

**Beyond the Sole: An Exploration of Affect, Desire,
and Commodified Black Masculinity in Sneaker
Consumption**

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Abstract

This thesis delves into sneaker culture, consumption, and the allure of limited-edition sneakers, which have ties to athletes and celebrities like Michael Jordan and Kanye West and have been amplified by artificial scarcity. It scrutinizes how sneaker companies like Nike profit from the commodification of Black masculinity, fueling sneaker fandom. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theories of distinction and Sara Ahmed's theory of affect, this research explores how sneakers are fetishized, affective objects, which is critical in understanding the motivations and desires of sneaker consumption. Research for this study, conducted from 2016-2019 in Metro Vancouver, employed a multi-site ethnographic approach, involving interviews with sneaker consumers and traders. This research contributes to literature on sneaker consumption, the politics of value and desire, and the use of affect as a theoretical framework for studying markets as cultures.

Keywords: affect theory; commodified Black masculinity; sneaker culture; sneaker consumption; politics of value; ethnography

Dedication

To my cherished friends, chosen family, and academic mentors,

This work is dedicated to you, the unwavering pillars of support who have stood by my side throughout my journey. Your constant encouragement, understanding, and belief in my abilities kept me going. I am forever grateful for your unwavering presence in my life. To Matthew Menzies, I am especially grateful for your advocacy and support.

To the university students who, like me, have navigated the intricate pathways of academia as (children of) immigrants, neurodiverse individuals, those who have faced obstacles and barriers related to ableism, and those who are not afforded the privileges and resources that are associated with success within academia, this dedication extends to you as well. This is a tribute to those who were courageous to have the strength to forge their own paths, often without guidance or mentorship, and who have defied expectations and shattered stereotypes along the way.

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee.....	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Acronyms.....	ix
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Markets as cultures.....	2
1.2. Research questions.....	3
1.3. Ethnographic interviews.....	4
1.4. Central argument.....	5
1.5. Sneakers and streetwear.....	5
1.6. Goals of research.....	6
1.7. Outline of thesis.....	7
Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework: Affective and Commodified Black Masculinity.....	8
2.1. Introduction.....	8
2.2. Pierre Bourdieu: Notions of distinction and taste.....	8
2.3. Sara Ahmed: affect and affective value.....	9
2.4. Affect and desire as practice.....	11
2.5. Affect and Commodity Fetishism.....	12
2.6. Commodified Black masculinity as affective.....	12
2.7. Hip-hop/rap music and sneakers.....	15
2.8. Affect, commodified Black masculinity, and sneakers.....	16
2.9. Conclusion.....	18
Chapter 3. Methodology and Methods.....	19
3.1. Introduction.....	19
3.2. Multi-sited ethnographic inquiry.....	19
3.3. Access to the field.....	20
3.4. Ethnographic interviews.....	22
3.5. Reflexivity.....	24
3.6. Positionality.....	25
3.7. Conclusion.....	26
Chapter 4. Sneakers as affective objects: Desiring Jordan.....	27
4.1. Introduction.....	27
4.2. Eugene an ‘old head’: The generation that grew up watching Michael Jordan.....	28
4.3. Nike marketing and the affects of ‘cool’.....	28
4.4. Desire for Jordan: Getting an “advantage”.....	29

4.5.	Eugene as an adult buying sneakers for ‘nostalgia’	30
4.6.	Older and newer sneaker consumers purchasing the same Jordans	32
4.7.	Commodity fetishism of Yeezy sneakers.....	34
4.8.	Connection between Kanye West and Yeezy	34
4.9.	Observations on Chinese “foreign” sneaker customers.....	35
4.10.	Parallels between the production of desires for Jordans and Yeezys	37
4.11.	Conclusion.....	38
Chapter 5.	Younger generation of sneaker consumers.....	40
5.1.	Introduction.....	40
5.2.	Newer generation of sneaker consumers.....	40
5.3.	Consumption as distinguishing	41
5.4.	Consumption as social practice	42
5.5.	Affect and community.....	44
5.6.	Desiring Jordan without watching Jordan.....	45
5.7.	Scarcity, affect, and meaning.....	46
5.8.	Distinction can become fleeting	47
5.9.	Researcher’s experience in the field	48
5.10.	Conclusion.....	50
Chapter 6.	Conclusion	51
6.1.	Black Lives Matter.....	52
6.2.	Limitations	53
6.3.	Future questions	55
References.....		57
Appendix A.	Questions for self-identified sneakerheads.....	66
Appendix B.	Questions for (re)sellers of sneakers:	68
Appendix C.	Questions for employees of sneaker retailers.....	69
Appendix D.	List of questions for self-identified female sneakerheads	70

List of Acronyms

SFU	Simon Fraser University
VSC	Vancouver Streetwear Community
VSG	Vancouver Streetwear Group

Chapter 1. Introduction

In Metro Vancouver, I have seen young men wait for hours outside of sneaker retailers, sometimes camping overnight, to purchase a pair of sneakers – a presumably mundane mass-produced item. Even more interesting to me were the individuals who purchased these sneakers for a price higher than initially retailed. Sometimes paying several times above the retail price for a ‘limited edition’ or earlier model of a sneaker, yet it is only sneaker traders and enthusiasts who can distinguish these subtle cosmetic differences between a highly sought-after shoe and its general release cousin. In 1917, the first rubber soled shoes were produced by Converse for basketball, by the 1920s the brand Pro-Keds also made rubber soled shoes for basketball. In the 1960s, Keds, P.F Flyers, along with the German brand Adidas helped make basketball shoes a part of mainstream American culture. Since the 1950s, sneaker consumption and its culture have developed as they have become a part of mainstream fashion in North America (Coleman 2013).

Yuniya Kawamura (2016) identifies three waves of sneaker fandom: the first wave as pre-Jordan, when the sub-culture was still considered underground, as its growth coincided with hip-hop in North America; the second wave as post-Jordan, with the release of the Nike Air Jordan 1 in 1985; and the third-wave as “sneaker hunting as a game” with the emergence of technological developments in sneakers and mass communication (94). With advent of the Internet, sneaker culture and reselling have expanded globally and enabling formal and informal sneaker economies to thrive in multiple spaces (Vanderbilt 1998; Riello and McNeil 2006). In the 2000s, manufacturer-retailers Nike and Adidas have mimicked diamond wholesalers in restricting product to drive interest (Falls 2014). Nike and Adidas have purposefully limited the supply of some sneakers to drive demand, particularly in global cities such as New York, Tokyo, and Los Angeles (Kawamura 2016). In the 2010s, interest in sneaker trading exploded globally due to its rise in popularity and sneaker reselling's perceived profitability.

The secondary market for sneakers has been evaluated to be somewhere between \$300 million to \$1 billion dollars (Wolf 2019), and according to the New York Times (Griffith 2019), the market is projected to be a “\$6 billion business globally by 2025”. Sneaker corporations continue to release high demand sneakers in limited

quantities, and this has resulted in the growth and profitability of sneaker reselling markets globally, which has the result of intensifying the speculative value associated with limited-edition sneakers. The high demand and resale price, the difficulty of procurement, and complexity of online informal sneaker markets has further subordinated practical value of sneakers, due to the symbolic, affective, and cultural value that is associated with them, which is the focus of this thesis (Andrew and Jackson 2001).

1.1. Markets as cultures

Culture is imperative to the ways in which people see themselves and act upon the world (Ortner 2006). Drawing upon Mitchel Abolafia's (1998), who conceptualizes "markets as cultures," markets have their own cultures and norms that reproduce their existence through repeated interactions and transactions, based on established mutual understandings of the marketplace. Sneakers have transformed from a purely functional item to a cultural commodity that symbolizes status, identity, taste, and commodity fetishism, a term coined by Karl Marx (1887) to describe the process by which goods are divorced from their production processes and imbued with value beyond their physical attributes (Appadurai 1988; Graeber 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Pearce 2010; Kratz 2011; Yano 2013). Limited-edition sneaker releases or 'drops' create artificial scarcity, inflating desire, and prices, and is one of capitalism's demand generation mechanisms (Baudrillard 2005). The global sneaker market highlights the flows of goods, ideas, and cultural meanings across borders, underscoring the complexities of consumption globalization (Appadurai 1990; Baudrillard 1994, 1998; Thompson 1971; Jackson 2002, 2004; Shankar 2006; Miller 2012; Miller and Woodward 2012).

Additionally, the emergence of a secondary market for buying, reselling, trading sneakers resembles financial markets, with sneakers treated like speculative assets. This mirrors the broader financialization of the economy, where wealth is increasingly generated through financial channels and risks rather than through the production of goods or service (Zaloom 2004, 2006, 2010; Ho 2009). The sneaker market is dominated by a small number of highly influential brands, like Nike and Adidas, which have significant power to shape consumer preferences, which consumers use to express their identities, exemplifying the role of consumption in identity and subjectivity formation in contemporary capitalist societies (Giddens 1991, Kawamura 2006, 2016;

Taro 2007a, 2007b; Falls 2012; Gewartz, Errington, and Fujikura 2013). The collaboration between sneaker brands and celebrities highlights the role of celebrity culture, and brand culture in consumer capitalism (Foster 1999, 2012; Andrews and Jackson 2001; Meneley 2007; Nakassis 2012; Alokparna and Monga, 2013; Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2013, Grinsphun 2014). Therefore, by understanding sneaker cultures and sneaker markets, it can help inform our understanding of broader trends and processes, and regimes of power that (re)produce contemporary capitalism.

1.2. Research questions

The insights from this thesis are informed by my experience in the field from 2016 – 2019 in multi-sited ethnographic research. My research sites included Facebook sneaker and streetwear trading marketplaces on Facebook and in-person at local sneaker conventions and retail and consignment stores. This thesis addresses the following research questions: What initially draws people's interests in sneaker and streetwear consumption and trading, and what sustains their interests? Why are some sneakers considered more valuable and desirable than others? What is it about famous Black men, like Kanye West and Michael Jordan, and the corporations that produce their products that influence and shape the desires and trading practices of sneaker and streetwear traders whom in Metro Vancouver? The types of sneakers that are of the focus of this research are sneakers that are limited edition, limited supply, and may have associations with celebrities and athletes, such as Nike Jordan and Adidas Yeezy¹ sneakers. In 2021, only 1.6% of residents in Metro Vancouver identified as Black (Statistics Canada 2023), due to this small representation and when contextualized with the majority of sneaker and streetwear traders I encountered generally were White Canadian or Asian Canadian makes the study of the affects of sneaker and streetwear items imbued with the commodification of Black masculinity a worthwhile investigation.

¹ Adidas Yeezy sneakers, a collaborative product from 2015-2022 between Adidas and Kanye West, were highly popular and influential in global fashion and sneaker markets. Adidas (2022) has officially terminated its contract with Kanye West, signaling an end to their production of the widely recognized Adidas Yeezy line. It should be noted that October 2022 is beyond the scope of my research period.

1.3. Ethnographic interviews

According to Abolafia (1998), ethnographic inquiry allows us to understand how rationalities within a marketplace “as a community-based, context-dependent cultural form” (74). Therefore, I engaged in ethnographic methods to explore and understand the practices, identities, subjectivities, and relationalities of sneaker consumers. While I engaged in participant-observation, the bulk of the data this thesis draws upon are based on semi-structured interviews that ranged from twenty minutes to two and a half hours. I conducted seventeen interviews with sneaker and streetwear traders and sneaker managers. The demographic of my interviewees spanned the age range of late teens to late thirties, who were mostly male, and white and Asian-Canadian. I solicited most of my interviews through two of Metro Vancouver’s most popular Facebook groups with the two major ones, Vancouver Sneakerhead Group and Vancouver Streetwear Community, with over 26,000 members and 18,000 members respectively at the time of my research.

In my conversations with Metro Vancouver sneaker and streetwear traders, I found out that sneakers associated with retired National Basketball Association (NBA) superstar Michael Jordan and the streetwear aesthetic and sneakers from the musician, producer, artist, and fashion designer Kanye West² were the most speculated upon and fetched the highest resale value. Additionally, other products or styles of streetwear and sneakers associated with other famous American Black rappers such as A\$AP Rocky and Travis Scott were also highly desired. In summary, in my interviews, Black athletes, designers, artists were consistently mentioned as being influential in shaping how trends or excitement. This was a facet of my research that I could not ignore because of how pervasive it was in my conversations and in the field.

² In the context of this thesis, Ye, when research was conducted between 2016 and 2019 was referred as Kanye West. Although the artist has expressed a preference for the name Ye since 2018 (Beaumont-Thomas 2021), for simplicity and consistency with the terminology used by scholars cited in this research, he will be referred to as Kanye West throughout this work. Please note that this is not a disregard of his preference, but rather a reflection of his widely recognized name during the period of study.

1.4. Central argument

Value is based upon the exchange of culture that generates value rather than the exchange of the production of value, Beverley Skeggs (2004) suggests “affect may enable us to explore how use-values are experienced, expressed and known” (86). In this thesis, I combine Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986) theories of distinction, social, cultural, and economic capital with Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 2010a, 2010b, 2014) theory of affect to explore how limited-edition sneakers can be understood as fetishized affective objects. Affect is cultural in that it (re)produces norms, and contours our desires, intentions, and motivations (Ahmed 2014). I argue the affects of commodified Black masculinity are intrinsic in understanding sneaker affects for Metro Vancouver sneaker consumers I interviewed, particularly the affects associated with Black celebrities and athletes such as Michael Jordan and Kanye West.

I conceptualize commodified Black masculinity as the cultural, societal, and economic process of turning North American constructions of Black masculinity into marketable products or concepts for consumption. It involves the creation, control, and exchange of representations of Black male bodies, primarily in industries such as music, sports, and entertainment (Dyson 1993; Gilroy 1994; Bederman 1995; Maharaj 1997; hooks 2004, Jackson 2006; Griffin 2012). This form of commodification capitalizes on, and often reinforces, stereotypes associated with Black masculinity, such as authenticity, originality, natural athleticism, perceived deviancy, physical prowess, and edginess. The processes of commodification are influenced by historical and socio-cultural contexts, particularly the legacy of slavery and colonialism, where Black bodies were often constructed as threatening, deviant, hypersexual, physically robust, and primitive. As I will discuss in later chapters, this history continues to shape the perception and commodification of Black masculinity today, evident in the cultural production and commodification within institutions like the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Hoberman 1997; Balaji 2009; Griffin 2012; Byrd 2017; Moralde 2019).

