

Rise of the Purchasing Programs

Reluctant Adoption of 'Bots' within Sneaker Consumer Culture.

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Preface

This thesis, *Rise of the Purchasing Programs*, is the final product of my master's specialization in Innovation & Entrepreneurship at the Nijmegen School of Management. During the past years, Radboud University guided me in developing my theoretical and methodological knowledge, which helped me write this thesis.

I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in developing this research. First, I want to thank my supervisor, dr. Franco for the continuous supportive, encouraging, and positive feedback during the process. He provided me with valuable insights and worthy comments and was an excellent sparring partner. Second, I would like to thank dr. Sidaoui for his time and efforts and for being a second examiner during the defense meeting. Also, I would like to thank every participant for taking the time to help me search for results.

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Enjoy reading,

Tygo Loeffen

Nijmegen, June 2022

Abstract

Sneaker consumerism is a rapidly growing industry in which scarcity leads to an enormous resale market. Subsequently, this scarcity can encourage resellers to adopt purchasing programs (colloquially known as ‘bots’ in the sneaker community) to acquire the desired sneakers. However, using these programs – combined with the scarcity of limited sneakers – can create dissatisfied feelings of unfairness in customers. Thus, some will reluctantly adopt a technology they may view as problematic. Prior theories on adoption assume a utilitarian view of adoption wherein cultural meanings are neglected. Likewise, these theories do not consider consumer culture within conceptualizing adoption. This research will contribute to existing adoption theory by theorizing a new form of adoption, specifically *reluctant adoption* within a cultural approach.

To answer the research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants. All participants were selected before conducting this research to ensure all different arguments could be enlightened: sneaker consumers who do not use purchasing programs to resellers deeply involved in the use of purchasing programs. The results showed multiple barriers that occur while reluctantly adopting a purchasing program, which can be separated into three main aspects: (1) a financial aspect, (2) a technological aspect, (3) and a moral aspect. If financial resources or technological knowledge is missing, customers will be less likely to adopt a purchasing program. Moreover, if a customer is morally involved in the sneaker consumer culture, their opinion about the use of purchasing programs will be perceived as more negative. Given the specific community in which this research has been conducted, future research could help generalize this phenomenon within other industries.

Keywords: Adoption, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), Purchasing Programs, Reluctant Adoption, Resistance, Sneaker Bots

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Introduction

When Virgil Abloh – founder of fashion label Off-White and artistic director of luxury fashion house Louis Vuitton – sadly passed away on the 28th of November 2021, the fashion industry stood still for a moment (BBC News, 2021). As a result, already limited sneakers of the Nike x Off-White collaboration skyrocketed in value, with some models doubling in price just a few hours after the devastating news (Rose, 2021). Moreover, a recent example is a collaboration between Louis Vuitton and a Nike Air Force 1 shoe. This sneaker, also designed by Virgil Abloh, sold for \$350.000, raising over 25 million dollars for 200 pairs (Tomlinson 2021). This may sound somewhat sporadic, but nothing is less true.

Sneakers – and the whole industry around them – are exponentially gaining popularity, stretching out the gap between supply and demand, resulting in anomalous prices. This popularity leads to more consumers collecting, curating, trading, and (re)selling sneakers (Denny, 2021; Scaraboto et al., 2016). Whereas the globalization and hype around sneakers are creating an ever-developing sneaker consumer community, consumers also happen to notice a chance to use the resulting price difference for profit generation. Just basic economics: when demand exceeds supply, prices will increase.

Consumers can use purpose-built computer programs to obtain a desired sneaker: so-called purchasing programs (colloquially known as ‘bots’ in the sneaker community). These programs are designed to speed up the online purchasing process. Consequently, users are able to buy (sometimes even multiple pairs of) limited sneakers. The rise of purchasing programs creates a vicious circle whereby sneakers will be harder to obtain, resulting in higher prices. Subsequently, these higher prices make it even more challenging for collectors and sneaker enthusiasts to get the sneakers they desire (e.g., the Nike x Off-White collaboration).

Unfortunately, little is known about the adoption of these (rapidly rising) purchasing programs in business disciplines such as marketing. Prior theories on adoption assume a utilitarian view wherein only the perceived usefulness and ease of use influence this decision (cf. Davis et al., 1989; Mani & Chouk, 2018; Ram & Sheth, 1989; Rogers, 1962). Thereby only focusing on functional features and how these features make them feel (Franco, 2020). Therefore, cultural meanings such as fairness and morality are neglected (e.g., Caruana, 2007; Kozinets, 2008; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Wilk, 2001).

Likewise, these theories do not consider consumer culture within conceptualizing adoption (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This is where this research comes into place. Sneaker consumer culture (Brace-Govan & de Brugh-Woodman, 2008; Denny, 2021) can be

seen as a context in which adoption unfolds differently around purchasing programs. This lack of knowledge means that researchers lack awareness on the extent of the willingness of some consumers to adopt this technology and the problems it can cause when they fall into roles as collectors and/or resellers.

This research will contribute to existing adoption theory by conceptualizing a new form of adoption, specifically *reluctant adoption* within a cultural approach. By using a consumer culture theoretical (CCT) lens, adoption will be theorized in the light of fairness and moral contributions. Before conceptualizing the adoption of purchasing programs through the rest of this thesis, the sneaker consumer culture as of today, collecting and (re)selling sneakers, and the definition of these programs will be first explained. Following this, the structure and content of the following chapters are outlined.

Sneaker Consumer Culture

Currently, sneakers and athleisure footwear are indispensable parts of modern society. Whereas sneakers started to be firmly rooted within different cultures (i.e., sports, hip hop, fashion, and Haute couture), the community grew and developed its own culture. As stated by Dolbec and Fischer (2015, p. 1450): “*the phenomenon of consumers connecting regularly with one another is perhaps the most prominent in the field of fashion.*”

Statista (2021) has conducted research on the sneaker industry. Within this research, sneakers refer to “*athleisure footwear, i.e., everyday footwear with an athletic appearance, where fashion aspects outweigh functional ones*” (Statista, 2021). The table below (Table 1) provides information about the total market of sneakers, with a tremendous market value of over \$85 billion in 2021, plus numbers still rising. Moreover, the market for reselling sneakers is growing exponentially as well. The global resale market generated \$6 billion in 2019 and most likely will explode and generate up to \$30 billion by 2030 (Kernan et al., 2019).

Consequently, sneaker resellers have created a new business model within sneaker consumer culture, with multiple sneaker resale platforms arising to support this demand. For instance, one of the biggest resale platforms, StockX, had to process over 7,5 million trades in 2020 (StockX, 2021). The numbers around reselling sneakers are unbelievable and sound pretty farfetched, but this market is rapidly growing, so knowledge of this industry is needed. A helpful way to understand this context is through collecting theories and theories of secondary market selling.

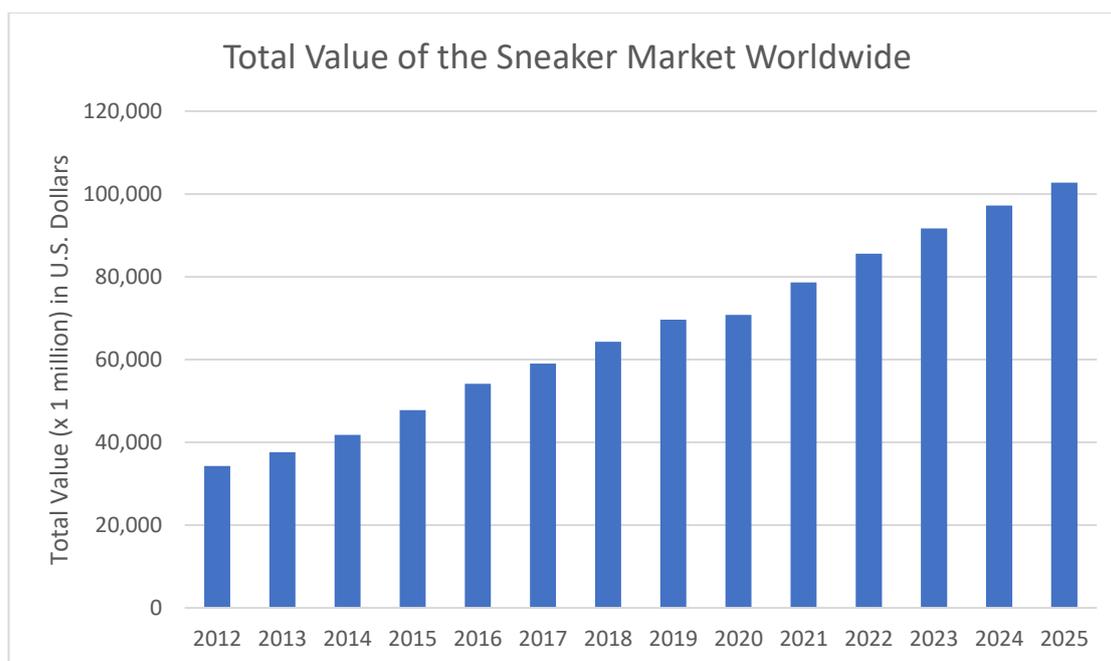


Table 1. *The Total Value of the Sneaker Market Worldwide (x 1 mil.) in U.S. Dollars (Statista, 2021).*

Collecting and (Re)selling Sneakers

As stated above, the sneaker industry worldwide is growing, with new releases (almost) every day. All different colorways¹, models, and exclusive releases – so-called ‘drops’ – make these sneakers not only wearable but also collectible. Belk et al. (1991, p. 180) describe collecting as “*a specialized form of consumer behavior*” and is typically seen as the focus of gathering more of something (Brown, 1988). Some even argue that collecting can be described as an “*organized obsession*” (Aristides, 1988, p. 330). The latter implies a somewhat negative charge of collecting, directing the definition towards an addiction.

