand, referrals) • What was the reason you particularly chose for joining online sneaker raffles instead of buying them in store? • What feeling do you get after “winning/getting” the sneaker? • How do you feel after not getting the sneaker you were aiming for? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>And after that, do you continue hunting for that particular sneaker on other platforms, and if you do, which platforms?</i>
<p><i>All right, these were all the introductory questions. I am now going to move to the questions more specific for this research, namely on sneaker culture.</i></p>	
<p>Connection Original Sneaker Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe sneaker culture? • What does sneaker culture mean to you? • Can you tell me about a notable event in sneaker culture for you? • Can you explain to me how sneaker culture is part of who you are (your identity)?

Change Sneaker Culture/Market Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has changed about sneaker culture in the last 10 years for you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Can you give examples of these changes in sneaker culture?</i> – <i>How do you feel about these changes?</i> • There is often talk about sneaker culture going mainstream, how do you feel about sneaker culture being adopted by a greater public? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>In what ways do you think the culture has changed?</i> – <i>Can you give an example of this?</i> – <i>How do you feel about this change?</i> • Do you feel like there are other trends, that have changed sneaker culture? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>In what ways?</i> – <i>Can you give an example of this?</i> – <i>How do you feel about these trends?</i>
Alienation Original Sneakerheads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you perceive your chances of collecting sneakers due to these trends? (<i>Clarify and point back to discussed trends</i>) • Has your interest in collecting sneakers changed due to these trends? (<i>Clarify and point back to discussed trends</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>In what ways?</i> – <i>How has this changed your collecting habits or sneaker purchasing habits?</i> • Have you ever considered moving to other sneakers brands, that are maybe less hyped/more independent?
New Customer Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel like the audience/customer base of sneaker collectors has changed over the last decade?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel like the new customer base understands the original sneaker culture?
<p><i>In an online news article, a fellow sneakerhead stated the following: “Now, the neo culture is to wear your kicks dirty and stained when that’s not the culture.”</i></p> <p><i>How do you feel when new entries to sneaker culture do not adhere to the unwritten rules or norms of sneaker culture? For instance, wearing their Jordans to the beach or not cleaning them?</i></p>	
New Customer Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you ever felt disrespected by new entrants to sneaker culture when they do not adhere to the unwritten rules/norms of sneaker culture? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Can you give an example of this?</i> <i>How this this made you feel?</i>
Representation Sneaker Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel represented still in the current sneaker culture? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Why no/yes.</i> <i>Can you give an example of this?</i> <i>How does this make you feel?</i>
<p><i>On sites like Complex, people often write about the gentrification of sneaker culture. This describes a process whereby original sneakerheads, like you, are being pushed out of the sneaker market by market trends as we earlier discussed or by new joiners. Examples of this process are for instance that it is now more difficult to purchase sneakers.</i></p>	
Gentrification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel like this process is happening? What role do you think you personally play in this process? What are the consequences of this process? Do you think there are advantages to this process?
Influence Sneaker Brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What role do you think sneaker brands play in this process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Can you give an example of this?</i> <i>How do you feel about this?</i> <i>How could they improve their impact on this process?</i>
Future Wishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would you like to see change in sneaker culture in the future?

<p>Okay thank you so much, these were all the questions!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any things, you feel I have left out of have forgot to ask you?• Is there anything else you would like to add/discuss?• Is there anything else you like me to know about?• Is there anyone you recommend I should talk to, that can also be of value to this research? <p>*Stop Recording*</p>	