1.5. Sneakers and streetwear

Streetwear and street culture more broadly have been understudied by academics, definitions of streetwear have been too broad or inadequate. Mayan Rajendran (2012) who conceptualizes streetwear as a form of dress that is influenced by

the subcultures of skateboarding, basketball, hip-hop, which has its roots in 1980s in metropolitan east coast cities in United States. In this research, my interviewees framed sneakers and the streetwear items they wore as being imperative their subjectivities, identities, and relationalities with other sneaker and streetwear consumers (Ortner 2006). I was not surprised by this because the physical and online marketplaces for sneaker markets were also places for streetwear trading. In this thesis, streetwear is anything related to dress that is not sneakers, such as clothing and accessories. Some readers may argue that my phrasing of "sneaker and streetwear " is redundant because, based on my definition sneakers should be categorized as a form of streetwear. I agree that sneakers are a form of streetwear, but I have chosen my phrasing for the following reasons. Limited-edition sneakers were the starting point of my research and the primary focus of this thesis, and for all my interviewee's sneakers were their first introduction to streetwear consumption, and some of my interviewees had a strong interest in sneakers rather than streetwear.

1.6. Goals of research

Scholars of fashion and taste such as Thorstein Veblen (2005), Georg Simmel (1957), Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 2013) have viewed fashion is an important sphere of social life to study because fashion and clothing are emblems and manifestation of one's taste and thus can be revealing of class distinctions. Since dress and aesthetics are an essential part of our social lives, limited research on sneakers and streetwear, especially when a concrete definition on constitutes streetwear is absent indicates the meaning of streetwear has been taken for granted. As a result, an important facet of this research is in its attempts to fill some of this void. Through my investigation of sneaker culture in Metro Vancouver, my goal is to our understandings of how affect can be used as a theoretical framework for studying consumption to further academic conversations on value and how certain items become social and cultural markers. Additionally, another goal of this thesis is to further the literature on sneaker and streetwear consumption. Limited scholarly work has looked at the ways sneaker and streetwear traders ascertain value and how their identities and subjectivities are morphed by their consumption and trading practices.

1.7. Outline of thesis

This thesis contains six chapters. In chapter two, I establish my theoretical framework by examining critical literature on affect, distinction, and the commodification and construction of Black masculinity. Connecting these fields together, I establish the theoretical foundations of my thesis, highlighting the relationship between affect and practice and by contextualizing how socio-cultural and historical sneaker consumption in North America is linked to the commodification of Black masculinity. In chapter three, I discuss my methodology and methods, describing my ethnographic research sites, how I gained access to field, and my positionality in the field. In chapter four, I explore the relationship of commodified Black masculinity and sneakers through the experiences my interviewee Eugene, a sneaker enthusiast who represents an older generation of sneaker consumers who grew up watching Michael Jordan as a child in the 1980s and 1990s. In chapter five, I focus on the motivations of the younger generation of sneaker consumers and how they come to desire sneakers through the experiences of three interviewees Elias, Ben, and Sun. I explore how affects of Black commodified masculinity explicitly and implicitly influences sneaker desires and sneakers affects amongst these consumers. In chapter six, I conclude my thesis and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework: Affective and Commodified Black Masculinity

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I highlight the ways the origins of contemporary sneaker consumption have largely revolved around the contestations of meaning and affects of commodified Black masculinity in the ways that Black male bodies are read and culturally produced in the NBA and in hip-hop/rap music. I outline the theoretical groundwork central to my thesis that commodified Black masculinity is what imbues highly desired sneaker and streetwear with affective value. By connecting scholarship on affect and commodified Black masculinity, I set the foreground for why sneakers and streetwear desires need to be understood within the context of commodified Black masculinity. The ways Black masculinity is culturally produced and commodified is critical context in understanding contemporary sneaker consumption because the NBA and hip-hop/rap foregrounds the origins of sneaker consumption and culture. Overall, the goal of this chapter is contextualizing consumption and value through affect provides deeper understandings of the nuances and complexities of how individuals become interested and motivated to consume and trade, and that there is a sociohistorical basis for understanding sneaker consumption through affect.

2.2. Pierre Bourdieu: Notions of distinction and taste

Bourdieu (1984, 1986) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (2013) asserts that taste is not innate, arguing that our preferences and understanding of taste is socialized into us – habitus. As taste is socially constructed, practices of consumption must be contextualized within meanings of distinction, where an object does not matter as much as the meanings associated with it. Practices and objects have “distinctive value as a function of a socially determined principle of pertinence and thereby express a social position” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013, 297). Practices of everyday people produces them into social subjects. Bourdieu sees the social world as the accumulation of history - the practices of accumulating capital “and all its effects” (1984, 15).

His investigation of the judgments of taste are socially constructed amongst the different socio-economic classes in France revealed how taste reinforced the social group it represented (Bourdieu 1984). He categorized social assets that are socioeconomically distinguishing as having its basis either of the three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is monetary or based on financial assets. Cultural capital refers to cultural competence of what an individual knows that can be embodied or be shown materially. Social capital refers to the social net worth of an individual, who they know and the social networks they are embedded in. These capitals can be (re)produced or exchanged, but Bourdieu shows that access and the capacity to do so is largely due to circumstances of birth, privilege, and power. Bourdieu calls this process of socializing children with the practices, values, orientations that are reflective of their class as social reproduction.

Taste reinforces the social group that it represents, and the dominant classes are shape the meaning of taste. What makes something, whether it is an object, mannerism, person, etc., as high class/high culture or low class/low culture come from labels the dominant class has constructed and socialized through institution, such as education and the media. The dominant classes change the practices and values of what is perceived as “good” taste, which Bourdieu argues is done through their access to institutional power. Therefore, continually distinguishing or distancing themselves from the lower classes, by creating new or modifying what their group values and socially constructs as tasteful to maintain and reproduce their hierarchy in society.

2.3. Sara Ahmed: affect and affective value

Emotional attachments and desires are political, our attitudes towards phenomena, objects, and others are produced within frameworks of socio-cultural, historical structures (Peletz 2001). Bourdieu’s work does not analyze the role of emotions and affect and by adding Ahmed’s theory of affect, this can enrich our understanding of Bourdieu’s habitus and capital by highlighting the emotional and affective dimensions of these concepts, especially the structural context within which Ahmed’s circulating affects occur. Ahmed’s (2004) argues that as objects become sites of “personal and social tension” they become saturated with affect (10-11). This is because our experiences, histories and memories of an object can also inform our orientation towards/away from an object, “how the object impresses (upon) us may

depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions” (Ahmed 2014, 8). She describes emotions as being both psychic and social because we experience them inwardly, and they outwardly shape the way we read, relate, and understand objects. Affects are experienced differently by individuals because “feelings may stick to some objects, and slide over others” (Ahmed 2004, 8). Ahmed’s work focuses on the politics of emotions and what they do in shaping “the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as orientations towards and away from others” (2004, 4). In other words, nothing is inherently good or bad nor we do not come into this world understanding whether something is good or bad, rather through exposure and experience we become influenced in attributing these meanings to the surfaces of objects (Ahmed 2004, 2010).

The more an object circulates, the more affective value it has, Ahmed (2004), “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (120). The more people who share or do not share a common emotional orientation towards an object and the more this object circulates, the more the object accrues affective value. When an object’s production and circulation become erased, the more emotions associated with an object accumulate thus creating “affective value”. She describes this process whereby “‘feelings’ become ‘fetishes’” in affective economies words associated with emotion are also circulated (Ahmed 2004). Words can contain affective value because they shape our orientations towards objects. She provides the example of the word ‘mourns’ in shaping our perceptions of how “some bodies more than others represent the nation in mourning” (2004, 13). As a result, the circulation of affect can create new subjects, subjectivities, and relations based upon the meanings that are portrayed (Ahmed 2010; McElhinny 2010; Richard and Rudnycky, 2009). When such objects of emotion circulate, “[these] objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” due to the contestations of meanings associated due to an object’s varied affects (Ahmed 2004, 11). Therefore, these sites of tension can serve as an anchor point for aligning individuals together, who have similar orientations by connecting “individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” based on shared relationalities, identities, subjectivities, and socio-cultural histories (Ahmed 2004, 117).

Connecting Bourdieu's and Ahmed's theories can further our understanding of how forms of capital and habitus interplay with the circulation and impact of affect. Cultural capital (knowledge, tastes, education) can influence the perception of and the affective response to objects. Our social networks and connections (social capital) also influence the flow of affects. Our habitus, habitual ways of feeling and responding to things, can be seen as part of our affective responses. The forms of capital we possess and our habitus can influence how we relate to others emotionally, how we experience and circulate emotions, and how these affects reinforce or challenge our social behaviors and identities.

2.4. Affect and desire as practice

Ahmed's conceptualization of affect as being (re)produced and circulated through their practices. Additionally, Ana Ramos-Zayas (2012) argues that "everyday practices are the locus in the production and reproduction of power relations under urban neoliberalism (7)." Ramos-Zayas (2012) investigates about how American-born Latino and Latin American migrants in Newark, New Jersey, a pre-dominantly Black city, use "an urban emotional commonsense" or an "affective predisposition" (4-5) that informed their racial knowledge and (pre)conceptions of Blackness, what people did with that knowledge, and how it shaped their feelings, judgments, and relational thinking of African Americans. She conceptualizes affect is a form "of practical knowledge that is embodied without being only located in the body" that it allows us to examine the space that exists between our perceptions and behaviour (2012, 11). Lisa Rofel (2007) who conceptualizes desire as a practice. The production of knowledge and skills that are required for an individual to become a desiring subject is embedded within "historically, socially, and culturally produced field of practices" (Rofel 2007, 14). Rofel (2007) argues the practices of desire reflect and are the product of broader economic policies and their accompanying ideologies. In her work, she examines the production of desires in post-socialist China as the production of new neoliberal subjectivities whereby desiring individuals shape their "inner selves," and by doing so they sustain the economic transformations that originates the production of these desires.

2.5. Affect and Commodity Fetishism

Karl Marx's (1887) concept of commodity fetishism refers to a phenomenon in capitalist societies where the social relationships between people are obscured by the exchange value of commodities. As a result, people tend to attribute value to the commodities, as if it were inherent qualities, rather than recognizing that their value ultimately comes from the human labour invested in them. Building upon Marx, Tim Dant (1996) describes fetishism as the human relationship with material objects. It is our relationship of desiring and fantasizing for an object. Any object in a culture undergoes a process of fetishization. Dant (1996) argues that it is through our practices that shape our perceptions of what items are distinguishing. Practices of commodity fetishism include expressing desire for an object and its capacities, celebrating it, and revering it, displaying, etc. (Dant 1996, 511). Practices that promote fetishization and desiring of an object amplifies its fetishization.

By connecting Ahmed's theory of affect (2004, 2010), we can theorize commodity fetishization as also a cultural and emotional production. Value attached to commodities through the process of fetishism can be understood not just as economic value, but also as having affective value. The value and significance of a commodity can evoke and circulate certain emotions and feelings. For instance, the desire, longing, or status associated with a high-end branded commodity (e.g., designer handbags) are not inherent in the item itself, these meanings are constructed through political and socio-economic structures (re)produced and experienced through practice (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013). Therefore, I argue the circulation of commodities in a capitalist society, then, also involves the circulation of these affective values. While feelings may seemingly manifest themselves in objects, almost like independent entities, their true origins and influences, including the impact of labour, labor time, production histories, as well as circulation or exchange histories, remain hidden or obscured (Ahmed 2004, 120 - 121). Affects attached to commodities are part of the fetishistic relationship that masks the true social and labour relations behind these commodities.

2.6. Commodified Black masculinity as affective

The commodified Black male body is a cultural product, a site of contested meanings imbued with the affects that include notions of authenticity, originality,

masculinity, naturalized athleticism, aspiration, deviant, dangerous, ghetto/of the 'street', marginal, edginess, success, and physical prowess. Black commodified masculinity can be seen as a form of cultural capital that is exchanged and valued in certain social contexts. This commodification often occurs in entertainment industries, such as music or sports, where certain aspects of Black masculinity are capitalized upon, often reinforcing stereotypes. The ways that the Black male body read today must be understood within the sociohistorical context of slavery and the colonial gaze where the Black male body was constructed as being the site of danger, deviance, physicality, hypersexuality, primitiveness, and a threat to the White order (Dyson 1993; Gilroy 1994; Bederman 1995; Maharaj 1997; Jackson 2006; Griffin 2012). The historical prohibition of Black men in American traditional sport up until the middle of the twentieth century is key to understanding the how Black masculinity has become culturally produced, commodified, and extracted in the NBA (Dyson 1993, 65-66).

Up until the mid-twentieth century in the United States, the Black male was constructed in the American psyche of having superior physical ability yet lacked the intelligence and cognitive skills to participate in sports (Dyson 1993; Hoberman 1997). As Black athletic heroes became valorized as embodying American ideals and transcended racialized boundaries of achievement, Black athletic excellence became commodifiable and profitable (Dyson, 1993). Overtime Black athleticism became a form "black cultural fetishization," where sports became synonymous with Black male racialized self-expression, and an avenue for breaking racialized barriers and achieving upward socio-economic mobility (Dyson 1993, 66-67). Gitanjali Maharaj (1997) argues the cultural production of Black men "making it" and the commodification of Black male bodies, as objects of desire, in the NBA for mass consumption emerged from post-World War II deindustrialization and the decline of American Black urban communities. These socioeconomic shifts caused the Black male athlete to be an "ideological site for the recuperation of black masculinity and black economic productivity under postindustrial conditions" by symbolizing the contradictions of "the "nightmare" of the urban ghetto and the "dream" of being a celebrity" (Maharaj 1997, 98-99).

Furthermore, the cultural production, control, commodification of the representations of Black male athlete and Black masculinity through the NBA has been critiqued for serving White consumption by appealing to the White imagination of "Blackness," which benefits corporate profitability (Hoberman 1997; Balaji 2009; Griffin

2012; Byrd 2017; Moralde 2019). While Black athletes participate in the commodification of themselves, their agency and power are ultimately limited. Alicia Griffin (2012) delineates the differences between the interest of the athlete commodifying themselves and corporations by arguing, “Black male athletes are functioning in a market in which the rules, interests, and desires of Whites are rooted at the foundation” (167). The commodification of Black male bodies in the NBA is shaped by “local and global market appeal, franchise expansion, commercialization, media contracts, sponsors, endorsements, and personalized apparel sales,” and sneaker endorsements are some of the most influential and profitable (Griffin 2012, 166).