Likewise, this implies that the collector wants to fulfill the need for a specific product by carefully selecting, seeking, and possessing products that contribute to the collection. Some collectors even take it one step further. By collecting different products of the same category, these possessions can become parts of our senses of self and play a significant contribution to the reflection of our identities (Belk, 1988), defining a “*person’s character, social or cultural place, even sexuality*” (Riello & McNeil, 2006, p. 3). An important example is the rise of ‘sneakerheads’ (Denny, 2021). This distinctive group holds a unique relationship with their sneakers, indicating a clear sense of group identity (Matthews et al., 2021). Sneakers’ ability to inform consumers’ identities is an aspect that makes it important to study sneaker consumer culture.

¹ A colorway is the color scheme used on a sneaker.

Sneakerheads' desire to update their sneaker wardrobe and rotation creates massive demand for sneakers. Moreover, not only sneaker enthusiasts but also outsiders see a gain in the price for most limited sneakers, creating an even more widespread interest in buying (and eventually selling) sneakers. However, a new development in the market – purchasing programs – is changing the nature of collecting and reselling sneakers.

Purchasing Programs

Purchasing programs refer to timesaving software applications that expedite the online checkout process (Ciment, 2021). These programs make it easier to buy a product (or, in this case, a sneaker) and even create the possibility of purchasing multiple pairs of shoes simultaneously (Wakabayashi, 2021). Accordingly, it is sensible that collectors and resellers want to adopt these purchasing programs since they are presumably necessary for most releases. Because these programs are faster in buying sneakers than consumers that try to do this manually, the latter will not stand a chance.

However, simply 'running' purchasing programs is not that easy. Let alone understanding the software itself – and programming it in the right way – a good server is needed. Moreover, a user must obtain proxies², and multiple mail accounts or Nike SNKRS accounts to secure multiple pairs (Welty, 2021). Therefore, reluctant feelings toward purchasing programs can derive from a technological perspective. This technological perspective is already discussed by several computer scientists (e.g., Rovetta et al., 2020; Somanath, 2021), however, without arguing a sociocultural consumer perspective.

Looking from a sociocultural approach, purchasing programs are also linked with negative impacts. They intervene in the sneaker world by hijacking limited sneakers from other collectors or sneaker enthusiasts. These digital actors are deeply involved in reshaping the market, frequently negatively affecting less technically adept consumers (Duffy et al., 2020). Some consumers even purchase sneakers while entirely focusing on the possibility of resale at a profit. These consumers can be described as “speculators” (Su, 2010) or “resellers”. Therefore, some perceive the usage of purchasing programs negatively in sneaker consumer culture. Thus, reluctant feelings towards these programs can also derive from an emotional or cultural view instead of solely a technological perspective.

² Proxies help hide your identity and your IP address from websites so they cannot block you for being a reseller.

Problem & Research Question

Collecting sneakers is a big business within consumer culture. The sneaker community represents a context in which an emerging technology deployed by entrepreneurs (i.e., purchasing ‘bots’ deployed by resellers) has disrupted the sneaker market, most prominently imposing a clear consumer problem to be solved. Using purchasing programs can have a positive effect: the user is able to buy a sneaker or even resell them at a higher price, therefore, making a profit. Although purchasing programs can be useful, their uses can also be perceived negatively within sneaker consumer culture. In particular, these computer programs destroy the rising market around collecting and loving sneakers and disrupt supply and demand, resulting in higher sneaker prices. This research seeks to investigate consumer experiences as they pertain to bots. Not every sneaker consumer is willing to adopt this new technology, whereby different impacts can stifle adoption. Therefore, this research investigates why some consumers are eager to adopt these programs while others do not. This research provides an answer to the following question:

What considerations make some consumers willing (or unwilling) to adopt purchasing programs within sneaker consumer culture?

Theoretical Relevance

Within adoption and resistance theories, research tends to reduce situations to the utilitarian cost and benefit analyses (e.g., Davis et al., 1989; Mani & Chouk, 2018; Ram & Sheth, 1989; Rogers, 1962), without well-incorporating notions of fairness, morality (e.g., Caruana, 2007; Kozinets, 2008; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Wilk, 2001), and cultural values important in sneaker consumer culture. Because of this, little is known about situations in which consumers adopt technologies they are resistant to. This research aims to enhance understanding of the different views of adoption and resistance theory and how these intervene within sneaker consumer culture. This research will contribute to adoption and resistance theories by taking a sociocultural approach to think about (sneaker) consumer culture. This approach enables this research to conceptualize ‘*reluctant adoption*’ by understanding this context through notions of fairness or justice. By gaining knowledge of the significance of this new form of adoption, a contribution to the existing adoption theory is expected.

Managerial Implications

As stated earlier, implementing purchasing programs within consumer culture can disrupt supply and demand. Doing so creates a reselling platform where “*demand and supply forces interact and influence producers and consumers through the price mechanism.*” (Happel & Jennings, 1990, p. 6). When the secondary sneaker price is significantly above the initial value of the sneaker, this can create issues of unfairness and immoral behaviors that damage the public perception of a product or even brand (Courty, 2017; Duffy et al., 2020; Kahneman et al., 1986; Sandel, 2012). Therefore, sneaker bots significantly impact consumer well-being and the perceived equality within sneaker consumer culture.

This perceived unfairness can have negative implications for businesses. More precisely, the way consumers view these companies. For instance, collectors do not want to buy from a specific brand anymore because they cannot get the sneakers they like. An example is the movement of sneakerheads currently migrating from Nike to New Balance (Waters, 2022). Another example is that resellers do not acknowledge the initial value of a release anymore and simply see the sneaker as another cash cow instead of seeing it as a novel creative design.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand how sneaker consumers perceive the use of purchasing programs and what favors the use of sneaker bots may bring, as well as arguments that contradict the usage of these programs. With this information, businesses can learn what they have to do to satisfy their customers, more concretely, how they can make sure that their customers perceive the brand or firm as being moral and fair.

However, purchasing programs are surfacing not only in the sneaker consumer culture but also in other industries (e.g., game consoles, electronics, and concert tickets) (Duffy et al., 2020). Therefore, the significance of this research is not only defined within sneaker consumer culture but also must be acknowledged as a broader concept beyond sneakers.

Outline of Thesis

The outline of this thesis will be as follows. First, a framework of the relevant theories and the CCT approach to the identified problem will be provided. Then, a description is given of the choices made regarding the methodology. This includes decisions over research methods, participant samples, and data sources. Furthermore, the procedure used for the data analysis, research quality, and how research ethics were assured will be addressed. After this, the data collection results will be shown, followed by the technological and managerial implications. At last, research limitations and future research recommendations will follow.

Theoretical Background

The second chapter of this thesis first contains a theoretical background towards the (different phases of, and views on) adoption and resistance theory. This chapter will then introduce the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research tradition, which informs the alternative theoretical approach of this thesis to extant adoption and resistance studies.

Adoption Theory

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) & Diffusion of Innovation (DOI)

Adoption is an important theoretical lens to determine why customers buy and use innovations. One of the first to do so was Davis et al. (1989). These authors proposed the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) – based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) – in the field of information systems. This model discussed that perceived usefulness (“*the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance their job performance*”), together with perceived ease of use (“*the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort*”), created an attitude and intention towards using a system that is assumed to lead to actual use (Davis et al., 1989, p. 320).

Earlier on, Rogers (1962) proposed a different approach toward adoption. This model applied to a broader set of innovations called the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI). Rogers’ adoption model discussed that the adoption of innovations was declared by the adopter characteristics (socio-economic, psychological, and communication-related variables) and the perceived innovation characteristics (relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability). Rogers’ adoption model, just as TAM from Davies et al. (1989), discussed that adoption is all about the perception of the innovation on an individual level.

Later, Moore and Benbasat (1991) further specified Rogers’ adoption model. They provide a figure containing Perceived Characteristics of Innovating (PCI) measures to classify the intention to adopt. This figure expands Rogers’ conceptual framework by adding several additional constructs that can also influence individuals’ adoption decisions. For instance, image (“*the degree to which an individual believes that an innovation will bestow them with added prestige or status in their relevant community*”) and voluntariness (“*the extent to which the adoption of an innovation is perceived to be under an individual’s volitional control*”) (Plouffe et al., 2001, p. 68).

Conversely to prior models, this article argues that adoption processes can be interlinked with others. All stakeholders have different insights, which (together) determine the adoption

of the innovation. This multiple-stakeholder approach also indicates that the various actors influence each other's sense-making process (Hillebrand et al., 2010). In the next section, mandatory adoption is discussed, as it can be considered an approach relevant to adopting processes involving multiple stakeholders. This approach can also be found within the sneaker context.

Mandatory Adoption

The above-described adoption theories were developed in industrial contexts first and foremost. Besides, the TAM (Davis et al., 1989) was implemented into a marketing context where features arguably create much more volition because consumers are in a different societal position than employees. Therefore, this model has been formed in environments in which adoption was voluntary, based entirely on volitional choices (Brown et al., 2002).

This article by Brown et al. (2002, p. 283) elaborates on so-called 'mandatory adoption': "*an environment in which users are required to use a specific technology or system, in order to keep and perform their jobs.*" Thus, where Davies et al. (1989) argue that attitude towards using correlates with behavioral intentions and subsequently assumes actual use, mandatory adoption theory states that these steps within the adoption process are unrelated. Hence, the users will intend to use the system, regardless of whether they have a positive or negative attitude toward the technology. This phenomenon can also be found in the sneaker community. Sneaker consumers are obligated to use purchasing programs to still have a chance to buy the desired sneakers. Therefore, the user is mandated to use this innovation because otherwise they cannot 'perform their job' (i.e., buying and reselling sneakers). So, mandatory adoption theory is relevant to this research.

However, within sneaker consumer culture (and sneaker community), there is no relationship of authority. Therefore, there is no actual obligation from a higher hand. Nevertheless, a subjective norm within this community reflects what consumers believe others think they should do. Thus, this subjective norm can be seen as a result of the multi-stakeholder approach (Hillebrand et al., 2010). Also, this is linked to the behavioral intention by perceiving the actual consequences associated with (non-)use (Taylor & Todd, 1995). This sense of dependency on others can create a resistant feeling towards the use of purchasing programs within sneaker consumer culture. Therefore, resistance theory will be elaborated upon as well.

