

# The Sneaker Culture, Status, and Schooling: A Thematic Narrative Review and Theoretical Framework to Study Youth Cultural Consumption

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## Abstract

The sneakers are branded products, collectible items, which acquire cultural significance based upon the perceptions of the surrounding world. This narrow narrative review puts the studies of sneakers in direct dialogue with the studies of youth-clothing and cultural theory. It considers the way identity, status, community involvement, and authenticity are connected to sneakers. Searches and citation chaining resulted in 44 different records: nine by the initial search and six bibliographically validated additions made up a 15-source core. The direct research connects sneakers to brands, communities, release information and authentication. Studies of children, teenagers, and school dress record peer recognition based on clothing, but do not identify a youth effect specific to sneakers. School culture is then seen as a situation with the potential to influence audience judgement. Comparative study should have identified contexts, peer and institutional assessment measurements, and alternative explanation testing in order to attribute school context differences to sneakers.

## Keywords

sneaker culture, youth cultural consumption, identity work, status signalling, school culture

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## 1. Introduction

Sneakers are highly mobile artifacts of culture. They circulate across sport, fashion, collecting, resale, customization, and everyday wear, their histories and market connections bleeding into mundane interactions [1, 2]. Their accessibility as visible things allows them to be used in self-presentation but it is not necessarily the fact that they are visible that determines what they represent. Only a limited number can indicate the ability to purchase, expertise, taste, loyalty to a brand community, or the desire to follow the trend. The meaning changes depending on who is watching and the criteria with which the audience gives credit. Sneaker culture thus provides a specific case where one can explore the way objects become resources of identity and differentiation. The direct sneaker evidence is still heterogeneous. It includes adult male sneakerheads, the practice of an online community, the authenticity in China, the sneaker becoming a symbol of a marketplace, and the commercialization of customization [1-5]. Close work introduces younger people to the review. Adolescents are using clothing to convey and assess identity; children associate popular brands of trainers with popularity and peer acceptance; and the local dress code may determine how people are perceived at school [6-8]. Not one of the mentioned works demonstrates that sneakers have a one interpretation among young

people. They rather shift focus on the topic of clothing, peer assessment and social circumstances surrounding recognition. Theories of conspicuous consumption, distinction, the extended self, brand community, and subcultural capital suggest possible mechanisms without providing evidence of school-level impacts [9-14]. The article is arranged around three questions. It looks at how current studies can explain sneaker consumption as identity work and status signaling, but then it explores the mechanisms involving peers that allow sneakers practices to facilitate inclusion and exclusion. It also defines the principles and evidentiary demands which can be used in guiding further comparative studies of sneaker meanings in different school settings. The history of culture and schooling presented by Willis makes it clear why the institutional evaluation can become a part of identity practices of young people, but it is a historical theory and not evidence on sneakers [14]. The last question thus gives a conceptual agenda and not a causal conclusion. Comparing schools based on labels like elite or vocational is not a place to begin. The first thing that should be determined is the conditions under which sneaker shows are evaluated. That is why direct studies of sneakers, youth-clothing studies, and the theories that have been applied to explain them are kept apart. Visibility, distinction, possession, community and subcultural awareness may be some mechanisms; local regulations and assessment would determine what a comparative study would require.

## **2. Related Literature and Review Scope**

The sources are grouped by the kind of evidence they provide. Brand preference, online community practice, market history, Chinese authenticity disputes, and customization are discussed by direct sneaker studies [1-5]. Research on youth studies looks at how teenagers use symbols when choosing clothes, how children interpret branded trainers, and identity in the context of junior school based on clothing [6-8]. The vocabulary of visibility, possession, distinction, community, subcultural knowledge, and institutional evaluation is provided by six consumer, cultural, and schooling texts [9-14]. With such a lack of division, theory and related clothing proof would be confused with direct sneaker results. The allocation is such that all inferences are proportionate to their evidence. The sneaker studies explain certain adult, market, and cultural contexts; the youth studies demonstrate that clothing can determine identity and group recognition; and theory provides mechanisms which could be transferred between contexts. Since no study compares the meanings of sneakers between delimited school settings, school culture is used as a set of propositions and measurement guidelines in future comparative studies; it does not aim at describing an empirically recaptured pattern.

## **3. Focused Review Method**

This focused narrative review examines a bounded and heterogeneous literature; it does not claim exhaustive coverage or use the formal risk-of-bias procedures of a systematic review [15]. The English-language search process was conducted on Semantic Scholar on 20-21 August 2026. Searches were supplemented by backward citation chaining and by checking the records of publishers and Crossref. Title, abstract, and keywords were queried with the help of three concept clusters: (sneaker OR sneakerhead OR trainers) AND (culture OR consumption OR identity OR community OR authenticity); (teenager OR adolescent OR child OR youth) AND (clothing OR dress OR fashion) AND (identity OR peer OR status); and (school OR junior school) AND (clothing OR dress code OR uniform) AND (identity OR peer). Classical theory was only within the focus when it helped to interpret modern cultural consumption, hence, no restriction on publication date was applied.