Nike has been accused of appropriating Black culture and commodifying the affects of Black masculinity to enhance the desirability and profitability of their sneakers through NBA endorsements (Maharaj 1997; Miner 2009; Moralde 2019). Contemporary examples of Nike’s alleged appropriation of Black culture can be seen today through their endorsement and their commodification of Black social movements such as their promotion of Black Lives Matter and products that promote Black History Month (Gunduz 2020). Nike’s relationship with Michael Jordan has faced the most scrutiny by scholars on this topic (Andrews et al. 1996; McDonald 1996; Wilson and Sparks 1996; Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman 2008; Miner 2009). Dyson (1993) argues that Michael Jordan’s basketball playing style, athletic gifts, and marketability have made him a symbol “spectacle-laden black athletic body as the site of commodified black cultural imagination” that enormously profited Nike (69). As a result, Michael Jordan’s body became “deified, reified and rearticulated within the narrow meanings of capital and commodity” (Dyson 1993, 71). The affects associated with him were objectified and commodified as products for mass consumption through his sneakers, as exemplified through the commodification of his initials ‘MJ, his uniform number ‘23’, and how his silhouette of dunking a basketball is abstracted and made raceless into the “Jumpman” Jordan logo (Armstrong 1996; Miner 2009). More importantly, Michael Jordan is not involved in the marketing of Air Jordan sneakers, which are still produced today. Michael Jordan’s lack of involvement in the brand and the ways he has been commodified results in Jordan sneakers lacking racialized signification. Dylan Miner (2009) states, “Jordan’s phenotypic identity as black, this actual knowledge is dislocated and alienated from the products he is contracted to endorse” (100). Through Nike, Walter LaFeber (1999) argues that Michael Jordan inadvertently became a symbol of American soft power and

global capitalism, as Nike monopolized on the popularity of the NBA and commodified Michael Jordan and affects associated with Black masculinity for their corporate benefit.

2.7. Hip-hop/rap music and sneakers

In addition to the influence of Nike and Michael Jordan, Dylan Miner (2009) attributes the influence of hip-hop for cultivating the “origins of masculine consumption” of sneakers. Turner (2014) discusses how sneaker consumption was rooted in the birth of hip-hop music in New York during the 1970s. Sneakers were a tool for urban youth to affirm and distinguish their identities from mainstream White America. The case study of the popularity of the iconic Adidas Stan Smith sneaker in the 1980s and the hip-hop group Run-D.M.C exemplifies this relationship by wearing their Stan Smith sneakers with no laces (Turner 2014). Wearing sneakers without laces was an attempt to reclaim the criminal image that has been bestowed upon Black men, Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman (2008) describe lace-less sneakers represented the “connection with the historical experiences of being a black man which, from a historical and subcultural perspective, involves being in prison” (100). Sneakers and how they were worn symbolized racialized histories, to (re)create and negotiate their identity through branding and to reclaim their marginalization in society (Wilson and Sparks 1996; Turner 2014; Gunduz 2020).

Sneaker consumption in the 2000s has changed since 1980s and 1990s where Nike and Air Jordans dominated consumer desires. Since the 2010s, Kanye West’s Yeezy line with Adidas has been the most influential and popular amongst contemporary sneaker and streetwear consumers (Houston 2014). Sneaker endorsements in the 1980s and 1990s were relegated to athletes, however, brands like Nike, Puma, Reebok, and Adidas have expanded to include athletes and other influencers, such as Black hip-hop artists and fashion designers like Travis Scott, Rihanna, and Beyonce. Even without endorsements, if these influencers are associated with a product (such as being seen on social media wearing a particular sneaker) this still can still influence and shape the consumptive habits of their loyal followers and the associated brand’s consumers.

Like Michael Jordan, Kanye West’s wealth largely comes from his brand. In 2019, it was estimated that the Jordan line of sneaker does \$3 billion in annual sales, whereas the Yeezy line was estimated to sale \$1.5 billion with expected continuous

growth in the coming years (Greenburg 2019). In an interview with Business Insider (Hanbury 2018), Katy Lubin attributes Yeezy's success to West himself, "Kanye is a master of social media hype. He's used his personality, plus smart scarcity, and exclusivity models to build a cult brand". Dan McQuade (2018) explains the appeal of Yeezy sneakers, "Yeezy sneakers are hot not just because they're endorsed by a popular musician (who got more famous when he married into a family with a TV show). They're hot because they're hard to get". Battle describes Kanye West as challenging the "limits of black male masculinity" through his persona and as a musician (2014, 84). Kanye West and Michael Jordan are both similar in that they are both Black males who are outliers in their respective fields and have achieved iconic global name recognition. Kanye West is a multi-Grammy winning and ground-breaking music producer and musician, fashion designer for his Yeezy clothing and sneaker line, was married to one of the most famous women on earth Kim Kardashian, and is vocal and unapologetic about his controversial political beliefs and opinions (Kautz 2023).

2.8. Affect, commodified Black masculinity, and sneakers

The limited literature on sneaker consumption suggests that in the 2010s sneaker consumption and fandom has expanded globally resulting in the affective value of certain sneakers to be intensified. The meanings of these affects, while rooted within the commodification of Black masculinity, have changed as sneakers have been transformed into what Iain Denny (2020) describes as a "fetishized product" that symbolizes the wearer's economic, cultural, and social capital. My approach to sneakers and streetwear are that they are affective objects, because of the affects associated with commodified Black masculinity have been critical to its production, marketing, and consumption. Ahmed's theory of affect is a useful framework to explore the affective dimensions of these processes.

McDonald (1996) argues the profitability of Nike Air Jordan's is rooted within Michael Jordan's status as a hyper-masculine athlete which enhances the desirability and profitability of Jordan's line of shoes, which has come at the expense of Black culture and its youth. Nike and their Jordan sneaker line have been scrutinized for benefitted from the exploitation of "black cultural expressions of cool, hip, chic and style" by taking advantage of the disposable income of young Black men through the commodification of their hero (Dyson 1993, 70-71). Erin Gunduz (2020) describes this

process, “effectively, money is made off Black Americans by using Black Americans” (18). However, Andrews et al. (1996) found that for British-African youth, Jordan sneakers symbolized “empowered Black masculinity” (451). For non-African diaspora youth, Jordan sneakers were also found to be aspirational and desirable commodities, through interviews with Polish youth, they viewed Jordan sneakers as symbols that elicit desires and imaginings of an “idealized America” from “Polish popular imaginary” (Andrews et al. 1996, 446). Therefore, affirming sneakers as an affective object that is read contentiously depending on the audience and localities.

Violence and deaths associated with sneaker procurement have been overrepresented by young Black youth particularly in the United States, which is linked to the artificial scarcity of sneakers (LaFeber, 1999). Catherine Coleman (2013) argues the “sneaker killings” in the 1980s and 1990s where Black youth were targeted and killed for their sneakers were a consequence of the corporatization and the appropriation of Black youth culture. She states, “athletic wear and particularly sneakers became hot commodity across the country, they held symbolic clout, perhaps nowhere more than in urban communities” (2013, 2). Nike and Michael Jordan were accused of purposefully undersupplying the number of Air Jordans in the market to increase the demand of the shoe to enhance its desirability (Coleman 2013), which is a criticism of Nike that continues today with limited edition sneaker releases.

Additionally, the desires for sneaker consumption have also resulted in new identities and terminologies. The term “sneakerhead” is sometimes used to describe individuals who are sneaker enthusiasts and consumer that “mends shoe and body within a single identity” (Hockey et al. 2015, 25). Iain Denny draws upon the work Cluley and Dunne’s (2012) notion of “commodity narcissism,” as the desire to have a product is at the expense of others, which relates to Gunduz’s (2020) argument that limiting supply to enhance the demand has resulted in the gentrification sneaker consumption in the United States by White Americans who have appropriated sneaker consumption trends of Black Americans. Therefore, the demand for already limited released sneakers is further driven, as “poorer individuals see these coveted sneakers endorsed by their favorite celebrities and worn by individuals in upper classes and their desire for them intensifies” (Gunduz 2020, 9). Since the 2010s, sneaker-related violence still has disproportionately impacted Black American the most (Gunduz, 2020). As a result, the affects associated with commodified Black masculinity imbued with sneakers has

resulted in negative consequences, which scholars have argued have disproportionately affected Black consumers.

2.9. Conclusion

Affect is an appropriate theoretical framework for my thesis because I am interested in understanding the deeper complexities that foregrounds sneaker and streetwear consumption and trading, and how these engagements shapes motivations, relationalities, subjectivities, and identities of individuals. With my literature review I contextualized the sociohistorical and economic basis of the affects associated with commodified Black masculinity through the NBA and hip-hop/rap music. While scholars I drew upon did not use the term 'affect', their work illuminated how the Black male body is a sight of multiple meanings and emotions, and the ways commodified Black masculinity has been imbued with multiple meanings that have been extracted and sublimed to enhance the value and desire of products. The affective value of sneakers has contributed to the proliferation of interest for sneaker consumption globally, which has caused the gentrification of sneaker consumption, with consequences especially for Black Americans.

Chapter 3. Methodology and Methods

3.1. Introduction

Ethnography was an appropriate approach for investigating my research questions, as the researcher gains epistemological insights through close association with their field and informants, “by being, doing, learning, and practicing” as they do in their daily lives (Hine 2017, 21). Ethnographic methods allowed me to gain insights on the practices, subjectivities, and relationalities of sneaker and streetwear consumers. Following Christine Hine (2015, 2017) who sees ethnography as understanding and “following connections” rather being bounded by specific spaces or geographical boundaries, informed my ethnographic approach (2015, 24). In this chapter, I discuss my methodology and methods, detailing, providing details of my field sites, and my experience in the field. I highlight the importance of my positionality and reflexivity in shaping my engagement with the field. The bulk of the data I draw upon in my thesis is from interviews with individuals located in Metro Vancouver that I conducted in 2017 - 2019.

3.2. Multi-sited ethnographic inquiry

Ahmed’s theory of affect emphasizes the role of social and cultural contexts that shape and circulate affect. My research led me to engage in multi-sited ethnographic inquiry as I was interested in the experiences and practices of sneaker and streetwear consumers (Larsen 2008, Postill and Pink 2012). Multi-sited ethnography is an appropriate methodology for investigating affect because it is not confined to a single field site. Therefore, allowing researchers to explore the complex, interconnected dynamics, connections, and movements across different sites to have a nuanced understanding of affect (Bach 2022). As this thesis posits markets as cultures, markets are complex systems that cannot be fully understood by looking at individual interactions in isolation, especially considering the context of sneaker market cultures existing off and online. By observing multiple field sites, I was able to gain a better understanding of these contexts and how they influence the way affect is experienced and expressed.

Hine approaches the internet as an “embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon” (2015, 13). She encourages ethnographers, especially those who use the internet, to be active participants in their field sites. In other words, engage in online research sites as the people they study would. She asserts by doing as our participants do online, the ethnographer can understand “how it feels to navigate the social textures of everyday life” to understand how embedded the internet is in the daily lives of the people with whom we are concerned (Hine 2015, 27). The internet is embedded in our everyday devices, such as our tablets or smart phones, and more importantly in the ways we understand context and produce meanings (Hine 2015). Hine describes the internet as an embodied practice because insights we gain through online engagements often “help us understand ourselves in new ways,” which thereby reinforce our senses, emotions, and our bodily being (Hine 2015, 44). I argue this is the case for Metro Vancouver streetwear and sneaker consumers, their marketplaces and engagements occurred online and offline, where social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are the most influential and important mediums of communication and information exchange.

3.3. Access to the field

In the field, I made friends and networked with people in Metro Vancouver, the Metro Vancouver geographically oriented sneaker and streetwear trading Facebook groups were particularly influential on me, as they were for my interviewees. At the time of my research, these two Facebook groups were the most influential Vancouver Sneakerhead Group (VSG) and Vancouver Streetwear Community (VSC) with over 26,000 members and 18,000 members respectively³. I introduced myself to the Adidas Granville store manager Paul while entering for a raffle to win the opportunity to purchase a Yeezy Boost 350 V2 sneaker in my size (which I happened to win). I became friends with the founder of VSC at an Adidas sneaker launch event that Paul invited me

³ While Facebook buy and sell groups like Vancouver Sneaker Group (VSG) and Vancouver Streetwear Community (VSC) were orientated towards Metro Vancouver streetwear and sneaker trading, sometimes active users in these groups would post trades and state they were from other Canadian cities, such as Victoria, British Columbia and Toronto, Ontario. In addition, it is practice for some serious sneaker and streetwear traders to join popular Facebook trading groups in other geographical regions, such as New York, to engage in transcontinental or transnational trading, or to gain information to help them ascertain the general market value or demand of particular products.

to. These two relationships were the most formative in enabling me to get a deep, nuanced, and complex understanding of the relationship between resellers, corporations, and consumers. These relationships allowed me to get access to information and social connections that I otherwise would have not been privy to. Overtime, I became well-known in the Metro Vancouver sneakerhead community, made a lot of friends, I attended locally, nationally, and internationally organized sneaker conventions in Vancouver. I eventually became more involved such as helping professional resellers sell their items at large sneaker trading conventions. I eventually established a presence as a researcher in the community, and fostered strong connections with numerous influential sneaker resellers, retailers, and collectors in the Metro Vancouver.

Since I was interested in the experience of what it was like to purchase limited edition sneaker and streetwear items, I would help my friends or purchase whatever I wanted for myself. I learnt over the course of my research about sneaker and streetwear resellers, who purchase items for the sole purpose to resell, often at significant profits margins. I participated in waiting outside stores to enter sneaker raffles for the chance to purchase an elusive pair, queuing online for high demand release, and when successful I tried reselling some of them for a profit in-person at sneaker conventions and in these Facebook groups. For highly sought out items that did not have raffle releases and that I was interested in or if I was helping a friend procure, I would stay up late, such as 12am for a sneaker drop in Europe, or wake up in the early morning in anticipation of sneaker or streetwear releases, such as 6am, 7am or 8am for releases in North America.