Resistance Theory

Barriers creating resistance

Instead of adopting an innovation, it is also possible that consumers have a feeling of resistance towards them (e.g., they are satisfied with the current product, they are afraid of being dependent on technology, or afraid of making life more complicated (Mani & Chouk, 2018). These authors further elaborated upon a traditional model of Ram and Sheth (1989), creating three main barriers of resistance: (1) functional barriers, (2) psychological barriers, and (3) individual barriers.

Functional Barriers. Functional barriers arise when consumers perceive significant changes when adopting an innovation. This classification can subsequently be divided into a usage barrier (the innovation is inconsistent with consumers' past experiences, therefore creates a higher resistance), a value barrier (lack of monetary and performance value of the innovation), and a risk barrier (the user cannot assess the risks and uncertainties associated with the innovation).

Psychological Barriers. The second classification was first divided into an image barrier (the degree to which the innovation is perceived as having a negative image) and a tradition barrier (the innovation poses a change in the consumers' prior beliefs). Mani and Chouk (2018) argue that, within this classification, a technological vulnerability barrier (an apprehension towards using computers or a sense of being overly dependent on technology) and an ideological barrier (the tendency to doubt promises made by commercial sources without a proper substantiation) would enhance this group.

Individual Barriers. Mani and Chouk (2018) also discuss a new form of barrier: an individual one. This barrier implies certain inertia in the customer. Thus, have a resistant feeling toward the innovation because of the current status quo, not willing to change. This Status Quo Bias (SQB) proposes a mental attitude in which any novelty is perceived as pessimistic, generating more risk than benefit. As Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) discussed: consumers prefer a stable situation where losses can be minimized rather than take risks to earn more.

Phases of Resistance

However, resistance cannot be described as the opposite of adoption because there are many phases in between (Heidenreich & Handrich, 2015; Ram & Sheth, 1989). According to Kleijnen et al. (2009), resistance can be subdivided into different phases: postponed adoption, passive rejection, and opposition. With each level becoming increasingly resistant.

Postponed Adoption. Postponement is the least destructive form of resistance. Within this form, customers find the innovation acceptable in principle. However, they decide not to adopt it immediately but literally ‘postpone’ it to a later time if circumstances are more suitable (Kleijnen et al., 2009). One of the most prominent reasons consumers will not adopt it at first is because the innovation is not regarded as a standard yet. Most consumers are still suspicious as to whether the innovation will work properly. Hence, an important aspect is an economic risk towards the innovation.

Passive Rejection. Passive rejection adds functional risk and social risk to resistance. The consumer dynamically evaluates the innovation within this category, taking utilitarian, emotional, and social aspects into account. Subsequently, this evaluation will result in a solid disinclination to adopt the innovation (Rogers, 2003). Thus, an important factor is that the rejection is not driven by a lack of awareness or ignorance on the consumer’s part. Rather, it recognizes that the reluctance is often induced by suspicious feelings (Lee & Clark, 1996 – 1997) or innate conservatism (Hirschheim & Newman, 1988).

Opposition. Opposition is the most far-reaching category of the proposed resistance levels. This level occurs when consumers are actively against the launch of an innovation. An example is “*innovation sabotage*,” where consumers engage in strategies to prevent the innovation’s success (Davidson & Walley, 1985). Apart from the economic, functional, and social risk involved within the adoption, with opposition, there also is a conflict with norms and traditions and maybe even a risk of physical harm.

Limitations of Prior Adoption and Resistance Theories

Prior theories on adoption and resistance assume a certain extent of volition for consumers, mainly focusing on cost and benefit decision-making. Doing so creates a purely utilitarian view of adoption (Franco, 2020). These theories partly consider social influences. Nevertheless, this is more in terms of social approval, not social pressure to compete for limited goods.

Therefore, one significant influence is neglected in defining (different) adoption and resistance theories. Mainstream adoption/resistance theories do not consider cultural meaning in a context beyond social norms. In other words, shared meanings such as fairness, justice, and morality. Recent articles somewhat implement this cultural meaning by defining a broader way of thinking about resistance (Belk et al., 2021; Kozinets, 2008). However, this theory is not attuned to a particular consumer culture context with its own meaning systems, like sneaker consumer culture. To implement this context, it is essential to understand culture theory first.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

Consumer Culture Theory – or CCT in short – refers to a bundle of different theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions and the marketplace while also considering cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Thus, linking culture and social resources in the way they are mediated through markets. CCT explores how consumers are affected by advertisements, brands, or retail settings and how they manifest their personal (and social) circumstances within these symbolic meanings (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002). Consumers actively rework, interpret, and transform these meanings for their own usage.

Consumer culture theory is an appropriate lens to approach the study of the sneaker consumption context. Purchasing sneakers will most likely also involve a certain feeling towards that pair of shoes and maybe even towards (belonging to) a subculture (Franco, 2022). More traditional marketing perspectives argue that consumers think rationally about consuming. Contrarily, CCT shows that circumstances, such as the desire to belong to a specific group, the excitement of finding that limited sneaker online, and the enjoyment of collecting specific models take a significant role in actual buying behavior (Aristides, 1988; Belk, 1988; Belk et al., 1991; Brown, 1988).

Morality plays a significant contribution within the sneaker culture community. Prior CCT morality studies researched how moral aspects are influenced through consumption practices and within everyday communities (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) and how morality can be positioned within an economic (Caruana, 2007) and a technological view (Kozinets, 2008). Wilk (2001) further elaborated on consuming morality by arguing that “*consumption raises another very fundamental moral problem: the need to define limits to individual autonomy, and to recognize that people can and do make bad decisions about their own consumption (p. 254)*”. However, all these studies define morality as ‘the good thing to do’ instead of considering the moral dilemma of fairness. Within this research, this dilemma is centralized.

This research draws upon CCT to study and theorize reluctant adoption in sneaker consumer culture and applies CCT as a sociocultural approach to understanding purchasing programs' potential adoption. Herein adoption of these bots is (partly) mediated through feelings and cultural meanings towards their use, especially with regards to creating a disadvantage for the rest of the sneaker consumer community. This also addresses the weakness in current adoption literature, specifically the adoption theory within consumer culture. This research will be conducted to fulfill the shortcomings of prior literature. The next chapter will elaborate on methodological choices made to answer the main research question.

Methodology

This section will introduce the research context, the researcher's positionality, and the rationale behind the chosen methods deployed. These details cover the strategy behind the participant sample and what data sources will be used. After this, the intended data analysis procedure will be elaborated upon. Last, the quality of research and the way research ethics were guaranteed will be covered. To better understand contemporary sneaker consumer culture, the history and origins of this culture will briefly be elaborated upon.

Research Context

A Quick History of Sneaker Consumer Culture

With a focus on culture in this thesis, the historical background of the sneaker consumer culture helps understand its current values and how these have emerged over time. History tells us that the beginning of the 'sneaker' first arose in the mid-nineteenth century as a 'croquet sandal' (Garcia 2006; Smith 2019). These progenitors of the sneaker were not that popular and were primarily worn to limit the wear of the feet. Fast forward to the late nineteenth century: Popular sports at the time (i.e., croquet and tennis) required a new sort of shoe not to damage the court's surface (BBC Ideas, 2021). These 'tennis shoes' spread to other sports such as cycling, boxing, and golf. However, they were not worn outside of sporting pursuits like we do today (Turner, 2016).

The popularity of sporting shoes did not go unnoticed, with two brothers from Germany wanting to join the party. Adolf and Rudolf Dassler founded the *Gebüder Dassler Schuchfabrik* (or GEDA in short) in 1919 (Smit, 2008). The German brothers capitalized on a popular way of promoting their product: getting someone famous to wear their shoes (BBC Ideas, 2021). Jesse Owens wore the GEDA-sneakers as he won a gold medal in the 1936 Olympics. After World War II, the brothers split, and both started their own shoe companies, which are still known today: Adidas and Puma (Smit, 2008).

Later, around the 1950s, American youth culture started to become popular. This culture embraced freedom and the associated way of dressing: casual, with the Converse Chuck Taylor All-Star being the most popular sneaker (Denny, 2021). Another important company on the rise was Blue Ribbon Sports, later known as Nike, Inc. Founded by Bill Powerman and Phil Knight in 1964, the company started to sell running shoes on the American market (Knight, 2016).

About 20 years later, Nike took a leap of faith, giving a yet undrafted Michael Jordan his own brand with his name on it (Denny, 2021). The gambit worked, and Jordan's became

(and remained) the ultimate sneakerhead-sneaker, with release after release, in every different colorway imaginable, which “[popularized] the culture of people collecting, curating, and trading astonishing amounts of sneakers” (Denny, 2021, p. 459). Additionally, this popularity led to price differences, which intrigued consumers to buy a sneaker merely for profit generation. According to Nike, this creates a notion of “unfairness” (Lotte, 2021).

Nowadays, sneaker consumer culture and the sneaker community are more prominent than ever. As stated in the introduction of this research, both the global sneaker and the resale market are expanding rapidly. The latter is being formed by using social communication apps (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, and Discord) to bring together sneaker enthusiasts and facilitate a resale platform to buy and sell exclusive sneakers. Most of the time, the consumers reselling sneakers on these platforms have used purchasing programs to obtain these sneakers. This research recruited participants from these platforms. Subsequently, these platforms were used to execute netnographic fieldwork.

Researcher Positionality

Since the researcher plays a direct and intimate role within a qualitative methodology study (such as interviews and netnographic fieldwork), it is important to emphasize my positionality within this research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Positionality refers to how our identities influence the research process and provide insight into a specific research context (UCLA Library, 2021). Within defining a position, a distinction can be made between an insider (i.e., a researcher who shares the characteristics, role, or experience with the participants) or an outsider (i.e., a researcher who has no specific relation to those participating in the research).