After duplicate exports were removed, 44 records remained for screening. The first search returned nine records, the citation chaining provided six more references, and the publisher or Digital Object Identifiers confirmed the 15-source core. A title and abstract should be related to sneaker or youth-clothing consumption, identity, peer recognition, school dress culture or review design in meaningful manner. Next, the corresponding full text or stable record was used to compare it to its bibliographic metadata. The inclusion included direct sneaker evidence, neighboring youth or school-dress evidence, an interpretative framework or a review-method rationale. Computer vision, recommender systems, artificial intelligence, and generic cultural evolution were not included: the mere presence of the word fashion or culture in a record would not qualify it as being about cultural consumption. Records were retrieved, deduplicated, and entered in an audit log; the author conducted the screening, inclusion, coding, and interpretation.

Five direct sneaker studies, three adjacent youth-clothing or school-dress studies, six cultural and schooling frameworks, and one review-method source make up the final core. All sources were coded by setting and evidence, supported contribution and boundary. The theme was kept in use only in cases where a direct study or a named framework could support it; frameworks were not considered to be observations and no effect sizes were estimated. Table 1 separates between direct and adjacent empirical evidence. Conceptual agenda is Figure 1, which depicts how sneakers can be understood via audience recognition and peer boundaries whereas school culture is an intended contextual factor of comparative studies.

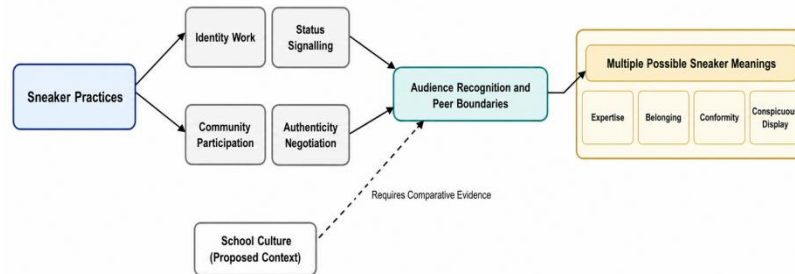
*Table 1: Direct and adjacent empirical data used in the focused synthesis. Entries represent the contribution and limits of sources; they do not form a comparative dataset*

| Source                    | Setting and evidence                                       | Supported contribution                               | Boundary                                         |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Matthews et al. [3]       | Adult male sneakerheads; qualitative study                 | Identity and brand-preference mechanism              | Not a youth or school comparison                 |
| Choi and Kim [4]          | Sneakerhead brand community; netnography                   | Community practice and recognition                   | Does not represent all consumers                 |
| Jia [5]                   | Changhuo sneakers in China; cultural case study            | Authenticity, scarcity, and market meaning           | Not representative of Chinese students           |
| Wallace and Andrews [2]   | Sneaker customization; 15 consumer interviews              | Agency, commercialization, and contested meaning     | No campus comparison                             |
| Piacentini and Mailer [6] | Teenagers' clothing choices; 38 interviews                 | Clothing as identity expression and social judgement | Adjacent clothing evidence, not sneaker-specific |
| Elliott and Leonard [7]   | Children aged 8–12; interpretive study of branded trainers | Branded trainers, popularity, and peer pressure      | Context-specific sample; not a school comparison |
| Swain [8]                 | One English junior school; ethnographic study              | Dress practice, peer recognition, and identity       | School-dress evidence, not sneaker evidence      |

#### 4. Conceptual Framework

Sneakers can also be conspicuous due to their price and rarity, but such attributes cannot alone provide them with status. Visible goods may demonstrate access to resources, and scarcity or cost is explained by Veblen as the reason why this is the case [9]. Bourdieu turns his focus on acquired tastes and the social circumstances that render ownership legitimate as opposed to being expensive [10]. A thing could be observable as expensive but not necessarily prestigious. Its transformation into status will depend on the evaluative model which an audience will use to read price, rarity, design, and history. Ownership also relates to how objects and individuals relate to each other. Belk notes that possessions can be integrated in an extended self, giving rise to a path wherein acquisition, care, display and memory play a role in identity formation [11]. The concept takes a more particular cultural shape when applied to sneaker studies. There is a link between identity and brand preference in narratives of sneakerhead involvement, but customization may represent individuality and still be linked to commercial structures [2, 3]. The object is hence not a passive badge or a totally self-governing manifestation. The meaning of the object is the subject of negotiating between personal attachment, brand narratives and other consumer perceptions. According to brand-community theory, the shared consciousness, ritual, and sense of moral accountability are the foundations of recognition [12]. Thornton also demonstrates the reason why it is important to identify insiders, value their style, and trustful participation as they may have standing [13]. Releases, provenance, customization, and judgements of what is real are the criteria of evaluation used by participants in sneaker settings, and authentication and scarcity are socially significant [4, 5]. The criteria are based on practice rather than simply ownership. Recognition also plays a role in youths because teenagers choose their clothes and children interpret branded trainers differently. They offer a parallel evidence about clothing rather than general information concerning youth sneaker culture [6, 7]. The culture of the school is introduced into the framework as an assumed prerequisite of recognition. Willis describes the reasons of the interrelation between formal evaluation and peer culture in the identity practices of young people [14], and the research on school dress by Swain shows what locally implemented clothing regulations might influence recognition and inclusion [8]. The sources inspire, but do not test, a proposition specific to the sneakers: the school norms could change the manner in which a display is perceived

by the peers. The comparison should then be based on institutional evaluation, peer culture, family resources, dress rules and sneaker practice instead of using school labels as explanations.