These experiences allowed me to experience the frenzy of online releases, which incessantly involved pressing the refresh button of my mobile or laptop browser. Most of the time, the servers of these websites would be overloaded with high traffic and crashed before I was even able to click on the product's webpage. Most of the times even when I was able to even put an item in my cart, it was already sold out before I got to the checkout page. The times I was able to check out due to glitches or overloaded servers, the product was already sold out or my payment was not able to be processed. Rarely was I able to purchase an item during these live drops due to the high demand. I gained different personal insights from my engagement of these different contexts, which allowed me to experience the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with

these different platforms, my experiences illuminated the possibilities and constraints of navigating these terrains (Hine 2017, 83).

My affective approach to practice and my ethnographic approach provided insights of relational thinking and subjective knowing were gained from the emphatic, bodily feeling of being there in the field, such as standing in line with those consumers, hearing their conversations allowed me to feeling the embodiment of affectivity of those interactions. My experiences in these at first seemingly fragmented spaces of engagement and being at these different sites of sneaker and streetwear engagement created mosaic of the spectrum of being that illuminated on the diversity of the daily practices of my informants thereby the different processes of meaning making and being in different cultural contexts of these spaces. Through participant observation, I was able to feel the embodied affects of waiting in line at sneaker raffles, I was able to interact with sneaker and streetwear consumers, cultivate friendships and became privy to the ways they understand their relationships with other consumers. Additionally, in conversations with my informants, when we talked about how certain individuals who came across to them as particularly opinionated i.e., very active or in their perception having annoying behaviour in Facebook posts, were surprised when they came across these individuals in real life because their expectations of these individuals did not match how they envisioned to be in real life, such as having a more introverted presence during in-person sneaker and streetwear spaces. This suggests how the online environment may allow for a certain type of agency and subjectivity (Hine 2000; Pearce 2009; Miller 2011; Boellstorff 2015).

3.4. Ethnographic interviews

The ethnographic interview is a powerful tool as it enables the researcher to understand the meaning assigned to objects, the world around them, how they understand themselves and each other. According to James Spradley (2016), “ethnographic interviewing represents a powerful tool for invading other people's way of life. It reveals information that can be used to affirm their rights, interests, and sensitivities or to violate them” (36). Through interviews, I could hear their tones of excitement, affect. As discussed in the introduction, the focus of my research was primarily on sneaker enthusiasts, as individuals kept discussing their fandom for streetwear, my research evolved where my focus was on both streetwear and sneakers.

Initially, my interview guides pertained to sneaker consumption⁴. The interview questions and themes were informed by my own auto ethnographic insights of getting acquainted with the online and physical spaces of sneaker reselling. The purpose of conducting these interviews, I wanted to focus on how my participants made sense of their experiences, how they became acculturated, and exposed to this subculture. I often heard stories of transformation. I created separate interview guides for individuals who worked in sneaker and streetwear retail, for individuals who self-identified as sneaker enthusiasts i.e., sneaker heads, individuals who identified themselves to be resellers, I had questions orientated towards self-identified females who were interested in sneaker consumption.

Although the focus of this thesis is of the experiences of four interviewees, I conducted seventeen interviews from 2017 to 2018 with sneaker consumers and sneaker managers. My interviewees were mostly young White and Asian men (and two Asian females) from the ages of 17 to 28 years old and lived within the Metro Vancouver area: North Vancouver, Vancouver, Coquitlam, Langley, Burnaby, and Richmond. In June 2017, I solicited most of my interviews through one on Facebook post in VSC regarding the nature of my research and that I was looking for people to speak about their experiences with me. My interviewees owned from a range of only a handful of limited-edition kicks to those who had hundreds of pairs. They had the option to give written or verbal consent, and were given the option to use their real names in the research or pseudonym. Interviews were recorded and the recording and any accompanying identifying information was securely stored on my computer and encrypted. Interviews were conducted in quiet restaurants, coffee shops, Simon Fraser University campuses in Metro Vancouver, and one of my interviewees resell stores and at a sneaker convention. All interviews were transcribed.

The semi-structured interview questions I asked revolved broadly around how they became acquainted with sneakers; how many sneakers they owned; how they understood sneakers to be affective (e.g., What makes certain sneakers more valuable or desirable than others?"); their practices of sneaker consumption; their perceptions of sneaker reselling and the speculative aftermarket of sneakers; and how they engage with other sneaker enthusiasts. For resellers, I asked additionally questions related to

⁴ See Appendix A – D for interview guides.

how they determine the resell price, their practices of reselling, the norms and code of conduct of online and physical spaces of sneaker reselling. For female sneaker enthusiasts, I asked additional questions related to their experiences and perceptions of engaging in a male-dominated places of sneaker consumption. Of note, I also had the opportunity to interact and interview sneaker company employees including individuals in store management from Adidas and Nike. Furthermore, another facet of my research is that I also interviewed sneaker resellers, from those who would occasionally resell goods to those who resell as their primary source of income. Of the corporate employees, I asked questions related to their experiences of how their respective brands try to cultivate excitement for new products; whether their company has tried to slow or stop sneaker reselling, and if so, what are these practices. For resellers, I also asked questions related to how they learnt to resell; how pricing works; procurement; speculation of stock; and their different practices of reselling.

3.5. Reflexivity

The approach to reflexivity that I took is that reflexivity requires an appreciation of the ways in which the researcher and the researched shape the research process, and how it influences the ontological approach of knowledge is created, our decisions in the research process, and how epistemological insights are garnered. As Emma Poulton (2012) states, how the researcher's "personal biographies shape our research interests, access to the field, relationships with the researched, and our interpretation and representation of the culture under examination" (2). The approach to reflexivity that I took is that reflexivity requires an appreciation of the ways in which the researcher and the researched shape the research process, and how it influences the ontological approach of knowledge is created, our decisions in the research process, and how epistemological insights are garnered.

This research is also an investigation of my relationship with dress and clothing. By studying sneaker culture, I also wanted to understand my consumptive behaviours -- I wanted to understand how was it that I can be seduced by and justify spending on certain brands despite knowing the psychological, environmental, and sociological effects of conspicuous consumption. I have a long interest in fashion and appreciate the styles that many sneaker enthusiasts wear. My interest in dress and fashion stems from childhood watching fashion journalistic coverage of luxury runway shows from the

Canadian show FashionTelevision (FT). From elementary school, I remember being intentional in the decisions I made regarding the ways I presented myself and in my dress. Coming from an immigrant and working-class background, and moving around a lot, I understood that clothing was a tool for me to fit in. Brand names and dress have always conveyed a sense of distinction and an affective sense for me, even when wearing brand name clothing without logos. By stating this explicitly, I acknowledge that my reflexivity and positioning shaped my motivations and the directions of this research from its inception to its analysis.

3.6. Positionality

During my fieldwork, I was aware of the ways my positionality allowed me to have access to privileged information and contacts. Globally sneaker and streetwear consumption and especially trading is male dominated, and Metro Vancouver was no exception. In the processes of conducting and talking about my research I have received remarks with sexist undertones about how my appearance allowed me to gain access to some of my informants due to my petite stature, youthful and feminine appearance, and being Asian female in the male dominant spaces of sneaker and streetwear trading. My identity may have impacted how my individuals perceived and interacted with me. Potentially, desirability bias may have impacted my interviewees speaking frankly on certain topics with me such as racism and sexism. I believe the point of ethnography is not to judge the value of these objects or to somehow get their representation “right,” but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already present in them (Hine 2015). Additionally, my positionality as a graduate student also affected my experience and the ways I was interacted with in the field. Some of my interviewees and individuals that I interacted with in the field felt validated that I, someone from the academy, was studying their community because it confirmed to them that their practices and spaces are indeed unique and meaningful. Perhaps, my solicitation of asking people to be interviewed limited the variety of people who wanted to contact me, as individuals may have been intimidated or felt they did not have anything valuable to say to a ‘researcher’.

3.7. Conclusion

Conducting multi-sited ethnographic participant observation helped me see the continuum of practices off and online. Doing ethnographic interviews allowed me to deepen my understanding of the everyday practices of my interviewees and the ways they engage navigate, use, and triangulate how people understood these spaces. Interviews provided the intimacy and space for my participants to provide their narrative of how they became involved in sneaker and streetwear trading, for them to tell me what they thought was important. In the next chapters four and five, I explore how my interviewees became sensitized to sneaker affects and learned the practices of sneaker and streetwear consumption, thereby establishing the grounds for understanding practices of desiring and consumption within the context of the affects of Black commodified masculinity.

Chapter 4. Sneakers as affective objects: Desiring Jordan

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the ways that feelings and meanings accumulate around sneakers, and how we come to view sneakers as desirable and valuable. This chapter provides considerations on how sneaker affects need to be contextualized by the processes that produces desires. As objects are points of conversion for affect, I am interested in exploring how sneakers become sites of where feelings accumulate around it (Ahmed, 2010). Ahmed states, “bodies also do not arrive in neutral: the acquisition of tendencies is also the acquisition of orientations toward some things and not others as being good” (2010, 34). This chapter contributes to my thesis by exploring the relationship between commodified Black masculinity and the value of sneakers by deconstructing the taken for granted assumptions of limited sneakers, particularly Yeezy’s and Jordans’ being coded as desirable, cool, and distinguishing to sneaker enthusiasts. Throughout my fieldwork, I often had encounters where sneaker consumers spoke about being influenced by Black men for their sources of style or wanting shoes that are affiliated by Black athletes and artists.

I draw upon my interview with Eugene, a 35-year-old Chinese-Canadian male and a childhood fan of Michael Jordan. The interview excerpts that I analyze centralize around Eugene’s telling of his childhood introduction to Nike sneakers, his strong interest in Michael Jordan and Air Jordan sneakers, and his opinions and observations about the current generation of sneaker consumers who are influenced by Kanye West and desire Yeezy sneakers. These observations that Eugene has made about the younger generation of sneaker consumer is a significant point of inquiry for my thesis. At the beginning of my research, I took for granted that Jordan was a popular sneaker. Eugene’s curiosity and inquiry into why the newer generation of sneaker consumers desire Jordan’s speaks at the heart of my thesis research. I focus on parts of our interview where he tells how he became interested in sneakers, his fandom with Michael Jordan, his perspectives and observations on contemporary sneaker consumption.

4.2. Eugene an ‘old head’: The generation that grew up watching Michael Jordan

I met Eugene at a sneaker convention in Metro Vancouver where he had a booth promoting his sneaker podcast. The topics of his podcast ranged discussions related to the culture of sneaker consumption and reselling, and current events related to sneakers, such as upcoming releases. Eugene was also affiliated with Stay Fresh, a company that resells premium sneakers located Metro Vancouver. Eugene is a self-identified as an “old head,” which is a colloquial term used in the sneaker subculture to describe individuals who are sneaker enthusiasts in their 30s and 40s that were highly influenced by Nike and Michael Jordan. It is important to acknowledge the term old head emerged from low-income, urban Black neighbourhoods in the United States, and describes a specific type of urban Black masculinity. According to Alford A. Young Jr, old heads “draw from both their earlier life experiences as “bad boys” and their more recent experiences as men who have survived turbulent pasts, in order to determine what kinds of approaches can—and, more important, cannot—work” and the “dimension of their selfhood that concerns being an old head and how they define a sense of social purpose in adopting that identity” (2007, 349). ‘Old heads’ were the mainstream of sneaker culture and consumption during the period of the 1980s to early 2000s. Compared to the younger and newer generation of sneaker consumers who rely on the internet for sneaker-related information, fast access online marketplaces, social media, and live in a time where limited sneaker collaborations releases are monthly, these spaces and places for getting access to information and sneakers are in stark contrast to the experiences of self-identified old heads I spoke to who recalled how it was hard to obtain information on upcoming sneaker releases, which was usually through print media such as magazines, and that major releases were only occurred a few times a year.

4.3. Nike marketing and the affects of ‘cool’

The conditions of what makes an object affective can be due to the circumstances of its location and the timing of when it appears (Ahmed 2010). For Eugene, timing seems to be an important part of the affective orientation he has towards Michael Jordan and Jordan products. As this comes out in talking about how affected he was by Michael Jordan as a child and basketball being a large part of his identity

growing up in high school. The role of the media is critical in understanding the production of Eugene's desires for wanting to be associated with Jordan, Rofel's argues there is a relationship between the construction of desires and consumption of television shows whereby "people learn the art of longing", in other words, learn the practice to desire (2007, 6).

Ahmed defines happy objects as those that "affect us in the best way," in other words, gives us pleasure (2010, 22). Eugene recalls becoming first interested in sneakers in grade one or two when he moved back to Vancouver from Hong Kong in 1988, he recalls at that time Nike Air Max's was trendy. He wanted the shoe because of the proclaimed marketing of the sneakers of giving enhanced performance, he recalls the pop cultural impact of Nike Air technology:

It was a pop cultural phenomenon at the time, like people would kinda talk about it on TV, on movies, and that type of stuff. And seeing that kind of cultural relevance at that time it was just unseen, unheard of before for a specific sneaker to get that type of attention. For that time, that time it was huge for me, it was the one thing at the time where I kinda need this so that a) I'll be the first to have it, or b) I can be like everyone else. It already cemented my materialistic goals even as a little kid.

Eugene's first memory was due to the influence of Nike's marketing that spread the message that Air Max sneakers was an object to be read as being a source of happiness due to the allegedly advanced innovation of Nike's Air technology. He equated his fascination with Nike Air Max's with the same type of affect of seeing a cool car. This was important for him as a child because he internalized that if owned these sneakers that were marketed as cool then by extension by wearing them, he would be read as a cool kid in school. In other words, that the affects of these sneakers would extend to him through proximity by wearing them (Ahmed 2010).

4.4. Desire for Jordan: Getting an "advantage"

As discussed in chapter two, Michael Jordan's relationship with Nike in creating the Air Jordan sneaker franchise was the largest endorsement and most profitable endorsement of the 1980s and 1990s (Andrews and Jackson 2001). Jordan's ground-breaking career in the NBA and his marketability made him an important cultural icon of the 1990s. Eugene's fandom and awe of Michael Jordan's athletic performance were the most influential aspects of what drew him to wanting to own Jordan sneakers as a youth.