It is important to acknowledge that I could be described as an insider in this research. Although I have never used a purchasing program, I have been collecting and (re)selling sneakers for around six years. I am deeply involved within the community; I am engaged in group chats and connect with other sneaker enthusiasts and buyers/sellers daily.

This position helped me access and understand participant observation (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989) and made it easier to understand specific concepts and ideas (Adler & Adler, 1987; Asselin, 2003; Kanuha, 2000). However, because I recognize my social position in this research, I must acknowledge any implicit assumptions I may bear since there is no neutrality (Asselin, 2003; Rose, 1985). Herein, no neutrality refers to how I already (subconsciously) developed an opinion on certain aspects. Therefore, the insights generated by the data collection should be interpreted with my insider status in mind. That is, my prior experiences have led to

an engagement with my studied context in a unique way from what another investigator would experience.

However, to broaden the possibilities of the insights I could derive, I have been critically reflexive of my insider position while conducting the research (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009). This has involved liaising with other research team members on my emerging engagements with sneaker culture. These individuals include my supervisor (a fellow insider) and master's research colleagues who identify as 'outsiders' to sneaker culture before conducting the research. Considering their perspectives and feedback has helped me acknowledge and work with my positionality in the sneaker culture context. This context was explored by conducting interviews and participating in netnographic fieldwork.

Data Collection: Interviews and Netnographic Fieldwork

Qualitative research focuses on depth rather than breadth; “[*caring*] less about finding averages and more about understanding specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments in time that are important or revealing.” (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 2). Qualitative research is excellent for unpacking social relations and meaning, like those surrounding sneaker consumer culture and purchasing programs. The most common way to gather data within qualitative research is by conducting interviews (Arsel, 2017).

Conducting interviews is useful because they can be seen as one of the most trustworthy and effective data sources about customers because of the flexible but focused nature of gathering and collecting data (Arsel, 2017). Interviews are, therefore, suitable for this research; they provide an in-depth view of the perceptions of experiences that are important to sneaker collectors and resellers (Belk et al., 2013).

Within this research, a semi-structured interview method was used. Each interview took its own form but followed a specific set of research questions around a series of themes (Berg & Lune, 2012). These questions are found in Appendix A. This semi-structured interviewing method is advantageous because it allows for some flexibility for researchers to discuss aspects that the participants feel are important and relevant to the investigation. This way, the researcher was open to discovering parts of the context that were not expected before the research was undertaken (Arsel, 2017).

This research was part of a wider team of master's students studying sneaker consumer culture. Therefore, the interview questions have been based on multiple overlapping studies, all with different approaches to this culture (and the use of purchasing programs within this

community). The first section of questions was conducted to provide a general overview of the sneaker consumption background, followed by a specific segment on brand loyalty, brand collaborations, and finally, purchasing programs.

The interviewees were selected by their consumption within sneaker consumer culture. By doing so, a non-probability sampling technique has been used. This indicates that the sample is selected and is non-random. More specifically, this research has used the purposive theoretical sampling technique by choosing participants based on emerging findings and theory (Saunders, 2012). Because the research question aims to investigate the (reluctant) adoption of purchasing programs, consumers who do not use them, consumers who only recently started using them, and consumers who are deeply involved in the use of purchasing programs have been interviewed. This focus created a various spectrum of participants. In table 2, a list of the interviewees in this research can be found.

Participant No.	Date	Sneaker Collector?	Reseller?	Use of p.p.	Feelings towards p.p.	Interview Duration
1.	20/02	Yes	Yes	Yes	Neutral (P)	50m55s
2.	02/03	Yes	No	No	Negative	48m39s
3.	03/03	Yes	Not anymore	No	Negative	33m58s
4.	03/03	Yes	No	No	Negative	40m10s
5.	12/03	Yes	Yes	No	Neutral (N)	42m24s
6.	13/03	Not really	Yes	No	Negative	39m45s
7.	05/04	No	Yes	Yes	Positive	32m50s
8.	10/04	Yes	No	No	Negative	41m10s
9.	13/04	Yes	Yes	Yes	Positive	41m40s
10.	16/04	Yes	Yes	No	Negative	34m32s
11.	20/04	Yes	No	No	Negative	31m06s
12.	25/04	Not really	Yes	Yes	Positive	52m44s
13.	25/04	Not really	No	No	Neutral (N)	27m01s
14.	28/04	Yes	Yes	Yes	Positive	27m11s

Table 2. Participant table.

These interviewees can be seen as the primary data source and will be used to answer the research question. However, this research has an inductive approach, meaning that the central concepts have not (yet) been defined (Corley, 2015; Thomas, 2006). As described in

chapter 2, the theoretical base, alongside the data analysis, will provide enough information to answer the research question. The research question is designed to build more theoretical knowledge about the adoption of purchasing programs, of which little to no empirical-based theories have been written yet.

Next to conducting interviews, netnographic fieldwork was undertaken to investigate sneaker consumer culture and the adoptive use of purchasing programs. Netnography can be defined as a form of ethnographic research focusing on online communities (Kozinets, 2002). This research consisted of online research on other opinions on sneaker bots using different social media platforms (e.g., Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook) and by reading through two different WhatsApp group chats containing over 200 sneaker consumers and resellers. The observations found in these communities are less “*obtrusive*” than those derived from the interviews because the context is not fabricated by the researcher (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62).

The netnographic fieldwork serves a supplementary role within this research design. Triangulation of netnographic fieldwork with data collected by the interviews was useful to generalize to larger populations other than the participants. The conclusion was supported more by getting more information and points of view from different consumers. Additionally, this fieldwork helped learn more about the broader context around sneaker consumer culture and make sense of the data found in the interviews.

Data Analysis

As stated above, all interviews have been recorded, transcribed, and coded. The latter implies that fragments of words are labeled with certain concepts in order to define them (Bleijenbergh, 2015). Coding was done to link the perceived data to the earlier described theoretical concepts. Since the reluctant adoption concept does not yet exist, no pre-defined codebook was used. All data has been transcribed using the application Trint and coded manually using the computer program ATLAS.ti.

First, an open coding system was used to summarize the transcribed data. Second, an axial coding system was used, so the interrelationships between all concepts could be found and constructed (Goulding, 2005). The coded data has been used to find patterns within all data. The coded data was subsequently interpreted. Therefore, trying to find relations between the perceived interviews and concepts. Before these relations were conducted, it was important to consider multiple principles to address the quality of research.

Quality of Research

According to Hogg and Maclaran (2008), two important criteria have to be met when conducting research in CCT studies. They consist of (1) authenticity and (2) plausibility. Both criteria will be elaborated upon below, attempting to address the validity and reliability of this research.

Authenticity. The first research quality criterion focuses on the way the data is interpreted and if the researcher has spent time in the field, “*experiencing the “lived world” of the informants.*” (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008, p. 135). Therefore, the research is authentic if the data collection and analysis processes are adequately described. Furthermore, this research conveys authenticity by ensuring that all arguments link back to the perceived data and that the researcher's personal biases are included. Also, because this research has been conducted by someone involved in the sneaker consumer culture, the authenticity of this research has been strengthened.

Plausibility. The second criterion focuses less on the process but more on the link between the data and the results. A good fit between the information and the explanation is required to get plausible research. Thus, the results must be consistent when conducting research and not ignore inconvenient themes or findings. The plausibility of this research is guaranteed by asking specific questions (built upon the theoretical background) and making sure that the information found in the data collection answers the research question.

Another important criterion – which is consistent with, although not strongly touched upon by Hogg and Maclaran (2008) – for exploring the trustworthiness of naturalistic research findings is argued by Bass et al. (2018). This criterion is described as *Transferability* and was first discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989). Transferability checks whether the results or findings are applicable to another context. Qualitative research tends to balance the specificity of the findings required to explain the particular circumstances of a context and consider if it can reasonably apply to contexts bearing similar features. This is also the case within this research, which focuses on sneaker consumer culture. To ensure this research is transferable, it is important to understand how this group is affected. By doing so, the research conducted in this study can be transferable to similar cultures or groups and can even be implemented in broader settings. But before this research can be implemented in more general settings, it is important to ensure that the research ethics are followed.

Research Ethics

The ethics of this research were addressed by taking multiple aspects into account and using the data responsibly and confidentially. First, the treatment of the participants was designed correctly. All questions were asked neutrally, and the interview was designed to make the interviewees feel comfortable. Additionally, the research goals were mentioned beforehand, and the interviewees were told they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

All participants have been provided with a plain language statement and a consent form, which can be found in the appendices. These documents were read and signed before conducting the interviews. This way, the participation of the interviewees was confidential and transparent. The interviews were recorded with the interviewee's permission and have been transcribed. These transcriptions are not in this paper but can be provided if necessary. As stated in the plain language statement (appendix B) and the consent form (appendix C), all results found from the interviews have been sent to the interviewee if desired. All participants that wanted to participate were promised to receive the final research by email.

Also, the information gathered from the interviews was anonymized by using pseudonyms. This was also informed to the participants and was done to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. These pseudonyms will refer to any participants and their experiences in the forthcoming sections. Some transcripts have been modified slightly to prevent identification (Markham, 2012).

To implement findings from netnographic fieldwork, four ethical research procedures must be followed (Kozinets, 2002). (1) disclose intentions, (2) ensure confidentiality and anonymity, (3) seek and incorporate feedback from members, and (4) take a position on the “*private-versus-public medium issue*” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65). Because some of the findings derived from the netnographic fieldwork were found in private group chats, it was challenging to implement these in this research. Furthermore, the results derived from publicly accessible websites (e.g., Reddit) had to be changed to prevent identification (Markham, 2012). Because all internet quotes were relatively short and direct, changing a few words could change the whole nature of these findings. Therefore, the findings derived from the netnographic fieldwork were not implemented in the following chapter. However, because this fieldwork was used to enlarge knowledge about the community and how sneaker bots intervene in this culture and make sense of the interview data, it still contributed to this research.