## 5. Thematic Evidence Synthesis

between genuine membership and imitation [4, 13]. A pair cannot disclose the motive of the wearer, his resources or identity alone. Peer borders are therefore based on common standards instead of inherent properties. There are disagreements among communities as to whether scarcity, prolonged participation, creative customization, or detachment of commercial hype indicate genuine membership. The literature supports recognition-based inclusion and exclusion, but it does not identify a single sneaker community or a uniform response from outsiders. A sneaker pair acquires different meanings across settings. The same shoe can be valued differently by a resale market, a brand community, and a private attachment. Scarcity, narratives and participation scripts are amplified through brands and resale markets, but consumers can also change them or challenge them [1, 2]. A pair that has been customized can withstand mass consumption regardless of the fact that it is based on a branded pair. Identity claims can be both affectively significant and commercially mediated. Personal attachment, collective standards and commercial value are bargained simultaneously.

### 5.3 A Conceptual Agenda for School Contexts

There is no existing research that can compare the status of sneakers between elite, ordinary and vocational schools. The neighboring evidence is more restrictive: teenagers apply clothing to identity formation and judgment, children relate branded trainers to peer acceptance, and local regulations and peer recognition influenced clothing behaviour in one junior school [6–8]. Any comparison should thus establish what is being compared before the comparison of status meanings. The available data on this subject matter supports a research agenda, which comparative statements are yet to be designed and data collected. Willis relates peer culture and institutional evaluation in the development of youth identity, whereas Bourdieu is focused on the uneven legitimacy of tastes [10, 14]. A school category alone cannot be used to clarify status; it is only when locally valued criteria are taken into account that a sneaker resource becomes legible. The accounts will supplement the idea of testing alongside sneaker and community studies: locally valued forms of achievement, taste, and membership might have an impact on the ways in which sneaker-related resources are perceived. When comparing, observable rules and evaluative practices must be recorded before school labels are assigned meaning to them. In addition to sneaker practice, it must also take into consideration peer recognition, dress regulations, family resources, gender, age, and online involvement. The expertise, belonging, conformity, and conspicuous display could then be used as alternative explanations. The influence of school culture is a contextual statement until the direction of its effects is proven by evidence.

## 6. Discussion and Research Implications

Direct sources locate the meaning of sneakers in the public interpretation and not the ownership itself. Perceptible possessions may link individual attachment, brand stories, taste and self-presentation [1, 3, 11]. A cue could be based on scarcity, price, expertise, or judgement on beauty, hence these indicators can be used as status messages [9, 10]. The cues are important in peer-boundary conflicts and credible membership evaluation due to community practices and authentication [4, 5, 12, 13]. Youth-clothing studies show that clothing and branded trainers also matter for peer recognition among young people [6–8]. The third question relates to the local audience, not to the pre-existing school type disparity. The problem is when specific audiences confer status on sneaker related assets. Elite, ordinary, and vocational schools are not homogeneous internally, and academic performance does not necessarily contradict consumerism. Peer groups, online communities, family expectations and formal school evaluation are all places that students can go in order to receive different standards of legitimacy. A comparative project should have a protocol approved by the ethics committee in clearly stated school environments. It must record sampling and lack of response, and it must integrate interviews or observation with indicators of evaluation of schools, peer recognition, knowledge of brands, purchase restrictions, and Internet use. The design would have made the source of each comparison clear instead of depending on institutional labels. Socioeconomic resources and dress rules should be considered as alternatives to the type of school. Predefined criteria would also minimize the chances of interpreting all positive sneaker stories as low-academic status or all negative ones as elite status. The first limitation of the evidence is that it is a concentrated, non-systemic search with a restricted core on purpose, and only five sources directly investigate sneakers. The clothing, branded trainers, or school dress are the main topics of the youth studies because these studies do not compare the sneaker culture. Foundational theories are of various eras and contexts; they shape interpretation, but do not confirm modern processes. Questions are mapped in the framework as part of the inquiry, not as a validated model of campus stratification.

## 7. Conclusion

The direct research on sneakers cannot create one youth meaning. The reading of this article together with research on clothing, branded trainers, and school dress locates youth in a limited reading. Sneakers can be used as an identity, engagement in the community, status signaling and authenticity bargaining when audiences can appreciate taste, knowledge, customization, price, rarity and credible participation. The comparison of the schools should be based on observable practices because they will define the setting, measure peer and institutional evaluation using relevant social settings, and compete with alternative explanations rather than seeing school labels as causes. The connection between the culture of the school and the meaning of sneakers is still a hypothesis until there is some evidence of this correlation.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

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