To Eugene, Jordan sneakers were just not a pair of mass-produced shoes, as what makes objects special is the socio-cultural context that it exists in that orientates our perceptions that it is (Dant 1996, Ahmed 2010). This is reflected in how Eugene expresses his desires for Jordan products because he watched “firsthand,” Michael Jordan “doing phenomenal things wearing that type of shoe, that had an impact on me”. The cultural and affective value of Jordan sneakers, this is not by accident as McDonald and Andrews (2002) argues that the production of Michael Jordan as a cultural symbol is due to Nike’s “emotional and affective investments” in the construction and commodification of his image:

When back in the day, it was like Michael Jordan did this, did you see it? Yeah, let me explain it to you. It’s a little different then, it’s not just getting the shoes, I had to get the fucking jersey, the fucking lunch box and jacket too. I didn’t play basketball that well, but I felt if I could get the same product as the greatest basketball player in the world, maybe that will give me some advantage...

Eugene believed that owning the same product as Michael Jordan would give him an athletic advantage on the basketball court is a form of practice that Tim Dant (1996) describes as “veneration” that promotes the commodity fetishism of an object. This is when an object is attributed with the perception of certain properties, such as power, which then become intrinsically tied to the meanings of the object. While wearing Jordan sneakers may give its wearers an athletic advantage on the court, I argue its effects are marginal compared to the Michael Jordan’s ability and talent as a professional athlete. Nevertheless, owning Jordan affiliated products gave him a closer proximity to Michael Jordan. Even items that are not directly related to his basketball playing, like a lunch box, these ordinary items became happy objects because they became associated with the affects of Jordan (Ahmed 2010).

4.5. Eugene as an adult buying sneakers for ‘nostalgia’

It was not until 2010, when Eugene started putting money aside to get the sneakers that he wanted. He was at a time in his life where he had disposable income as he was finished post-secondary and worked fulltime. During this time, Eugene recalls that the Air Jordan brand was “retro-ing” Jordan’s, meaning they were re-releasing an older iconic model of Jordan 11s “Concord” that Michael Jordan made popular in the 1990s. Iain Denny (2020) states that the “retro release” of Nike sneakers is generally

targeted towards sneaker collectors and aficionados. – especially ‘old heads’ like Eugene. Jordan 11’s particular importance is because of its historical importance, as it was the first shoe that Michael Jordan wore after he came back from his NBA retirement in 1995 to play for the Chicago Bulls, which marked a significant revitalization for the team as the Bulls went to dominate the NBA. The Jordan 11 is also distinguishable because of its design and allegedly “promised a technical advantage on the court” (Denny 2020, 2).

Eugene describes nostalgia as an important part of why he purchases Jordan sneakers as an adult, “Now we have the money to buy this stuff that we remembered, and we are buying back...its nostalgia”. The nostalgia that Eugene is referring to is the nostalgia that many old heads like him have about the positive emotions they had about Michael Jordan. Drawing upon Ahmed (2010), memories are influenced by emotions, “the feeling is shaped by contact with the memory, and also involves an orientation towards what is remembered” (7). The idea of being able to buy nostalgia relates to what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) description of what brand do. She argues that brands sell feelings and affects, personalities and values rather than the goods itself. Branding is about building an affective and authentic relationship with a consumer. It is through brands that consumers create themselves, as they become the “spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant, and authentic” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 8-9). Therefore, what we are being sold is not the product itself rather the immaterial, such as values, affects, memories. Therefore, when Nike releases retros as nostalgia from ‘old heads’ like Eugene view these sneaker releases as opportunities to relive their memories of Michael Jordan, in addition, drawing in other new consumers to the narrative around the shoe’s history and cultural significance.

Commodification is turning something into a commercial product, which includes the monetization of different spheres of life, transformation of social and cultural life that can be bought and sold (Banet-Weiser 2012). By building upon the work of Rofel (2007) and Ahmed (2010, 2014), the production of sneaker desires and affects associated with popular limited-edition sneakers such as Jordan’s and Yeezy’s are imbued with the images and construction of commodified Black masculinity associated with Black male athletes and musicians (Crockett 2008). The Black male body has symbolized “cool” and hip-hop culture, in particular, the site of fantasy, “the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the call to liberal

individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face” (hooks 2004, 141-142).

4.6. Older and newer sneaker consumers purchasing the same Jordans

Eugene does not understand why the newer generation of sneaker consumers also shares the same affinity as he does for Jordan sneakers. Eugene expressed his perplexities at how the newer generation of sneakerhead’s are also fascinated with Jordan’s, who were not exposed to the same experiences as he was, watching Jordan while he was an NBA player, “[high school] kids out there who are asking for a pair of certain Jordan’s like they have never fucking see Michael Jordan play a single game in their life” and this perplexes him for why there is such a high demand for Jordan’s amongst a new generation of consumers. Eugene’s comment reflects how he views these new consumers as not having the same cultural capital as he does to be able to desire Jordans as he does as an old head (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013) and that they perhaps have not been exposed to the production of desires that makes Jordan’s desirable (Rofel 2007).

Scholars such as Dylan Miner (2009) argue that Nike’s commodification of Michael Jordan into a product has alienated Michael Jordan and the knowledge about him as an individual from his affiliated products. Therefore, Michael Jordan has been reified into a product for consumption, where the meanings of Jordan as an individual has been abstracted into the recognition of him primarily as a product (Honneth 2008). Therefore, for some individuals as Eugene observes amongst the newer generation of sneaker consumers, their knowledge of Michael Jordan is based on the knowledge of the Jordan brand. Nevertheless, Jordan sneakers are still sought after by a newer generation of sneaker consumers who are purchasing these sneakers based on a different context; therefore, different motivations for consumption (Banet-Weiser 2012). The fetishization of an object varies overtime, place, and between groups of people (Dant 1996).

Eugene explains the differences between the appeal to consume Jordan sneakers for the older and newer generation sneaker consumers fascinates him:

Like the most fascinating thing about the sneaker culture for me is that mother fuckers like me that want the shoe for like nostalgic for fucking 'old head' reasons, and there are all these kids that want it. Want the exact same product. We have totally different paths of how we got there.

Eugene doesn't get why newer sneakerheads like Jordan because he isn't a part of that cultural practice of veneration or worship and for him watching Michael Jordan legacy is critical to why he finds Jordan sneakers affective (Dant 1996; Ahmed 2010). How an object comes to be fetishized is influenced by the cultural context of one's practices of learning what objects are desirable (Dant 1996).

In my interviews with old heads like Eugene, they learnt how to desire for sneakers through different cultural contexts, influences, channels of information, and spaces to purchase sneakers, such as through sport, rap/hip-hop culture, in-person shopping line ups, traveling to different cities and stores, and information was less available as it is now, such as through paper magazines (Kawamura 2016). Whereas in my interviews with the younger generation of sneakerheads have developed their desires for sneakers in different ways, most notably the internet and social media has played a significant role, which has allowed a platform for sneaker influencers and sneaker communities, and the creation and circulation of accessible information related to sneakers. The sneaker became a conduit of how they met new people and made new friends through online sneaker communities and social media channels, where the motivations to learn how to desire for sneakers became related to obtaining social capital, becoming purveyor of and having access to cultural capital by being able to demonstrate ones taste by posting photos of sneaker acquisitions and outfits with limited edition sneakers, and for interviewees who became interested in sneakers based on accumulation economic capital due to the profitability of the resale market, learning how to desire sneakers allowed them to speculate what sneakers would fetch high resale value. Additionally, there are more sneaker brand collaborations and celebrity endorsements than in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Puma and Rihanna's Fenty brand and Nike and Off-White, and sneakers have become more integrated into mainstream and high fashion, with high-end brands like Balenciaga and Gucci creating their own luxury sneakers. This has broadened the appeal and consumer base of sneaker collecting beyond just sports and streetwear. I will delve into more in the next chapter on how the younger generation of sneaker consumers learn to desire sneakers.

4.7. Commodity fetishism of Yeezy sneakers

Eugene's shared his opinions with me about how he does not understand the current generation of sneaker enthusiasts' zeal for Yeezy sneakers that were popular at the time of our research. His perplexity regarding Yeezy fandom comes his perspective that being a Jordan fandom is different:

Looks here's the difference. Back when I was a kid, I bought Nikes and Air Jordan's because I wanted to be like, "I want to play like Michael Jordan" but I am not fucking buying a pair of Yeezy's cause like I wanna rap better, you know? What does this celebrity have? He is not a designer by trade, he's not an athlete, but he is signed to an athletic footwear brand...

Eugene's comments infer that he believes fandom for Nike and Jordan sneaker to be more sensible because of how their shoes were marketed to improve athletic performance and were highly valued because Michael Jordan wore them. Eugene cannot see why the newer generation of sneaker consumers would find value in wearing Yeezy sneakers. Drawing upon Tim Dant (1996) and Bourdieu (1984, 1986), distinction of what items are venerated or treated as ordinary or rubbish is embedded within cultural codes that emerge due to practices in that culture. Therefore, Eugene does not read Kanye West nor Yeezy sneakers with the same affects like the newer generation of sneakers consumers do because of the different context of how he came to be a desiring subject for sneakers (Ahmed 2010).

4.8. Connection between Kanye West and Yeezy

While Eugene described Kanye West as a "great artist," there is a disconnect regarding the fervor for the younger generation of sneaker consumers who are willing to purchase Yeezy's at resale and purchase other clothing and shoes that Kanye West is seen wearing on the internet:

I'm a fan of his, but I'm not a fan of his music. So, [the thought] "I have to get these shoes" there is a disconnect for me. But for the younger generation that wants all the Yeezy's that buy it at resale, those are the people, "Oh, I love his music. So, I do have to get his shoes." Where the fuck do you get that connection from? ... But these kids that will do whatever Kanye tells them to do, like wear what Kanye is wearing on fucking blogs. That shit's important to a marketing standpoint because they are the people who will blindly spend money on shit.

Eugene's perspective suggests he views the appreciation of Kanye West and his music as an insufficient justification to purchase items associated with the celebrity. He does not understand the younger generation of sneaker consumer's fascinations with wearing clothing styles like Kanye West's and Yeezy sneakers. Eugene sees the newer generation of sneaker consumers as purchasing whatever they see Kanye West wears or sells. As I have argued, the production and politics of desiring Jordan sneakers must be contextualized within the continuum of the socio-historical racialized capitalist exploitation and marginalization of Black male bodies and Black masculinity, so does the consumption of Yeezy sneakers (hooks, 2004)

Eugene's observations on the fandom of Kanye West are important and I will delve into this more in the next chapter, as I focus on the experiences of the newer generation of consumers. Miles White argues that non-Black youth access these affects "through racialized commodity fetishism and the consumption of music, film, clothing, videos, computer games, and other parts of the apparatus of hardcore rap culture mediated through the mass media and the culture industry" (2011, 106). In other words, the adoption of Black fashion, music, and styles are a way for non-Black youth to pursue an identity, value, meaning for themselves to break away from "mainstream values" that is based on the "on fantasies of the racialized Other and idealized tropes of racial deviance in the pursuit of identity" (White 2011, 30).

4.9. Observations on Chinese "foreign" sneaker customers

Being able to discern between good and bad taste is not just about having the practices of discernment, according to Ahmed (2010) it is also tied in with the nature of an individual's relationship to these objects. In this section, I analyze Eugene's observations and remarks about "foreign" Chinese customers who buy Yeezy sneakers from the premium sneaker consignment resale shop that he works for located in a Richmond mall:

I have seen on multiple occasions, Chinese people, clearly foreign. Probably wasn't born here, wasn't raised here, they have characteristics that tell that they are foreign.

Eugene despite also being ethnically Chinese makes a racial intragroup distinction by labelling certain Chinese consumers as "foreign". This labelling has a similar semblance

to identity label FOB (fresh off the boat) that Cui (2016) defines as term used by culturally assimilated second generation Chinese-Canadian to describe Chinese newcomers to Canada “who may still maintain their ethnic cultural characteristics in terms of ways of dressing, talking and doing” (239). Eugene was born in Hong Kong but came to Canada at a young age; therefore, in his categorization of these consumers he is differentiating himself based on the assumption they are not assimilated to Canadian culture. Eugene believes these “foreign” Chinese consumers do not have the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) to understand why certain colourways of sneakers are priced differently:

They [Chinese consumers] have money because they at the store and they would ask for a pair of Yeezy’s, okay. “Do you have this one?,” “Yeah of course, it’s right here”. They will try it on, they are not too knowledgeable about the product: [the customer says] “Okay, how about this one? Do you have this one?” It will cost like \$500 more. He goes, “What?! It’s the same shoe different colour, why does it cost so much more?” So, they are not knowledgeable about the history of the product itself, and we are talking about Yeezy’s specifically. And then at the end of this interaction with that customer we realized he doesn’t even know who Kanye West is, so now the product is selling itself not the celebrity.

Eugene is commenting on the nature of the relationship of Chinese’s consumer’s orientations to Yeezy sneakers, and it can also be inferred that he is also commenting on the authenticity of their relationship to the brand (Banet-Weiser 2012). To appreciate characteristics that distinguishes a particular sneaker from another requires an individual to have the knowledge and the practices of being able to read and interpret affective differences (Dant 1996; Ahmed 2010).

As highlighted above in Eugene’s remarks on the newer generation of sneaker consumers, he views Yeezy sneaker fandom as direct a relationship with the fandom of Kanye West. However, when “foreign” Chinese consumers purchase Yeezy sneakers at a high resale price, his perception is that the “product is selling itself” because they are still motivated to purchase these sneakers despite a lack of knowledge about Kanye West. This situation also exemplifies what Ahmed (2004) describes when an object has “affective value” by being detached from its original meanings through processes of fetishization that disentangles and erases the object’s history of production overtime (11). The act of going to the store, being interested in Yeezy sneakers, and purchasing them at price significantly above retail suggests they have value for these consumers,

but within a context where these sneakers have gained such popularity and appeal that its affective value has become independent of a consumer's direct relationship with Kanye West.