Findings

Following the theoretical background and the methodology used, this chapter will elaborate on the results of this research. The data gathered in the interviews, combined with the theoretical framework that has been developed, make it possible to answer the research question: *What considerations make some consumers willing (or unwilling) to adopt purchasing programs within sneaker consumer culture?*

Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework can be obtained by looking at the findings as found in the qualitative research (figure 1). This framework contains three aspects, each explaining a part of the adoption of purchasing programs: a financial aspect, a technological aspect, and a moral aspect. In turn, these three aspects help explain how consumers come to oppose, passively reject, or reluctantly adopt purchasing programs. The first two ('opposition' and 'passive rejection') align with the concepts defined in the theoretical background (i.e., Kleijnen et al., 2009; Rogers, 2003). The last view on adoption – reluctant adoption – is conceptualized in this research and thereby contributes to existing adoption theories.

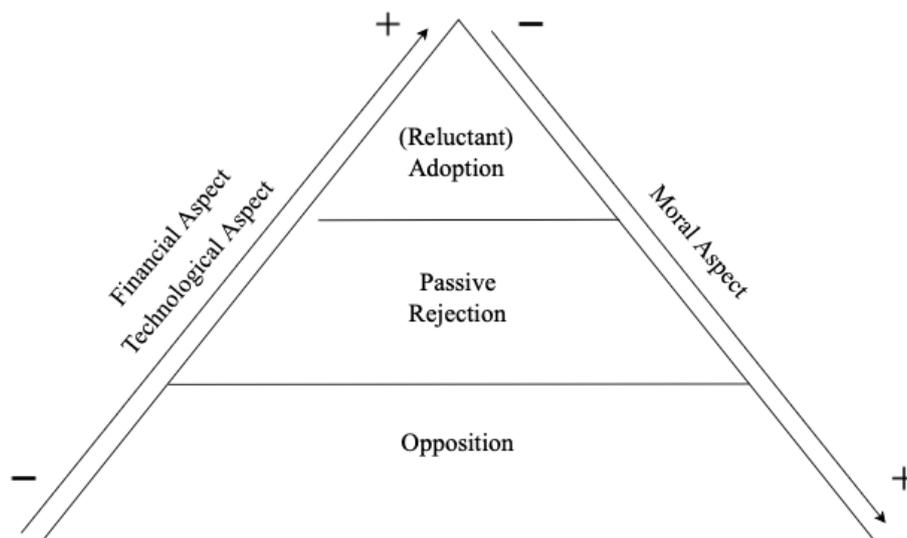


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

First, a cost and benefit analysis occurs when consumers doubt adopting a purchasing program: acquiring such a program should be seen as a large investment. Second, the findings further expand on existing adoption theory by formulating reluctant feelings that emerge from (a lack of) technological knowledge. This shortcoming is seen not only at the start of using purchasing programs but can also be found later on. Third, a discussion of fairness within the use of

purchasing programs has been found. Across all themes, sneaker consumers see the formulated aspects as barriers to adopting purchasing programs within sneaker consumer culture. An explanation of how the parts should be understood in terms of the pyramid's sides can be found below. Furthermore, a more elaborative interpretation of the different views on adoption can be found at the end of this chapter.

Financial Aspect

The first central theme that emerged focuses on an economic view of the use of purchasing programs. This view can be described as a cost and benefit analysis (Davis et al., 1989; Mani & Chouk, 2018; Plouffe et al., 2001; Ram & Sheth, 1989; Rogers, 1962). Therefore, if the investments that have to be made (price- and timewise) are higher than the predicted revenues, the user is less likely to adopt a purchasing program.

According to several interviewees, acquiring a purchasing program is expensive, with prices above €1,000 being common. For example, participant 1: *“At the time, I paid €3,400 for a bot. But there are also bots worth €7,000. You even had a €20,000 bot [...], but the more expensive ones work better most of the time”*. Moreover, participant 9 said: *“Yeah, I just couldn't afford it. I mean, you normally don't have like €3,000 to spend. And if so, you also need money to buy multiple sneakers at the drop. So, it doesn't end with purchasing a bot.”*

Also, the participants that were not involved in purchasing programs are familiar with the prices of such a program. *“Often those things [sneaker bots] are quite expensive, especially if you want a good working one. [...] And I think that a bot is only profitable if you have a lot of money because then you are able to buy multiple pairs of shoes.”* (Participant 4). In this case, even the users interested in buying a purchasing program cannot do so simply because they do not have the resources. Like, participant 6:

Of course, you have different types of bots. Some start under €100, but some bots are worth more than €4,000. I don't know the ins and outs, but the €4,000 one is probably better. But using a bot, you must also buy certain things to run it. So, it costs a lot of money [...]. I didn't just have €5,000 lying around to invest.

As argued above, simply purchasing a bot alone is not the only investment to be made. To keep a bot running, investments in proxies are needed. This is also claimed by participant 1: *“It's not a matter of just buying a program once and having no more costs. You have a lot of proxy costs, for instance. Also, I'm in a cookgroup [group that supplies information about sneaker drops] that costs €100 each month.”* And participant 10: *“It is quite expensive to run a bot, especially*

with everything that comes with it. There are a lot of extra costs involved.” This argument is also described by participant 7:

The first one [sneaker bot] was \$500 or so, but that’s cheap for a bot; that’s just an entry-level price. But hey, those bots are cheap for a reason. So, it didn’t work so well that you make a lot more money from it. After a short time, I bought a more expensive one which worked better. So that could also be another reason people don’t use bots because they are a big investment. [...] Not everyone has €2,000 to invest in a bot.

Moreover, participant 12 said:

The most I’ve spent is \$7,500, which was the resell value of the bot at that time. You would be surprised how difficult it is to get a bot. The retail value of that bot was \$200. But yes, it sold out, so you had to buy it from a third party. Those people determine the price based on how good the bot works. So, I bought it for \$7,500, and four months later, the developer stopped, and I lost all my money.

Thus, even with higher investment costs, purchasing a sneaker bot is not a guarantee for success. There are multiple risks involved. An example is that a bot could stop working properly after some time. Another example is being given by participant 7:

But that’s the botting game, so to speak. If you doubt too long, you’re already too late. For example, you had the so-called NOTBOT a while ago. With this bot, users were able to secure 1000 pairs a week on Zalando in the first month. That bot went for \$15,000 or so. But later, Zalando started to adjust things, and the bot didn’t work that well anymore. Thus, because of the popularity, the bot's success rate decreased. So, it also is a risk to buy a bot.

In this example, the fact that a bot gained popularity had a negative consequence. Whereas the bot could be used for entrepreneurial purposes of buying and (re)selling sneakers, the hype around the bot eventually destroyed itself. Consequently, all users that purchased this bot lost their investment after a short period. However, the story does not end there; within the adoption of purchasing programs, the technological and moral aspects also have to be considered.

Technological Aspect

The next emergent theme on the adoption of purchasing programs focuses on the technological side of these programs. To use purchasing programs, specific knowledge about computers – more specifically computer programs – is needed. Therefore, a technological perspective can also derive reluctant feelings towards purchasing programs. As stated by participant 2: *“The reason I didn’t do it [use a bot] is that I barely know how to turn on a computer. So, I had no idea how to use a bot”*. Thus, not being familiar with these programs can also prevent consumers from adopting purchasing programs.

This argumentation is in line with what was stated by participant 8, who said: *“Besides, I’m not that technically minded, so that also plays a big role. I just don’t know much about bots, so I don’t feel like getting started.”* Both participants show a certain reluctance towards the use of purchasing programs simply because they do not have the technological abilities to do so.

On the contrary, other consumers are urged to adopt purchasing programs because they do not perceive the technological aspect as a barrier. Participant 9 argues: *“And then at some point you discover bots. I’m quite technical myself, so it didn’t take long for me to invest a bit in those programs”.*

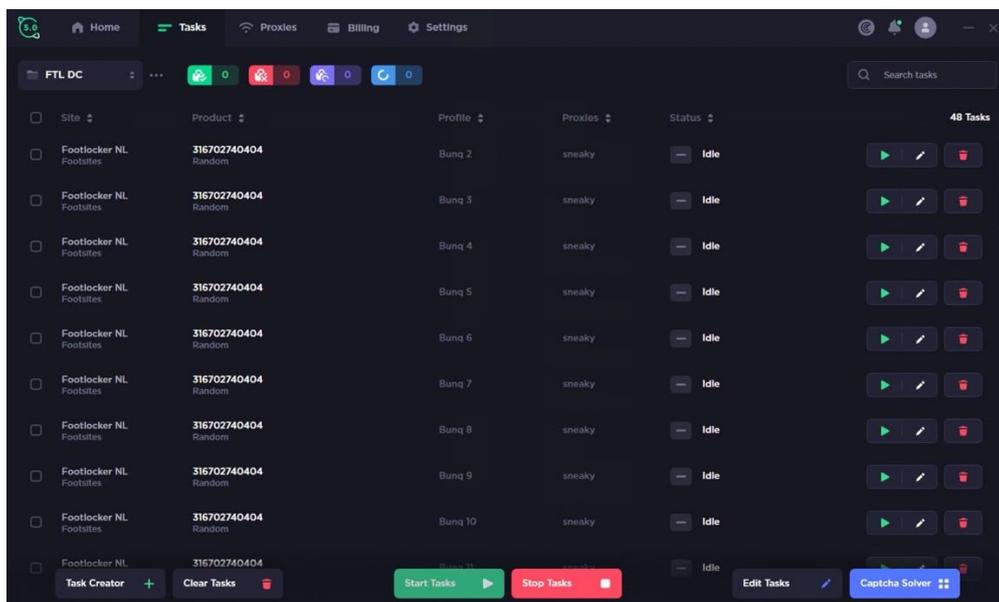


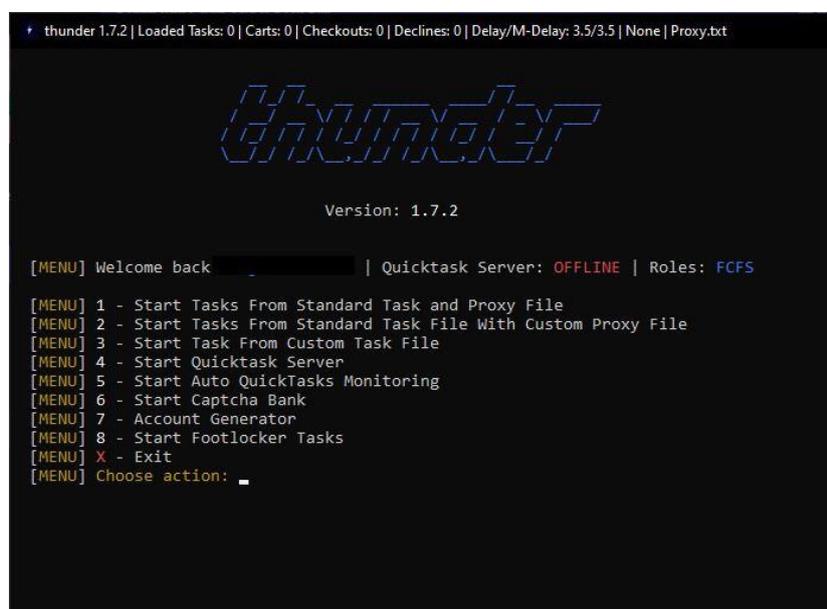
Figure 2. The interface of the sneaker bot ‘Cybersole’ (GUI).