4.10. Parallels between the production of desires for Jordans and Yeezys

The theme of being affected positively by these highly successful ground-breaking Black men in their respective fields, who have major sneaker deals, is shared in his experience for Eugene becoming a Michael Jordan fan and the criticisms of Kanye West fans. Although Eugene does not understand the motivations for the consumption of Kanye West fans, I argue there are similarities in his telling of how he came to desire Jordans and the meanings they have for him. White (2011) describes Black male bodies, especially in hip-hop/rap music, have been the “primary vehicles and sites for fears as well as fantasies of the racial Other” (4). The narratives of Michael Jordan’s “alleged naturalness” of his extraordinary athleticism must be understood within racialized history of White supremacist constructions of untamed Black physicality. McDonald and Andrews (2002) argue the production of Michael Jordan as a cultural symbol can be attributed to Nike’s “emotional and affective investments” in the construction and commodification of his image, which need to be contextualized in the sociohistorical and political economic processes behind the ideological constructions of Black masculinity and identity. Michael Jordan became a symbol of American individualism and individual success, as “commercial after commercial, Jordan is indirectly implicated in the individualistic discourse of American values, this time in terms of the obsessive pursuit of personal success” (Andrews 1998, 207). When contextualizing the narrative surrounding Michael Jordan’s exceptionalism was only amplified when contrasted amongst what McDonald and Andrew’s (2001) describes as the New Right’s narrative, which demonized Black masculinity through stereotypes of criminality and violence, and the moral panic about welfare dependency, erosion of the nuclear family, drugs, and sexual promiscuousness of the 1990s (27). Therefore, Michael Jordan represented “gentler” or “preferred” Black masculinity that was palatable for White audiences and did not cause too much “White cultural unease” (McDonald and Andrews 2001, 29).

Ken McLeod (2009) argues that consumers who may not possess “the physical talent of Michael Jordan or the creative ability of Kanye West can nonetheless

appropriate a portion of their success through acquiring their clothing lines and equipment” (221). Jordan sneakers are affective objects imbued with meanings, such as nostalgia, that compels his desires to purchase them, just as he remarked that Kanye West fans justify paying resale for Yeezy sneakers because of their fandom for the musician. As a result, I believe the “advantage” that Eugene gets from wearing Jordan’s is similar, but repackaged for the younger generation of consumers who wear Yeezy sneakers, whereby the consumer becomes associated with the affects and meanings of those items through their proximity of the object (Ahmed 2010).

4.11. Conclusion

Scholars such as McLeod (2009) have argued there is a relationship between Black musicians and athletes with entrepreneurial success whereby narratives of exceptionalism are reflective of the processes of racialization and the socioeconomic marginalization of Black males in the United States. Drawing parallels between the narratives the construction masculinity amongst Black celebrity athletes and musicians, such as Michael Jordan and Kanye West, whereby the Black male body becomes “the site of spectacle and improvisation” (McLeod 2009, 221). McLeod contextualizes the narratives around the success of these Black athletes and musicians appeals to the “American mythos of the glory of individualism and self-determination” (2009, 222). Their successes are further framed as exceptional and further amplified due to their marginality. Therefore, McLeod (2009) argues that the “spectacularization of black athletic and musical masculinity” whereby these Black athletes and musicians are read becomes a form of commodity fetishism.

Eugene’s experience of being impacted by watching Michael Jordan, who he reveres as the greatest athlete in the world, exemplifies this fetishization of the athletic Black male body. As a youth, he was motivated to purchase products associated with Michael Jordan, from lunch boxes to sneakers, to be associated with the affects of Michael Jordan’s in hopes that his own athletic ability in basketball would be enhanced through proximity -- owning and wearing these items. Now as an old head, Eugene purchases retro’d Jordan sneakers, where his motivation to consume is driven by the nostalgia that is tied to the fetishization of Michael Jordan’s career and legacy. While some consumers may not understand why Yeezy sneakers are highly sought after, Adidas pursuing a multibillion contract with Kanye West despite him being an athlete

speaks to the profitability of creating products associated with Kanye West and the meanings associated with Kanye West, which is inextricably tied to spectacularness of his successes and complex multifaceted career (McLeod 2009).

The value of a sneaker has little to do with the human labour that went into creating the sneaker, value is created by the brands and consumers (Denny 2020). This chapter explored the different roles affect has in shaping how an individual may come to desire sneakers. I have shown that motivations that Eugene has for purchasing sneakers situated within the affects and the memories or nostalgia he has for Michael Jordan. Despite the perceived differences between the motivations of older and newer sneaker consumers, I have argued that the desires for sneakers are imbued within complex power and economic structures, racialized histories, and White supremacy, as they relate to the affects that stem from the commodification of black masculinity of Black athletes and musicians of are associated the most with influencing sneaker consumption and production.

Chapter 5. Younger generation of sneaker consumers

5.1. Introduction

In my semi-structured interviews, the influence of Black athletes and hip-hop/rap artists, especially Michael Jordan and Kanye West, and their products always indirectly or directly became a topic of conversation. During my research, sneakers and streetwear styles associated with these Black celebrities were the most desired and fetched the highest resale value. In addition, at every sneaker convention I went to in Metro Vancouver, mainstream rap and hip-hop was the music of choice for DJs at these venues. Personal aesthetic choices are imbued within a greater social and cultural context that often reveal the complexities of social life. Elisa, Gill, and Scharff argue that trends in aesthetics, such as fashion and beauty, are never random and instead based on patterns that are often not evident, stating, "individuals may be invested in seeing their own look as entirely personal and idiosyncratic[;] appearance is, we suggest, thoroughly social and cultural, and however quirkily they self-style, few people live outside the fashion-beauty complex entirely" (2017, 19). In this chapter, I highlight the relationship between notions of distinction, social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013), affective value (Ahmed 2004) and conspicuous consumption (Veblen 2005) as motivators factors for sneaker consumption amongst the younger generation. I argue that motivations for sneaker consumption underlies the same phenomenon of how non-Black youth access the affective meanings associated with the representation of Black masculinity through the consumption of mediums such as music and clothing.

5.2. Newer generation of sneaker consumers

I draw upon the experiences of three of my interviewees: Elias, Ben, and Sun. I have picked their experiences to highlight as they particularly stand out to me as being reflective of the motivations that the younger generation of sneaker enthusiasts bring into sneaker and streetwear consumption. At the time of our interview, Elias had just graduated high school. Elias had only become involved in sneaker consumption several months prior to our interview in the fall of 2016. He is of Hispanic heritage and grew up

in Coquitlam. Elias' introduction to sneakers and streetwear was from his high school friends. Ben is a White teenager who at the time of the interview was going into grade twelve. Ben is from the upper-class suburban neighbourhood Dunbar-Southlands in Vancouver. Ben explained that his interest in sneakers and streetwear started when he was in grade seven in 2013 and was a part of Facebook groups dedicated to sneakers and streetwear trading in Metro Vancouver and in New York city. One of his friends randomly added him to one of the groups and his interest started. Sun is Chinese-Canadian who was 18 years old and lives in Richmond. I draw upon his interview because his motivations for sneaker consumption are influenced by wanting to participate in a communal activity with his friends. At the time of our interview, sneaker consumption for him was just a hobby and he appreciates having a variety of sneakers to pick from to match different outfits. He first became interested in sneakers at 16 years old because his high school friends would talk about latest sneaker and streetwear clothing releases every day.

5.3. Consumption as distinguishing

All interviewees perceived the wearing sneakers and streetwear as distinguishing, as a motivator for the younger generation of sneaker consumers to consume. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2013) argues practices or things are considered distinctive when they are understood within a “symbolic universe of practices and properties” that are relative to another, and it is the distance between these practices and properties that become marks of distinction (298). Markers of distinction are not inherent properties of an object; they are considered distinguishing because of socially and culturally mediated practices and beliefs that uphold them to be. This is reflected in Elias' perspective that although he perceives his sneaker consumption as fiscally irresponsible, it is justifiable to him because it makes him feel and look good towards others:

I am not doing great money wise, not the smartest move in my book. But it makes me feel great, I think it looks good. It does, it's like a confidence booster that's all that is. When you buy, in my opinion, super expensive sneakers cause you want to look good. You want people to know I have money. It's a social thing.

Elias views sneakers as a vehicle that signifies economic capital. This reflects that the value of sneakers for Elias are the particular meanings that are of value to him. In other

words, the value the sneaker signifies shapes the ways that others read him: that he has economic capital, and this gives him an affective response in the form of a confidence boost. Even though he does not have economic capital, in his words not doing 'great money wise', Elias believes that wearing highly sought sneakers gives the perception that others interpret that he has economic capital.

Denny states, "the various forms of ritual involved with the acquisition and display of sneakers and the signs embodied by them are things sneakerheads are expected to learn through time spent studying the culture" (2020, 8). Elias found that learning about sneakers and consuming sneakers helped him fill a void as he expressed, he lacked an interest or hobby at the time.

I guess with me personally, it was at the time in my life at that point there wasn't much interesting to clutch onto and sneakers were something just like -- it's really weird its expensive, cause like it opens you up to design, brand names and fashion designers, and bigger you know celebrities and stuff.

This suggests Elias found that by increasing his knowledge about sneakers, he was able to learn about cultural capital, this opened him up to ways of seeing design, designers, dress, brand names, and celebrities associated with sneaker culture that he was not aware of prior. It is important to note that it was not until Elias learned information that he was able to contextualize and recognize the affective value of sneakers and understand certain sneakers and styles as distinguishing. Elias's experience has similarities with other conversations I have had with other interviewees when they speak to how the more information they gained, amplified their interest in sneaker and streetwear consumption. In other words, by gaining more cultural capital they felt like they were able to understand the "hype" or frenzy behind certain items in addition to being able to appreciate the cultural significance of designs, individuals, and iconic moments that influence sneaker and streetwear consumption.

5.4. Consumption as social practice

Streetwear brands tend to be niche and unknown to the layperson; they tend to have limited products and are intentional in their stock lists -- generally niche or boutique stores. No price point delineates what makes an item streetwear, but streetwear items are generally marketed towards teenagers and young adults. However, brands like Nike

and Adidas, while having global brand recognition, they have more elusive sub-brands, such as Nike's Lab brand, that tend to have a more limited production and are priced at a higher retail cost relative to the corporation's more mass-marketed products (Childs and Jin 2018). In my research, I found that if a product had an accessible price, for instance, Supreme⁵ retails T-shirts at \$35 USD and due to scarcity driven by limited releases by Supreme, this same T-shirt can fetch upwards on average \$100 - \$300 CAD in Facebook online aftermarket spaces. Additionally, luxury streetwear brands were becoming mainstream and were in high demand in Metro Vancouver during my research, such as the brand Off-White⁶, which sells graphic T-shirts starting at \$350.

Consumers often use streetwear to signal their social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), which is reflected in my interview with Ben who explained how he saw social advantages to wearing expensive sneakers and streetwear clothing:

How I dressed before?...I didn't care what my clothes looked like, I'd just wear whatever I want to wear the day and it didn't matter to me what I wore. I'd wear anything. As soon as I noticed that I liked the style of this type of stuff, cause the [streetwear and sneaker] community and the like hype of it and stuff it was a lot better to wear that stuff...those years I liked it, but a part of me...didn't really care about your appearance in those young ages. I was like, "what's the point \$300 T-shirt?" and then it hit me, it's like a community and everything...

As notions of distinction are motivators for consumption, it has created a situation where the object does not matter as much as the meanings associated with the object. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant all practices or objects have "distinctive value as a function of a socially determined principle of pertinence and thereby express a social position" (2013, 297). On the other hand, Sun remarked that while he was glad that he learned about sneakers and streetwear through his friends because he felt like the way he dressed made him feel more distinctive, he recognizes he is also dressing similarly to others:

⁵ Supreme is a streetwear and skateboarding fashion brand from New York. One of Supremes' notable business strategies is its "drop" system, in which new items are released in limited quantities on a weekly basis. This approach creates a sense of urgency and exclusivity, often resulting in lines of customers outside their stores and rapid sell-outs online.

⁶ Off-White is a luxury fashion label founded by American designer Virgil Abloh in 2013. The brand is recognized for its innovative designs that blend high fashion with streetwear, a genre Abloh has helped popularize in the fashion industry.

It's kind of ironic to say this, I feel like when I know these brands and I wear it I feel more unique in my own style, but that's ironic because a lot of people like are into this, right? Technically you're just part of this big group, but you wear it yourself, you try to be different.”

Sun shares the same sentiments and reflections that many of my other interviewees have discussed, the irony of using sneakers and streetwear to distinguish oneself as “unique” yet recognizing that you dress like the other people who are also into the same type of consumption.

5.5. Affect and community

Miranda Joseph (2002) describes communal subjectivity as being “constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption” (p. viii), as consumptive practices should be viewed as a site of performance embedded within communities. Thus, capitalism can provide the means for people to belong to communities on their own account through their everyday consumptive practices. Communities, or an imagined group of people connected by their consumptive behaviors, are important as they can change the meaning or the use of a product (Foster 1999, 2012; Anderson 2006,). Brian Massumi (2002) describes affect as operates within the space between an event and our emotional response to it, which provides a framework of how we can understand the emergence of communal feelings and shared experiences. Lauren Berlant’s (2011) notion of “cruel optimism” explores how societies and individuals remain attached to unachievable dreams or desires, a condition that creates shared affective states. Berlant (2011) helps us understand the affective dynamics within communities that are formed around shared aspirations or struggles. Ben, Elias’ and Sun’s experiences illustrates how affective experiences and emotions can contribute to a sense of belonging and being part of a community, but a community that is in the “know”.

By connecting affect theory to Bourdieu’s works (1984, 1986), we can better understand how economic, cultural, and social capital can be tied together in understanding communal affective experiences, fostering feelings of belonging, identity, and mutual understanding of the younger generation of Metro Vancouver sneaker enthusiasts. Ben’s experience illuminates Bourdieu’s notion of how an item’s meaning changes based on who is associated with it. The circulation of commodity fetishism as a

process that not only involves economic value, but also the circulation of affects. These affects, such as desire, envy, or disgust, are attached to commodities (Ahmed 2004, 2010). These affects are then circulated and felt by individuals who interact with these commodities. By highlighting the role of affect and how it can circulate for sneaker consumers, this reveals how emotions can be a powerful motivator in (re)producing desires, shaping our understanding and pursuit of value, subjectivity, relationalities with others especially within online spaces.

5.6. Desiring Jordan without watching Jordan

Unlike Eugene from chapter four, the younger generation of sneaker enthusiasts I interviewed age ranged from mid-teens to early twenties, therefore, they did not grow up watching Michael Jordan play basketball, as he retired from the NBA in 2003. Michael Jordan's success and his positionality, that have turned him into a "prominent American commodity-sign who not only signified and promoted himself and Nike, but who also symbolically represented the preferred expressions of contemporary American culture" (Andrews 1998, 202), which still has relevance today as the Jordan brand is still popular amongst sneaker consumers. This is exemplified by Ben's explanation of how he became interested in sneakers and streetwear, particularly the Jordan 1 sneaker:

Friends, influences, sneakers -- I've always really liked Jordan 1s. That's the first shoe I really liked was Jordan 1s, and then once the Yeezy's came out they were my favourite of all time and I just love them, so much and I bought them finally. I like Jordan's because I am not super into basketball, but I like Michael Jordan. I like his shoes a lot. When I first started joining things, Jordan's were really big. I like those, and I feel like Jordan's is what got me into streetwear.

For Ben what influenced his taste in Jordan's was that when he was introduced to sneaker consumption and culture, Jordan sneakers were popular at the time. Just like Ben, many of the younger generation of sneaker consumers explain that a motivator in their consumption of Jordan's sneakers due to the design of the sneaker and being influenced by their friends or social media.

Scholars such as White would argue the popularity of Jordan's is not by chance, as the appeal of representations from hip-hop and rap music from non-Black males is that the construction has coded Black masculinity as "iconic of an authentic and desirable representation of masculinity to be emulated" (2011, 23). Therefore, the

fandom of Jordan sneakers amongst the younger generation of sneaker consumers such as Ben suggests that having lived experience of following Michael Jordan career has a minimal role in one learning to desire the sneaker or perceive its affective value. The affective value with Jordan's and similarly with clothing styles popularized by hip-hop and rap artists are rooted within certain notions and representations of Black masculinity (White 2011, 46). The Black male body historically and continues to be the "sites for fears as well as fantasies of the racial Other" (White 2011, 4-5). White argues that non-Black men are inspired to emulate or to stylize themselves in similar clothing as an attempt to produce themselves with certain notions of authenticity associated with Black masculinity to "act out their own racial fantasies of black urban masculinity as social rebellion" (2011, 104).

5.7. Scarcity, affect, and meaning

For some sneaker enthusiasts there is a relationship between scarcity and perception of affective value of a sneaker. If a sneaker is imbued with certain affects and meanings, its affective value becomes amplified if the product is scarce. This results in a situation where the sneaker can fetch a high resale value in after-market due to scarcity. This resale value amplifies some people's desires for the sneaker even further. This phenomenon in the sneaker resell market closely reflect Bourdieu and Wacquant conceptualization that distinction is rooted within the unequal distribution of goods and services, which is made "all the greater when their relative scarcity is higher or as a mark of infamy" (2013, 298). Sun believes that high resale value is the key motivator behind people's desires for Yeezy sneakers and that the influence of Kanye West is only a partial motivator. Observing how high demand amplifies desires, he explained, "you know a lot of people just want it because it's so sought" and "people want it because of the hype." He attributes desirability and motivations for consumption stems from the perceptions that others desire it. For Sun, he believes the celebrity who endorses the product has little to do with its desirability, this was the case of how he became interested in sneakers, it was through the influence of his high school friends.

5.8. Distinction can become fleeting

'Hype' is another commonly used term that emerged in the 2000s amongst sneaker and streetwear enthusiasts and consumers. Denny (2020) argues hype is a useful conceptualization in understanding sneaker fandom (5-6). I define hype as meaning something is considered to have high affective value. Like sneakerhead, "hypebeast" mends the pursuit of hype and an individual into an identity of an individual whose consumption is guided by whether an item has affective value. Similarly, Amelia Widjaja, Samuel Afiat, and Desideria Leksmono defines hypebeast as an identity that "describe individuals or communities who chase trends to impress others involving high fashion streetwear, expensive fashion items that are "hype" (cool and trendy)" (2019, 8), and they attribute the popularity of the hypebeast lifestyle amongst mostly male young adults (18-30 years old) due to social media, which has globalized its consumption.

Simmel argues that signifiers of distinction can be fleeting if they do not signify scarcity, "fashion is based on adoption by a social set," where one engages in it to distinguish themselves from others but within an aesthetic that is reflective of certain social groups (1957, 558). This is exemplified by Ben who identifies his biggest style influencer as Kanye West. Ben purchased a hoodie that he saw Kanye West wear online by the streetwear brand Anti Social Social Club (ASSC), but then sold it after he saw people in Vancouver wearing the same hoodie and sensed the hoodie was too mainstream for his liking:

You would walk around downtown [Vancouver], you'd see a bunch people wearing it [and think to yourself] "Oh, I am not really unique" and then all your friends be like don't or are into sneakers but not really and soon as they start wearing it, 'Oh, it's like a normal thing now' like maybe it's time to wear something more unique.

For Ben, when he saw certain group of people dress similarly to him, it indicated to him that garment is no longer a distinguishing. Perhaps because he perceives that these individuals who do not have the same type of cultural capita and wants to distance himself away from them, describing the garment as being "normal now." For Ben, being seen as unique through dress is important. His ASSC hoodie was not actually unique, as it was seen on Kanye West. Rather the ideas of unique he alludes to is being an early adopter of styles, particularly styles associated with Kanye West. Despite being a fan of Kanye West and even proclaiming, "Kanye, he used to be my biggest idol. I love him so

much. I went to his concert [in Vancouver] and everything,” Ben still sold the ASSC hoodie. This perspective and actions suggest that he saw the meanings associated with owning the hoodie related to Kanye West were no longer distinguishing for Ben with more supply in the market, his perceptions of the type of people who purchased the hoodie after him changed its affective value.

5.9. Researcher’s experience in the field

Through my experiences of navigating multiple platforms, I was able to connect how these varied spaces and the opportunities of engagement shaped and informed the practices and subjectivities of traders online and in-person. I share similar experiences to many of my interviewees. Online spaces were the most important spaces of engagement and practices of my informants, which were the most influential in helping them navigate trading spaces because they were used as spaces and a venues for gaining knowledge, experiences, producing their subjectivities as sneaker and streetwear traders, and their relationalities with other traders locally, nationally, and transnationally.

I used my personal Facebook and Twitter accounts and created a new public Instagram account for my research. Despite being familiar with the social media platforms, like many of my informants, the process of becoming fluent in navigating these platforms of having to learn the cultural norms, terminology, rules, and codes of conduct was initially daunting at first due to the number of posts and the varied posts I would see on Facebook. My day-to-day activities involved a lot of scrolling through my feeds on these platforms, following different accounts, and engaging with posts. Since I was experienced with these social media platforms, my learning curve was just limited to understanding the cultural norms of how sneaker and streetwear traders used and understood these platforms.

Most of my interactions were just liking people's posts or comments that I genuinely was interested in on all these platforms. On Facebook and Instagram, the types of images I posted were of me, which included showing off my latest sneaker acquisitions or showing my outfits or "streetwear style". Like the experiences of Elias, Ben and Sun, I was able to see what type of content, hashtags, accounts that I would tag that would generate the most 'engagement' on Instagram. Overtime, what I posted

consciously became dictated by what was affective in the moment (e.g., sharing a photo of my freshly procured Yeezy sneakers). My overall dressing style changed that was indicative of sneaker and streetwear style, and I was able to feel the affects and excitement of people recognizing my clothing whether it was through comments "nice sneaker" or by people's sustained or pique expressions looking at the item. Changing my clothing style was important part of participant observation. It helped me to build rapport with my participants to convey that I could relate to them, sharing similarities to Sun's explanation of his motivations in sneakers and streetwear because it became a conduit for me to connect with others.

Like the experiences recalled of my interviewees, my personal style changed too as I conducted the fieldwork. At the peak of my research, I owned approximately 20 pairs of sneakers comprising of mostly Adidas and Nike brands. I navigated the world with my sneakers in a way I previously did not before. My relationship and the ways I interacted with my shoes changed as I became hyper aware of where I was stepping on to prevent unnecessary dirt on my sneakers to not devalue my sneaker more than necessary if I wanted to resell it in the future. I became more aware of the ways others dressed. Symbols such as the brand Supreme, which I knew about, gave me affective feelings that they otherwise did not before as I understood the cultural meaning of the logo. I became familiar with sneakers and streetwear clothing.

The ways my interviewees recalled their experiences reveals how sensitization to the affects of streetwear and sneakers is influenced by the practices of other consumers and the practices of consumption, including searching for and learning information. I too experienced the same thing, overtime I became more familiar with the iteration of Jordan sneakers and what the significance of style iterations, where individuals would refer to the shoe by its release number, such as Jordan 1's and 3's. I also learnt overtime the cultural context of why certain Jordan's were considered more valued than others. For instance, Jordan 1 "Bred" sneakers were the first sneakers that Jordan wore in collaboration with Nike and was considered controversial because of the black and red colourway, the NBA fined thousands of dollars Jordan for wearing the sneaker because it broke the NBA's dress code of plain coloured sneakers. With new information and context, this changed my perception from seeing them as ordinary sneakers, I began to recognize certain sneakers in the field as being important due the stories and narratives that gave it affective value.

Additionally, conducting this research involved learning and doing research about brands, brand histories, categories of shoes, significance of colourways, styles, and sizing information. For Instagram and Twitter, I used these platforms generally to follow latest releases and global trends in streetwear and in sneaker culture based off the posts of influential lifestyle news platforms such as Hypebeast, High Snobiety, and Complex that cater to the audiences who appreciate sneakers, fashion, and streetwear. Particularly, based on the content released by these news platforms, I was able to see what other people were reading about, especially information pertaining to upcoming product releases. This information helped contextualize my ethnographic data regarding the habits and (changing) tastes of sneaker and streetwear enthusiasts globally, and how that translated into affective value of highly sought-after items in Metro Vancouver.

5.10. Conclusion

By drawing upon the experiences of my interviewees, I show how the relationship between the appeal of sneaker consumption and racial desire is not always overt, nevertheless, the meanings associated with commodified Black masculinity persist in explicit and implicit ways. As Michael Jordan became reified and commodified through the Nike Jordan brand symbol that came to represent American idealism of success, individualism, and athleticism (Andrews 1998) for the generation of sneaker consumers such as Eugene who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s. For sneaker consumers, value rooted in notions of distinction and meanings are dynamic and influenced by the practices and consumption of others. The appeal of Kanye West and his Yeezy sneaker and streetwear line is imbued with similar affects of commodified Black masculinity that Nike and Air Jordan monetized upon. Jordan became objectified and commodified through the Air Jordan sneaker, which gave it affective value, likewise, West is also commodified through Yeezys. Just like Air Jordans, the scarcity of Yeezys intensifies the affective value of the sneakers. Therefore, the value attached to commodities through the process of fetishism can be understood not just as an economic value, but also as an emotional or affective value.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Little critical attention has been paid to sneaker and streetwear consumers and the impact of race. Kawamura (2016), through her study of sneaker enthusiasts in the United States and Japan, explicitly makes a point to not talk about race because she argues it is irrelevant in understanding sneaker consumption because of how globalized the sneaker market is. Kawamura's (2016) oversight ignores the work of other scholars that have focused on the emergence of sneaker consumption, the branding and commodification of Michael Jordan, and the ways sneaker consumption has disproportionately affected Black males in the United States. Sneakerheads have transformed the consumption of sneakers by placing new signification by re-inscribing its use-value (Miner 2009; Yano 2013). By focusing on the affects associated with commodified Black masculinity, this thesis explores the relationship of commodified cultural constructions that have profited sneaker corporations and the ways it continues to overtly and covertly shape individual desires and consumptive practices of non-Black individuals in North America.

This exploratory thesis contributes to an understudied field of sneaker consumption and reselling and proposes an approach for examining the politics of value through the examination of the relationship between race and emotion contributing the motivations of consumption through the secondary sneaker market as my site of investigation. My thesis contributes to the work that exists along the continuum of the processes that have constructed meaning and the value of the Black male body. This is the same in sport, such as the NBA, and through hip-hop and rap music. That all exists due to the socio-historical and cultural processes that have made Black bodies considered a site of spectacle, as discussed in chapter 3, and the ways neoliberal capital extracts value from racialized bodies for profit (Ramos-Zayas 2012).

Approaching my research through the lens of affect and commodified Black masculinity was not my intended approach in my ethnographic fieldwork. I wanted to approach my data and analyze it with the richness that I felt was justified and nuanced. By drawing upon the theories of affective value, commodified Black masculinity, and Bourdieusian notions of capital gave me a particular framework to understand the pattern and similarities of behaviour that I observed in the field and during my

interactions with others, such as my interviewees, particularly the pattern of the intersections of desire and influence of Black musicians and athletes influencing affective value. I explored different perspectives of sneaker and streetwear enthusiasts, those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s that had high regard and respect for Michael Jordan, whereas for my interviewees who grew up in 2000s and 2010s they were fascinated with Kanye West and other Black musicians.

6.1. Black Lives Matter

My approach to practice provided insights on how sneaker and streetwear traders in their every day practices were participating in the circulation of goods, ideas, information and affects through everyday practices. Until I conducted this research, I did not consider the ways emotions shape meaning and value, particularly in the domain of clothing, aesthetics, brand names and marketing. This research was also an investigation of my relationship with dress and clothing. A researcher's "personal biographies shape our research interests, access to the field, relationships with the researched, and our interpretation and representation of the culture under examination" (Poulton 2012, 2). By studying sneaker culture, I also wanted to understand my consumptive behaviours -- I wanted to understand how was it that I can be seduced by and justify spending on certain brands despite knowing the psychological, environmental, and sociological effects of conspicuous consumption. My theoretical perspective is also motivated by my dissatisfaction with scholarly work that has failed to critically engage sneaker and streetwear consumptive and trading practices today. Motivated by scholars such as David Crockett (2008) and those who I drew upon in my theoretical framework, who have talked about how Blackness has been used to market products, I have theoretically explored the ways the affects of commodified Black masculinity are circulated, understood within a particular regime of value and market -- sneaker and streetwear trading.

Most importantly, my largest motivation in approaching theoretical framework is inspired by the social unrest and Black Lives Matter movements associated with the disproportionate racial violence and marginalization against Black people, particularly in the global north. As demonstrated by the scholars I drew upon in this thesis, I was inspired by their critiques and explorations on how contemporary capitalism needs racism to function, I thought it was important to contribute to academic conversations on

how not only capitalism function bases on the marginalization of peoples' bodies, their labour, but the ways that bodies or ideas about bodies have been commodified and marketed.