However, this technological barrier is not solved at the start of using purchasing programs. In figure 2, an interface of a sneaker bot is shown. This bot uses a Graphic User Interface (GUI). This means that the users do not have to write down commands themselves but can just choose from a menu. A GUI-bot is argued to be easier to understand. However, the user still has to learn how to work with these sneaker bots in order to secure a pair of sneakers. Consequently, users generally do not understand how the technology around these programs works and just develop a surface-level understanding of the purchasing programs. Take, for example, this quote from participant 7:

My first bot was a bit of a thing. I didn’t understand it at all. At first, you think you just have to turn on such a program and then have multiple pairs, but it doesn’t work that way. It takes much effort to design your bot in the right way. It’s a lot of hassle, so the first ten to twenty drops with a bot, I just secured one pair of sneakers, sometimes even nothing, because it’s that hard.

This quote shows that the actual use of a purchasing program – mainly looking at the technological aspect of this innovation – is not a one-time decision. Merely, it can be seen as an adoption process a user goes through. Participant 12 feels the same way by arguing the following:

People are very quick to think bluntly that it's a matter of turning on the program and walking away from the computer. People don't realize that it [using a bot] takes an awful lot of time and money, and that makes sense. Besides, you also need to 'have talent'. Some bot-users are better than others. [...] The more time and effort you put into it, the better it gets. You also learn more about how to start using a bot after you have used it. The first bot I bought gave me very little success. After learning more about which bot I needed, I noticed a huge difference [in success rate].



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thunder 1.7.2 | Loaded Tasks: 0 | Carts: 0 | Checkouts: 0 | Declines: 0 | Delay/M-Delay: 3.5/3.5 | None | Proxy.txt

thunder

Version: 1.7.2

[MENU] Welcome back _____ | Quicktask Server: OFFLINE | Roles: FCFS

[MENU] 1 - Start Tasks From Standard Task and Proxy File
[MENU] 2 - Start Tasks From Standard Task File With Custom Proxy File
[MENU] 3 - Start Task From Custom Task File
[MENU] 4 - Start Quicktask Server
[MENU] 5 - Start Auto QuickTasks Monitoring
[MENU] 6 - Start Captcha Bank
[MENU] 7 - Account Generator
[MENU] 8 - Start Footlocker Tasks
[MENU] X - Exit
[MENU] Choose action: _

```

Figure 3. The interface of the sneaker bot 'Thunder' (CLI).

As stated by participant 12, using (thus, adopting) a purchasing program is best defined as an ongoing learning process. To successfully implement it within their sneaker consumption, the user must develop some technological knowledge about the innovation. In figure 3, another screenshot from a sneaker bot is being shown, this time with a Command Line Interface (CLI). CLI means that the users must enter the commands themselves for the bot to work. Therefore, it is crucial to have correct encoding knowledge to give effective commands.

According to participant 7, the most challenging part of learning how a bot works is the scarcity in which these programs operate. Because only a certain number of sneakers are available, bot-users must outperform their competitors. Therefore, the proper way to set up a sneaker bot is not shared regularly. An example is being given by participant 7:

The problem is that nobody says how such a bot works or which set-up you should use. Because if you do, your set-up will no longer work because everyone will use it. [...] So, it's all about developing your own knowledge about the bot. If you share this information, your bot is no longer worth anything, or your method is gone. So, it is tough to get the correct information. If you know some people in the sneaker game who have the same bot, you will talk to them. Sometimes you get tips, sometimes you don't. Then you must figure the rest out by yourself by just trying things. Suppose you have ten drops. One time you use these proxies [...] if that works, great. If that doesn't work, you change them the next drop. If at some point the proxies are working and you still can't cop, then you're going to adjust other things. For example, more credit cards or fewer credit cards. It is a bit of a custom mark to see what exactly works.

Thus, if a consumer is willing to adopt (and make use) of a purchasing program, they have to gain the knowledge – which is necessary to use this innovation – by themselves. However, the technological knowledge about the sneaker bot itself is not the only technical difficulty with using these purchasing programs. Because most web shops and stores perceive the use of purchasing programs as unfair, they do the best they can to disrupt these programs. For example, this quote from participant 1: *“It's also possible that a website has been updated recently and that a certain coding of the bot no longer works and therefore must be adjusted again.”*

Additionally, participant 7 argues the following:

In the beginning, you must find out how such a program works. Now that I understand my bots better, it becomes easier to get more pairs. But the problem is that it's not just better understanding the bot alone. For example, at Footlocker, every drop is slightly different. Thus, you can still understand the bot, but it is very hard to adjust if they do something completely different again. You can't say that better understanding a bot will get you more pairs immediately.

So, within the technological factor of adoption, an external aspect also influences this factor. This external aspect is directly linked to the third and last adoption factor: the moral aspect of adopting a purchasing program.

Moral Aspect

The last emergent theme on the adoption of purchasing programs focuses on the moral of using these programs by creating a feeling of unfairness towards others in the sneaker consumer community. The findings provided two different views on the use of purchasing programs.

Whereas the first view provided a negative opinion of using these programs, the latter somewhat implied a relatively positive view of this use. In other words, this side tried to justify the usage of purchasing programs. Arguments about why not to use a sneaker bot can be clearly distinguished. Using such a program creates a gap between supply and demand and allows users

to hijack popular shoes from others in the community. A few examples from non-bot users can be found below.

Participant	Quote
Participant 2	Personally? I think using bots sucks. A big group is genuinely interested in a sneaker, and they would really like to wear them. However, they cannot buy them because bot users hijack the whole stock.
Participant 3	It makes no sense. The real sneaker enthusiasts don't even get the chance to get them because the sneaker bots just steal them right in front of them.
Participant 5	Yes, using bots is a bad thing. [...] It's just not fair.
Participant 6	It [using bots] is bad. Collectors are no longer able to buy the sneakers they like for retail. As a manual user you just can't get through. Therefore, the only place I buy sneakers right now, are websites that block bots.
Participant 8	Because I don't want to interfere with the collecting of sneaker lovers. Yeah, kind of a moral dilemma, kind of honesty or something. [...] But the main reason is that it's not fair. I think it's more fun to wait in a queue, to really put effort into getting a sneaker, instead of paying for a bot and getting multiple pairs. That's not fun anymore, is it? Just a bit sad.
Participant 10	The real sneaker lover just gets screwed. I worry about it myself.
Participant 11	It's a bad thing of course. Certainly, for the real fans, for the enthusiasts, for those who just want to wear the shoes like me.

Table 3. Overview of Negative Quotes on using Purchasing Programs.

Nevertheless, the opposing view on using purchasing programs does not end here. Even users who adopted this innovation can still understand why the community dislikes such a program. For example, participant 7: "I notice that the community itself looks *at it [using bots] negatively*. I also understand *it's frustrating for those people*." Additionally, participant 9 has a consenting view on this topic:

There are some groups [...] if you mention that you're using a bot, you'll be butchered completely. [...] They can't just accept that it works like that from now on. But I do get that. The sneaker lovers that have been around 10/20 years in this community are used to being able to just walk into the store or stand in line and buy some sneakers. So now those enthusiasts have to pay triple because a newbie bought 20 pairs using a bot.

Following this argumentation, the users of purchasing programs acknowledge the problem within the sneaker consumer culture by saying that using such programs is not fair towards the loyal customers who have been around for so long. Additionally, it can lead to customers that want to stop collecting sneakers just because – in their opinion – sneaker bots are ruining the community.

But this is not occurring in this sneaker community alone. Participant 1 discusses the following: *“The problem of purchasing programs can also be found outside the sneaker community, with concert tickets or PlayStation 5’s, for instance. Thus, that problem becomes bigger than just within a certain community.”*

Thus, this problem of automatized purchasing programs is also occurring in other industries. However, within the sneaker consumer community, some resellers already see this unfairness as the main reason to stop using such programs. Participant 3, for example: *“But at one point, I thought, ‘I’m actually creating the problem that drives me crazy, and I’m kind of becoming the cause of the problem.’ So, I got rid of it [the sneaker bot].”*

Conversely, not all resellers see the use of purchasing programs as a problem that must be stopped. This brings us to the other side of the coin. This argumentation can be seen as an entrepreneurial way to look at the sneaker consumer community by taking a utilitarian view of supply and demand. A few examples of this argumentation can be found below.

Participant	Quote
Participant 1	On the other hand, that’s how the world works. I honestly think that humanity is a bit like that too. You’ve to take what you can, we’re all commercial, so we want to make money. Using bots is not illegal, so why not?
Participant 4	I get it. It’s a gigantic business model. You can make some serious bucks, so rationally it makes sense that it happens.
Participant 6	I respect the hustle. I think it’s smart. Someone I know also worked with bots and made good money with it. But using them is pretty expensive. High investment, but you also get a lot in return.
Participant 7	I understand that it a gray area of course, morally speaking. I don’t have that many problems with using them myself, because in my opinion anyone could buy a bot and delve into it. So, if people hate it or don’t feel like investing time and money in it, it’s your own fault. [...] It just depends on how much effort you want to put into.
Participant 9	Yeah, but that’s life. Look at the big picture, it’s not very different than selling mandarins on the market. If I don’t do it, someone else will. Such a nice cliché to say, but it is true. It’s just a matter of supply and demand.
Participant 11	It also makes sense. Of course, people are looking for the possibilities to keep the chance of winning as big as possible for them.
Participant 12	Pretty positive actually. I keep telling people ‘If you can’t beat them, join them’. That’s how I looked at it too. ‘Is it dirty?’ Yes. ‘Would I do it too if I could make a profit with it?’ Yes. [...] If you could have to opportunity to make it your full-time job, I’m sure everyone would.

Table 4. Overview of Positive Quotes on using Purchasing Machines.

Thus, most participants understand that using purchasing programs is just a novel, entrepreneurial way to make a profit, although it may sometimes be unfair. They argue that it is not the most ethical thing to do, but the arguments for doing so are understandable.

The users that fully adopted purchasing programs within their business model even justify the use of purchasing programs by arguing that in doing so, it creates a certain hype within the community. Subsequently, this hype generates more enthusiasm and can be a good thing for the sneaker consumer culture in the long term. Participant 1, for example, argues: *“I think it’s a good thing for the community. Why? Because of bots, shoes become more exclusive and therefore more popular.”* Subsequently, participant 1 claims that shoe brands benefit too: *“[shoe brands] benefit from it because it also creates a hype. Because of bots, the shoes are more difficult to get. So, even if they release more pairs, they will sell out.”* This participant claims that because the purchasing programs buy every single pair, shoe brands can release higher stocks and still sell out. This can be considered a good development for the shoe brands and the customers. Participant 12 corroborates this opinion by saying:

I also think resellers have a lot of influence on the success of a brand. [...] Because no one has been able to buy it manually, you create a hype that people actually want that shoe even more. So, I think we have a very good influence on the market. [...] Then consumers are happier when they receive the shoes as well.

Following the line of reasoning, because scarcity is being created and formed by sneaker bots, the sneaker enthusiast can become more intrigued by a release and maybe wants the sneaker even more, simply because it is harder to obtain. Still, this argumentation is followed not only by sneaker bot users but also by consumers who do not like purchasing programs. For example, participant 4: *“Resellers also contribute very much to the fact that the sneaker world is so big and there is a lot of hype and exclusivity within this community.”* So, creating scarcity leads to hype and more involvement within the sneaker consumer culture and the associated community.

Interpretation of Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework has been conceptualized based on these three aspects. If consumers are less technically skilled or do not have the financial resources, they are more likely to passively reject the adoption of purchasing programs. If consumers have all the financial resources and technological knowledge, they are more likely to (reluctantly) adopt these programs.

However, in this formulation, the third aspect intervenes. If consumers in the sneaker culture are more involved in the rich background of sneaker culture and mindful of the moral

aspects associated with bots, they would be more likely to oppose adoption. According to Kleijnen et al., 2009, opposition occurs when there is a conflict with norms and traditions. This is in line with the sneaker community, wherein the usage of sneaker bots is perceived as something negative. Thus, even if consumers have the technological knowledge and financial resources to adopt a purchasing program, this last aspect (the moral aspect) plays a significant role in the consumer's view on adoption.

Thus, the conceptual framework stated at the beginning of this chapter should be interpreted as follows. The technological and financial aspects combined determine whether a consumer passively rejects or reluctantly adopts a purchasing program. Within this decision, the moral aspect determines if this choice will be strengthened or impaired.

So, if consumers have some technological knowledge and financial resources but are deeply involved in the sneaker community, they will oppose the adoption. Likewise, if consumers have no technological knowledge and financial resources but are partly involved in the sneaker community, they will also oppose adoption. If consumers have some technological knowledge and financial resources and are partly involved in the sneaker community, they will passively reject the adoption. If consumers have all the technological knowledge and financial resources needed for adoption and are not involved in the sneaker community, they will (reluctantly) adopt the purchasing program.

Discussion

The results indicate multiple barriers occur while adopting a purchasing program within sneaker consumer culture. These barriers can be divided into a financial aspect, a technological aspect, and a moral aspect. Thus, the research question “*What considerations make some consumers willing (or unwilling) to adopt purchasing programs within sneaker consumer culture?*” can be answered with this information.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to both theory and practice. Concerning theory, a lot has already been written about the adoption (and resistance) of innovations (cf. Davis et al., 1989; Mani & Chouk, 2018; Ram & Sheth, 1989; Rogers, 1962). However, these theories assume that the adoption is voluntary and the decision to adopt solely depends on the perceived usefulness and ease of use. Therefore, these theories partly consider social influences and the social pressure to compete for limited goods. This study linked prior theory to a specific community: sneaker consumer culture. In this culture, the adoption of purchasing programs is less voluntary than the allegations made in prior adoption theory. By looking at the current adoption theory through a CCT-lens, shared meanings such as fairness and morality can be implemented within this phenomenon. Therefore, this research pushes the theory of adoption forward. Future research could elaborate on this by studying adoption in other communities and if different cultural meanings can also influence this adoption process.

As stated above, considerations about adopting a purchasing program result from three different aspects. The first two, the financial and technological aspects, are relatively straightforward. Not being able to buy (financial) or use (technological) purchasing programs creates a reluctant feeling towards using such a program. These barriers can be linked to prior adoption and resistance theories. Whereas Davis et al. (1989) and Rogers (1962) argue that the (perceived) ease of use is a determining factor in the attitude towards adoption, this correlates with the results from this research. Ease of use is described as “*the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort*” (Davis et al., 1989, p. 320). Yet, a specific example is not being given. The financial and technological aspects can be seen as barriers that make using a particular system more complicated, and therefore, more effort is needed.

Mani and Chouk’s (2018) work also hinted at these aspects. However, despite treading similar ground, this research extends this work by offering an insightful alternative framing of

the adoption process. The financial aspect follows the reasoning of the 'value barrier'. This barrier is described as the innovation's lack of monetary and performance value. Investing in a purchasing program can be perceived as too expensive, so it will not be adopted. Likewise, the technological aspect can be a concrete example of the 'usage barrier' described by Mani and Chouk (2018). This barrier creates a higher resistance because the innovation is inconsistent with the consumers' past experiences. The technological aspect of adopting a purchasing program follows this reasoning. Because the consumer is not used to working with such computer programs, using them can be perceived as relatively complex.