6.2. Limitations

There are several limitations in my research related to my methods and positionality as a researcher. My key recruitment strategy of soliciting individuals for semi-structured interviews through the Facebook group Vancouver Streetwear Community (VSC) resulted in individuals who had positive experiences with sneaker and streetwear to contact me. After seeing my research flyer, these individuals contacted me through Facebook or via email. They often spoke in detail of how they felt their sneaker and streetwear consumption was positive and transformative for their identity and their social lives. While the name VSC suggests the group is a community space, certainly not everyone feels that way as Christine Hine notes, "online space may look like a community according to certain criteria does not mean that everyone passing that way will experience it as a community" (2017, 323).

My positionality as a researcher may have played a role in expanding or limiting ability to engage with those who I was researching. Julie Mazzei and Erin O'Brien's (2009) reminds us of how as researchers our field sites construct our identities and the ways we are read. The meanings associated with our identities are always contextualized, "to be a woman, as in the gendered, social role rather than the physical being, differs by social context and this has consequence for entering the field and establishing rapport" (Mazzei and O'Brien 2009, 329). I acknowledge that some informants may have exaggerated information or were more willing to tell me details of their engagement in sneaker trading because perhaps I was not seen as a marketplace competitor or that they wanted to 'impress me'.

However, being reflexive is to acknowledge there is no such thing as objective truth. My informants could have exaggerated or gave false information in my interviews. Since I had no way of verifying their information and that I was more interested in their experiences and self-narratives, I did not consider this to be an issue in my research. The point of ethnography is not to delineate what is factual or to judge our informant,

rather to focus on the ways people make meaning through their daily practices (Hine 2017, 325).

Through interviews, I was able to explore people's subjectivity changes as they become effected by the affects of sneakers. There are many ways that an individual becomes connected to sneakers, although there are differences, the main thing in common is emotions. Emotions whether through experienced through the second-hand excitement of others, through marketing and media, and through wanting to be noticed and accepted to be a part of a group of consumers that have an emotional appeal, such as appearing 'cool'. Emotions underlies the different decisions of what is perceived as being valued and the evaluation of its worth.

Additionally, due to the limited scope of my thesis I did not delve further into cultural politics of Black identity as I focused on the relationship between Black masculinity and affective value, and how it foregrounds and influences the practices, identities, and subjectivities of sneaker and streetwear traders. Individuals familiar with streetwear and sneaker consumption may critique that just focusing on Black masculinity as a source of affective value is a limitation because I neglect examining other forms of masculinity derived from skateboarding (Beal 1996), a subculture that is facet of sneakers and streetwear. In North America, Sneaker and streetwear culture is also influenced by such work/blue collar wear, Japanese streetwear, vintage clothing, and skateboarding. These references in sneaker and streetwear are also sources of affective value. Therefore, I acknowledge my perspectives in this thesis are not shared by all sneaker and streetwear enthusiasts.

When I asked my participants why they wanted to be interviewed, they were unanimous that they wanted to talk about how sneaker consumption and trading has been transformative for them and for most of the sneaker trading used to be or is one of their major pastimes at the time of their interview. Therefore, another limitation of this research is that my informants were those who seemingly had mostly positive experiences with sneaker trading. Being introduced to other sneaker consumers and traders from my informants is another research limitation, as it may have limited the heterogeneity of interviewee perspectives, and the spaces where I engaged in participant observation in the field. This likely impacted the lack of cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity of those who I engaged with and interviewed. For example,

my research lacked representation of individuals who self-identified as Indigenous or South Asian, which are two groups out of many that reflect Metro Vancouver's diverse demographic population.

Conducting my research in English is another limitation given the sociodemographic of sneaker and streetwear consumers I observed in my fieldwork. English is the language used in Metro Vancouver's most popular Facebook groups for sneaker and streetwear trading. As a result, I likely missed varied perspectives from non-English speakers and non-English trading platforms that were not accounted for in this research. If I had the opportunity to do this research differently, I would have liked to interview individuals from more varied backgrounds, such as the parents of my interviewees because parental approval came up in conversation, especially amongst my interviewees in their late teens and early twenties. I would have liked to interview more Chinese sneaker and streetwear consumers and traders because they represent a significant demographic of consumers in Metro Vancouver.

6.3. Future questions

While my ethnographic methodological approach, online and in-person participant observation and interviews provided valuable insights understanding the relationship between sneaker culture and the commodification of Black masculinity, future research could address the limitations encountered in this exploratory research. Future research should consider exploring how different identities intersect and influence consumer behaviour and perceptions, which may yield deeper insights by incorporating more purposeful sampling to intentionally seek out more diverse groups of consumers to understand the broader cultural, racial, gender, and other dynamics that intersect in understanding sneaker culture and consumption. As my recruitment was primarily done through popular Metro Vancouver Facebook sneaker groups and my participant observation focused on the online and physical spaces and events that were of interest of these users, this may have led to an exclusion of those who were not aware of, interested in, nor may not have the cultural, social, and economic capital to access and feel comfortable in engaging in these spaces. Therefore, future studies that draw upon other methodologies, such as visual ethnography (Penaloza 2011), sensorial ethnography (Pink 2015), and phenomenological inquiry (Frechette et al. 2020) that incorporate an intersectional lens (McCall 2005) could offer alternative or further our

understanding of the motivations behind sneaker consumption, and whether commodified Black masculinity is affective for certain or all groups of sneakers consumers.

For future research, it would be interesting to do a similar investigation of sneaker consumption in Toronto, which is home to Canada's only NBA team the Toronto Raptors and is where 36.9% of Canada's Black population resides (Statistics Canada 2022). It would be interesting to see if there are any differences amongst consumers in Metro Vancouver and Toronto in how people come to see sneakers as valuable and desirable objects for consumption. I would also like to do further investigation to understand how individuals involved in marketing of sneaker brands make their decisions on which celebrities, athletes, influencers to collaborate or do campaigns with.

This research was conducted in 2016 – 2019, when Ye was one of the biggest influencers in sneakers and streetwear, and his Yeezy sneakers were highly sought after, fetching a high resale price. Since I have conducted my interviews, Ye has been associated with individuals such as Donald Trump and Nick Fuentes that have been associated with American far-right White supremacist ideology. On October 25, 2022, Adidas (2022) announced its partnership termination with Ye following antisemitic comments that he made publicly. Through the discontinuation of Yeezy products, this made Yeezy sneakers even more exclusive, which was documented in different news sources, for example in a CBC article titled "Ye or nay? Yeezy sneaker sales soar as fans, companies split on giving Kanye West the boot" collectors rushed "to snap up remaining shoes after Adidas cut ties with rapper over antisemitic remarks" (McQuillan 2022). It would be interesting interview my interviewees who had expressed Ye was their icon and ask them whether they are still interested in sneaker consumption and if so, do they still wear styles and sneakers associated with Ye. According to Bloomberg News (Bhasin 2022), Adidas will continue to sell existing Yeezy product designs without the Yeezy brand name. It will be interesting to see whether sneaker consumers will be interested in purchasing these products under different Adidas branding, and whether any of their products would have value in the resale market.

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Appendix A. Questions for self-identified sneakerheads

General questions:

- How old are you?
- When did you start becoming interested in sneakers?
- What sparked your interest?
- What does the term sneakerhead mean to you?
- Do you identify as a sneakerhead?
- How many sneakers do you own?

Research question: **How do sneakers become affective objects?**

- What was the first sneaker you purchased that you were proud of owning? Why?
- What is your favourite pair of sneakers? Why?
- Why do you think people are so enamoured with sneakers?
- What makes certain sneakers more valuable or desirable than others?
- How often do you wear the sneakers you purchase?
- How do you care for your sneakers?
- With the sneakers you don't wear, what is your intention with them?
- Do you customize your sneakers? If so, how?

Research question: **What are the practices of sneaker consumption?**

- How do you afford your sneakers?
- Where do you get your information about sneakers?
- When do you decide to sell shoes?
- Are there particular brands that you prefer, if so why?
- Where do you buy your shoes?
- Have you ever waited in line for sneakers and raffles?
- What do you do while waiting in line?
- What do you think about stores doing raffles? And some stores not doing raffles?
- What would you be doing instead of waiting in line for sneakers/raffles?
- How do you have the money to buy sneakers?
- If you weren't buying sneakers what else would you do with the income?
- What else do you spend your money on?

Research question: **Have the participants engaged in speculative practices of buying sneakers?**

- What do you think the reselling of sneakers?
- What do you think about resellers?
- Have you resold or purchased resold sneakers? If so, why have you done it?
- How is the aftermarket price determined?
- If so, how do you find these resellers or customers?
- Have you purchased sneaker from a reselling?
- What is the process of purchasing/selling aftermarket sneakers?
- Who is to be trusted in the reselling of sneakers?
- Have you ever been scammed or know someone who has?
- If so, what happened?
- Do you worry about getting mugged for your shoes?

Research question: **What are the practices of sneaker consumption?**

- How do you afford your sneakers?
- Where do you get your information about sneakers?
- Are there particular brands that are more popular, if so why?
- Where do you buy your shoes?
- Have you ever waited in line for sneakers and raffles?
- What do you do while waiting in line?
- How does it affect you whether stores do raffles?
- What would you be doing instead of waiting in line for sneakers/raffles?
- Have there been any indiscretions between you and a buyer?
- Have you created any new friendships through you and a buyer?

Research question: **How do people become a part of and engage in the sneakerhead community?**

- Do you have friends or family that are into sneakers?
- Do you think there a sneakerhead community in Vancouver?
- What makes it a community?
- How do people participate in the community?
- Do you participate in the community? How so?
- Are there any rules to how you govern yourself in the community?
- Is there anything you don't like about the community? Or about being a sneaker enthusiast?
- Have you ever been scammed or know someone who has? If so, what happened?

Appendix B. Questions for (re)sellers of sneakers:

General questions:

- How old are you?
- When did you start becoming interested in sneakers?
- What sparked your interest?
- What does the term sneakerhead mean to you?
- Do you identify as a sneakerhead, reseller, or both?
- How did you find out about the reselling of sneakers?
- What do you think the reselling of sneakers?
- How many sneakers do you own?
- What sneakers have you sold? Why did you sell the ones you did?

Research question: **Have the participants engaged in speculative practices of buying sneakers?**

- How much quantity of a particular sneaker do you sell?
- How do you determine the aftermarket price?
- What sneakers have the highest resale value? Why?
- If so, how do you find customers?
- Have you purchased sneakers from a reseller?
- How do customers know to trust you?
- What is the process of purchasing/selling aftermarket sneakers?
- Who is to be trusted in the reselling of sneakers?
- Have you ever been scammed or know someone who has?
- If so, what happened?
- Have you worried about being robbed for your shoes?
- How is authenticity of a shoe determined?
- What forms of payment do you accept?

Appendix C. Questions for employees of sneaker retailers

General questions:

- How old are you?
- How long have you worked at your store?
- What position(s) have you held at your store?
- Tell me about what you do at your store
- Are you personally a collector of sneakers?
- Why do you think people are so drawn to sneakers?
- What sneakers sell out the fastest?
- Have you noticed trends changing since you've worked at your store?
- What makes products more popular than others?
- Do you usually know what products are going to arrive to the store?
- How does that affect which products you choose to bring?
- Do you identify as a sneakerhead? If so, why or why not?
- From your observations, how has sneaker culture changed?
- Who participates in sneaker culture? Has this demographic changed?
- Describe your average customer
- Can you identify who comes to your store is a sneaker reseller or a sneakerhead?
- With the popularity of sneaker culture, how has this affected your business in person and offline?
- Do you hold raffles for sneakers? If so which ones? Why do you do this?
- How do you control raffles and adjudicate the winners?
- Do you think sneaker culture is going to still flourish in the future or do you think the excitement will die down?

Appendix D. List of questions for self-identified female sneakerheads

General questions:

- How old are you?
- When did you start becoming interested in sneakers?
- What sparked your interest?
- What does the term sneakerhead mean to you?
- Do you identify as a sneakerhead?
- How many sneakers do you own?

Research question: **How do sneakers become affective objects?**

- What was the first sneaker you purchased that you were proud of owning? Why?
- What is your favourite pair of sneakers? Why?
- Why do you think people are so enamoured with sneakers?
- What makes certain sneakers more valuable or desirable than others?
- How often do you wear the sneakers you purchase?
- How do you care for your sneakers?
- With the sneakers you don't wear, what is your intention with them?

Research question: **What are the practices of sneaker consumption?**

- How do you afford your sneakers?
- Where do you get your information about sneakers?
- Are there particular brands that you prefer, if so why?
- Where do you buy your shoes?
- Have you ever waited in line for sneakers and raffles?
- What do you do while waiting in line?
- What do you think about stores doing raffles? And some stores not doing raffles?
- What would you be doing instead of waiting in line for sneakers/raffles?
- How do you have the money to buy sneakers?
- If you weren't buying sneakers what else would you do with the income?
- What else do you spend your money on?

Research question: **Have the participants engaged in speculative practices of buying sneakers?**

- What do you think the reselling of sneakers?
- What do you think about resellers?
- Have you resold or purchased resold sneakers? If so, why have you done it?

- How is the aftermarket price determined?
- If so, how do you find these resellers or customers?
- Have you purchased sneaker from a reselling?
- What is the process of purchasing/selling aftermarket sneakers?
- Who is to be trusted in the reselling of sneakers?
- Have you ever been scammed or know someone who has?
- If so, what happened?

Research question: **Females practices of sneaker consumption?**

- How do you feel being a female sneakerhead especially since the culture largely has men?
- How do people in the community perceive you?
- Have you met other females who have been a part of sneaker culture?
- Is it hard for you to get shoes?
- How do you afford your sneakers?
- Where do you get your information about sneakers?
- Are there particular brands that are more popular, if so why?
- Where do you buy your shoes?
- Have you ever waited in line for sneakers and raffles?
- What do you do while waiting in line?
- How does it affect you whether stores do raffles?
- What would you be doing instead of waiting in line for sneakers/raffles?
- Have there been any indiscretions between you and a buyer?
- Have you created any new friendships through you and a buyer?

Research question: **How do people become a part of and engage in the sneakerhead community?**

- Do you have friends or family that are into sneakers?
- Do you think there a sneakerhead community in Vancouver?
- What makes it a community?
- How do people participate in the community?
- Do you participate in the community? How so?
- Are there any rules to how you govern yourself in the community?
- Is there anything you don't like about the community? Or about being a sneaker enthusiast?
- Have you ever been scammed or know someone who has?
- If so, what happened?
- Do you ever worry about being robbed for your shoes?