However, the last aspect – the moral one – is more difficult to declare. Hence, this barrier takes place in the minds of all consumers and can subsequently change over time and place. Looking at the data, a distinction can be made between sneaker enthusiasts and sneaker resellers. Most of the time, a consumer deeply involved in reselling sneakers is also a sneaker lover. Yet, the data shows that some consumers buy and sell sneakers solely for profit generation, in which the internal value of a sneaker is passed over. These consumers know the use of sneaker bots as a system to facilitate this business and therefore try to justify the use of such programs.

On the other hand, consumers who see buying sneakers as a hobby argue that using purchasing programs is unfair and should be banned. Thus, this moral aspect takes place in two different phases. First, the consumer is not using purchasing programs and is somewhat habitually against using them. Second, if a consumer eventually decides to use a purchasing program, such programs are downplayed and internally justified to validate the usage. This reasoning is followed because of the culture in which purchasing programs occur. Within consumer culture, specifically sneaker consumer culture, an external pressure to match current values and beliefs towards the adoption of purchasing programs is forming these phases. This view on norms and traditions occurs when opposing an innovation (Kleijnen et al., 2009).

At first, a link between theory and the moral aspect can be made with the resistance model of Mani and Chouk (2018). This model defines the 'image barrier', which can be classified as the degree to which the innovation is perceived as having a negative image. Thus, because the community itself is against the use of purchasing programs, this usage receives a negative image within sneaker consumer culture. Therefore, consumers can create reluctance towards the use of purchasing programs just because the image of using them is perceived negatively. However, after adopting a purchasing program, this image is being reformed to justify its usage. Thus, this negative image is only applicable if the innovation is not adopted yet and does not play a significant role when the adoption takes place.

Therefore, this research contributes to the existing resistance theories by arguing that resistance to an innovation only occurs before adopting a purchasing program and is justified afterward. Future research could elaborate on these two phases by researching the adoption of purchasing programs in multiple stages of this adoption process. In other words, study how this process forms and what considerations occur in the transition between these phases. By doing so, the findings of this research can be strengthened or impaired.

Besides, the conceptual framework that has been conceptualized in the previous chapter implements two known views on adoption: opposition and passive rejection. The new form of adoption, being reluctant, is a novel view of the adoption process. By conducting future research on this specific form of adoption, knowledge of this view can be expanded. Moreover, future research can determine if this new view on adoption is also found in other contexts.

Managerial Implications

This study also contributes to practice. A broader view of the sneaker consumer culture has been obtained by asking the participants about their opinions on purchasing programs. By asking, “*who should do something about the use of purchasing programs?*” most interviewees answered analogously. Parties that were mentioned most were sneaker brands and stores. Customers can even create negative feelings towards a sneaker brand because these companies do not prevent customers from using bots on their websites. Thus, the way customers perceive sneaker brands is also influenced by what these companies do to avoid the use of purchasing programs.

Sneaker stores could facilitate raffles³ instead of just releasing a shoe online. This way, the stores can check whether the consumer is using a purchasing program or is trying to buy the sneaker themselves. These raffles could happen in-store or online. However, facilitating them in-store could be more bot-preventing because the sneaker enthusiasts have to pick up the sneakers themselves (with an ID card or such), and they can only sign up once.

Sneaker brands that release the shoes online can also implement a bot-preventing software, such as captchas or Shopify. These programs are designed to recognize whether or not a purchasing program makes a purchase. As a result, the purchasing programs will be less successful, and this will positively affect the fairness of a sneaker release.

³ Sneaker raffles are nothing more than a raffle of the right to buy a specific sneaker and can occur in-store or online (Maren, 2020). Consumers can sign up with their information to be able to buy a specific sneaker (Denny, 2021).

Research Limitations

This research has several limitations. To start, this research was conducted in the sneaker consumer culture. By doing so, multiple specific characteristics, values, and beliefs can influence the results. For example, purchasing sneakers – and fashion more in general – can also intent certain feelings that other products do not create. This study can be transferrable to different consumer cultures if the latter corresponds with the aspects mentioned in sneaker consumer culture. An idea for future research could be to study the adoption of purchasing programs within other contexts in terms of consumer cultures or product categories – where goods are limited – for instance, the ticket or game console industry.

Furthermore, this research has assessed the sneaker consumer culture in the Netherlands alone, not considering this culture in other countries. For robustness of the results in this research, future research could examine the proposed barriers in other environments or investigate different sneaker consumer cultures across the globe. However, the sneaker consumer culture is relatively globalized. Thus, future research can enrich the information about sneaker consumer culture in other environments or even implement the idea of glocalization within this community (Klejdgaard & Askegaard, 2006).

Also, this research includes a sample of 14 interviewees, which can be seen as a limited sample. Because of the small sample size, it is difficult to see a broader range of possibilities of how sneaker community members understand their world. Future research could address this issue by collecting more data from a larger sample, offering a faithful account of the context (Arnould, 1998). Additionally, the samples used were selected manually. Therefore, the results found in the interviews are not random and can (subconsciously) be affected by the selection of the participants.

Additionally, this research was only conducted for a few months. Therefore, the results found only apply to a specific moment in time. As stated in the introduction, the sneaker industry is evolving very fast. This could mean that the barriers to using purchasing programs today can be different in the (near) future. Future research could examine the proposed barriers later when more is known about the usage of these programs and consumers are more familiar with using purchasing programs in general.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Project: Adoption of Purchasing Programs

DATE & TIME:	
OTHER COMMENTS:	

PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Name:	
AGE (CIRCLE RANGE):	18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+
GENDER:	Male / Female / Nonbinary / Transgender / Prefer not to say
Profession/study	
Bought first pair of (exclusive) sneakers: (Year)	
Favorite sneaker brands:	
Hours spent on searching for sneakers per week:	

VERBAL CONSENT FORM

PREFACE A FOCUS ON STORYTELLING

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. What do you spend most of your time doing?
3. What do you do outside of searching/ collecting sneakers?

General Sneaker Consumption Background

4. When did you start collecting sneakers?
5. What was your very first sneaker?
6. Which pair of shoes in your collection are you most proud of and why?
7. How many pairs of sneakers do you have? And how many of them are collaborations of different brands?
8. How do you get your information about sneakers?
 - Which sneakerhead pages do you follow?
 - How many hours a week do you devote to sneaker-related activities?
 - Do you search/discuss or interact with sneaker-related topics with anybody else like friends or family?
9. What keeps you searching for sneakers?

Brand Collaborations

10. What do you consider to be the added value of a sneaker collaboration?
 - When is a sneaker collaboration between two brands successful in your eyes?
11. Would you pay more for a sneaker where two brands collaborate? If so, what is the reason for this?
12. Do you think it is important to be familiar with both brands when buying a collaborative sneaker?
13. Many shoe manufacturers are now collaborating with high-end fashion brands; what's your opinion on these high-end co-brands?
14. Do you own sneakers that have a collaboration with a high-end fashion brand? What is the main reason you bought them?
15. Did the purchase also make you buy from brand X? / Have the more recent drops of collaborations with high-end clothing brands made you more interested in these luxury brands?
16. Do you think this collaboration has changed your perception of the high-end fashion brand?

Brand Loyalty

17. Which brands do you have in your sneaker collection? And how is the distribution (roughly) between these brands?
18. What do you like about brand X? How do sneaker brands wake your interest and/or grab your attention?
19. What key factors influence your choice for a specific brand/release (e.g., design, brand, hype, price, availability/scarcity)?
20. How do sneaker brands create value for you as a consumer?

Purchasing Programs (main questions)

21. When did you figure out you could make money selling sneakers?
22. How did you get in touch with different buyers?
23. What was your first opinion about using bots?
24. Do you think bots are a good or a bad thing?
25. How will the sneaker culture develop/change in the future?
 - Is this a good development?

Purchasing Programs (If they use bots)

26. How did your opinion about using bots change over time?
27. When did you decide to use bots?
28. Did you see a big difference in your success rate (of buying limited sneakers)?
29. How do other buyers react when they hear you use bots?

Purchasing Programs (If they do not use bots)

30. What are the main reasons for not using bots?
31. Who should be responsible for regulating or taking action against purchasing bots? (Brands, reseller platforms, governments, buyers).
32. What could sneaker brands improve and/or change to the current sneakerhead industry?

Wrap Up

33. Is there anything I have left out?
34. Is there anything else you would like to add/discuss? Anything else you want me to know about?
35. Is there anyone you recommend I should talk to?

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

Radboud University



Nijmegen School of Management

PROJECT TITLE: *Rise of the Purchasing Programs*

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

Dear Sir/Madam,

We invite you to participate in this student research project conducted by the student researcher Dhr. Tygo Loeffen through Nijmegen School of Management at the Radboud University. This student research project contributes toward the fulfillment of the requirements for the master's Business Administration degree being completed by the student researcher.

Purpose: This study aims to investigate the experiences of sneaker consumers and the way they perceive purchasing programs (colloquially known as Sneaker Bots). We are interested in the adoption process of these computer programs. We hope this project will help us better understand how this process takes place to understand sneaker consumer culture better.

Research Process: The researcher will ask you questions about what sneakers are in your collection, and your opinion towards certain brands and (successful) collaborations. Furthermore, the researcher will ask you questions about your opinion on purchasing programs and the way these interfere with sneaker consumer culture. Since we are conducting these interviews in person at your home, you are more than welcome to show your collection and the programs you use.

These interviews are expected to be between 30 minutes and 1 hour and are also contingent on how long you are all willing to participate in this study. This is at your discretion. Further interviews following the initial interview are possible and may allow you and the researchers to continue our discussions further. Participation in any future interviews is at your discretion. All interviews, including any further interviews and your overall participation, are voluntary; you can withdraw at any time and withdraw any data you have supplied (up to the point of analysis/publication).

Confidentiality and Data Use: Only the researchers involved in the project will have access to the raw data in this study. Confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal restrictions. We audio-record the interviews for research purposes. Once we have transcribed and analyzed the recordings, we remove any personally identifiable information from the transcript documents to provide you anonymity. In resulting research publications, you will be referred to by a pseudonym. A copy of the results – in whole or redacted form - of the study or a summary of the research findings are available to you if you wish to be sent a copy.

Possible Effects: No physical or psychological risks to you are foreseen. You will not be audio-recorded or your personal details collected without consent. With the small sample of participants in this study, there is the possibility that you and your responses may be identified through the outputs of this study. However, all reasonable measures will be taken to mitigate this risk, including de-identifying any personal information in transcriptions of recorded audio and referencing you using a pseudonym in any written outputs produced from the research.

Providing Consent: Each interviewee over the age of 18 will be required to fill out a consent form to participate in the research or provide verbal consent at the start of a research interview.

Researchers:

Name (Student Researcher)	email
Dhr. Tygo Loeffen	Tygo.loeffen@ru.nl
Dr. Pao Franco	Paolo.franco@ru.nl

Any Questions?

For more information or a request for the final report to be sent to you in an electronic format, please contact the student researcher Tygo Loeffen at Nijmegen School of Management (tygo.loeffen@ru.nl).

Thank you for your assistance,
Tygo Loeffen

Appendix C: Consent Form

Radboud University



Nijmegen School of Management

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: *Rise of the Purchasing Programs*

This is a student research project contributing to fulfilling the Master of Business Administration degree requirements being completed by the student researcher, Dhr. T. (Tygo) Loeffen.

Name of participant:

Name of the investigator(s):

Student Researcher:

Name: T. (Tygo) Loeffen

Email: tygo.loeffen@ru.nl

Supervisor:

Pao Franco, Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands;

Email: paolo.franco@ru.nl

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.
3. I understand that my participation will involve observations, and I agree that the researcher may use the results described in the plain language statement.
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 persons under the age of consent (under 18) might be present during the interviews at home, and their responses may be collected, and their behaviors observed.
7. 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.
8. I acknowledge that:
 - (a) the possible effects of participating in the *observations* have been explained to my satisfaction;
 - (b) 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;
 - (c) the project is for the purpose of academic research;
 - (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
 - (e) I have been informed that the observations may be recorded and transcribed with my consent. *Recordings* will be destroyed after transcription (but no less than five years after the fieldwork). The transcriptions will be retained indefinitely in safe storage;
 - (f) I am aware that all reasonable measures to de-identify my responses will be taken, including removing personal information in audio transcripts and using a pseudonym instead of my real name while the interview is being recorded.
 - (g) 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.
 - (h) I am aware that there are legal limitations to the confidentiality of the data collected from me after all measures to de-identify my responses have been taken. This includes that the data provided can be subject to subpoena, freedom of information requests, or mandated reporting by some professions.
 - (i) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings can be forwarded to me, should I desire.

I consent to the researcher observing behavior

yes **no**
(Please tick)

I consent to interviews being audio-taped

yes **no**
(Please tick)

I consent to the use of a pseudonym instead of my real name after the interview has been transcribed and the usage of this pseudonym in the resulting outputs of this study.

yes **no**
(Please tick)

I wish to be notified when outputs of this research project are published and receive a summary of research findings (If yes, please also provide your email address below)

yes **no**
(Please tick)

Participant signature:

Date:

Participant contact email:
