social sciences

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The Contested Terrain of Sporting Consumption: Navigating Meaning, Identity, and Late Capitalist Marketing through Sneaker Customization

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Abstract: This discussion critically examines and questions assumptions about the meanings and motivations of sporting consumption. We argue that the practice of sneaker customization demonstrates the contested terrain of sporting consumption, wherein contemporary consumerism is characterized by a dynamic interplay between top–down structural determination (by mass commercial forces) and bottom–up creative agency (by everyday consumers). Based on in-depth interviews with 15 sneaker consumers, we narrate the complexities of late capitalist consumer culture through three overlapping "tensions" between the commercial sneaker industry and everyday sneaker consumers: (1) Sneakers as a vehicle to express individuality versus to demonstrate conformity; (2) Sneaker customization as a means of artistic expression versus being a commodity rationalized to maximize profit; (3) An affective versus instrumental attachment to sneakers. Overall, the analysis illuminates how the cultural and affective meanings that consumers attach to sneaker consumption operate; sometimes in conjunction with, more often in opposition to, but always in tension with the meanings that the sneaker industry attempts to embed through its ever-expansive means of marketing and advertising.

Keywords: sporting consumption; contested terrain; sneaker customization; sneaker culture; sports advertising

Citation: Wallace, Brandon T., and David L. Andrews. 2024. The Contested Terrain of Sporting Consumption: Navigating Meaning, Identity, and Late Capitalist Marketing through Sneaker Customization. *Social Sciences* 13: 383. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13080383

Academic Editors: Steve Jackson and Mike Sam

Received: 6 May 2024
Revised: 15 July 2024
Accepted: 17 July 2024
Published: 23 July 2024

1. Introduction

Considering the centrality of consumption to our everyday lives and identities—not to mention its accelerating role as the engine of elite commercial sport (Andrews 2019; Grainger 2021)—the cultural politics of sporting consumerism continues to represent a germane focus of critical intellectual inquiry (Giulianotti and Numerato 2018; Horne 2006). The grand narrative that the era of hyper-commodification and technological advancement has rendered sport (and its various sites, products, and services) as a mere site of capital accumulation by the sporting industry is complicated by the creative individualism and agency expressed by sporting consumers (Free and Hughson 2006; Willis 1990). In light of what are rapid changes to the cultural and technological landscape of sport, the critical and contextual (re)consideration of sporting consumption needs to move beyond dichotomized, and seemingly unresolvable, structure or agency understandings that previously held sway. For example, as the culture industries have evolved to (at least ostensibly) incorporate more cultural and technological consumer input (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), the meanings and motivations of consumption are still constrained, by structural forces and relations. Similarly, even as every crevice of sporting culture is appropriated and exploited for commodity value (Andrews 2019; Jameson 1991), sport consumers are still far from zombies mindlessly following late capitalist marketing and advertising directives.

Hence, within this discussion, we advance a messier ontological model that positions sporting consumption as simultaneously shaped by and manifested through both agentic

and structural forces. According to this approach, the moments of consumer agency are enabled/constrained/augmented by contingently manifest structural forces, which are always already (re)made, (re)shaped, and transformed by micro-agentic responses. In other words, we argue that sporting consumption should be considered a *contested terrain* between necessary co-constitutive structural and agentic forces. As our data will demonstrate, a contested terrain model of sporting consumption harbors three central assumptions. First, the meanings and motivations attached to consumption are never guaranteed; they reject simple explanations and can never be assumed in advance. Second, consumption is an expression of cultural and political communication through which everyday individuals respond (in a variety of potential ways) to the socio-structural forces framing their existence. Third, consuming is never preordained or final; the initial act of consumption is the first step in a longer process of identity construction, meaning-making, and navigating image-based late capitalist culture (Kearney 1989; Lury 2011; Willis 1990).

This project explores the complex, and at times contradictory, contested terrain of sporting consumption through an illustrative product of late capitalist consumer culture: the athletic sneaker (see Coleman 2013; Miner 2009; Turner 2019). While originating in the context of sport (Turner 2019), the sneaker's polysemic character extends its reach into realms far beyond sport, i.e., occupying important material and symbolic spaces within music, fashion, street culture, and even representative politics. Importantly, as scholars have noted, sneakers are not only "a potent and emotive subject, laden with cultural meanings, associations and stereotypes" (Sherlock 2012, p. 2), they also display an "agentic capacity" to "contribute to individuals' everyday embodied processes of social differentiation and identification" (Hockey et al. 2015, p. 22). Building on these notions, our analysis further explicates the practices and meanings of contemporary sneaker consumption, but also gives voice to what happens after the initial purchase of the sneaker. Hence, we examine the phenomenon of *sneaker customization* as a practice incorporating—even if in exaggerated form—the vast possibilities of commodity consumption more generally. We define sneaker customization as any form of alteration, re-design, or intentional manipulation of material and/or aesthetic dimensions of a sneaker, carried out in order to transform a sneaker's physical/material form and, thereby, its cultural/symbolic signification. This can be performed pre-consumption (ordered specifically in a customized way), but most often, sneakers are customized post-purchase by grassroots artists or professional sneaker customizers. Customization is a generative site for scholarly inquiry, as it allows for the more direct expression of consumer desires while simultaneously unleashing new possibilities for the process of consumption.

Perhaps more than any single commodity, the sneaker is the culmination of late capitalist consumer culture, wherein culture and economics have merged onto a single plane (Jameson 1991), such that "mass-mediated 'cultural forms' have thus become a 'central focus and expression of economic activity'" (Connor 1989; quoted in Andrews 2006, p. 90). Our analysis builds on decades of scholarship on the cultural politics of consumption, including (but not limited to) Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) analysis of the communicative role of goods, Baudrillard's (1983) analysis of the role of sign-value in consumption, Miller's (1995) anthropological theories of consumption, Lefebvre's (2014) critique of the inauthenticity of consumer society, and De Certeau et al.'s (1980) analysis of the transgressive potential of "everyday" consumer practices. While our analysis is based on a particular understanding of cultural studies and critical sport literatures, shoes/sneakers, in particular, have also been an object of analysis in fashion studies (Benstock and Ferriss 2001; Sherlock 2012), anthropology and material culture (Hockey et al. 2013, 2015), and other related fields. While retaining this contextual focus, scholars such as Featherstone (2007) and Willis (1990) urge for a more grounded "everyday" approach to studying late capitalist consumerism, which encourages scholars "not to just read the signs but look at how the signs are used by figurations of people in their day-to-day practices" (Featherstone 2007, p. 62). As such, we follow Willis' (1990) theoretical framework of symbolic creativity—the open-ended process by which people use commodities to negotiate meaning and express identity on

an everyday level—for a more comprehensive and, indeed, agentic portrait of sporting consumption in late capitalism.

Expanding upon these scholarly conversations is especially pertinent given the evolutions of the culture industries, wherein advertising has extended not only across media broadly construed but increasingly to the mundane and previously uncommodified corners of everyday life (Lury 2011). We are now living in a consumer culture in which meaning is infused into every product we buy and each advertisement with which we are bombarded (Syfret 2021). This condition of existence begs the questions that frame sneaker consumption and customization: is advertising effective in creating meaning for us (and even presenting meaning as another item to be consumed), and to what extent do consumers play an agentic role in formulating their own meanings? Which "meanings" are winning, and what are the stakes?

2. Locating Sneaker Customization in Late Capitalism

Inspired by these general questions, our specific research questions for this study are twofold. First, how and why do individuals engage in sneaker consumption and customization? Second, what meanings do individuals attach to the process and products of sneaker customization? What emerges is neither a simple tale of an exploitative mass commercial culture devouring and determining a vulnerable "low" culture, nor is it a triumphant story of a low culture perceiving and operating in a unified resistance against a domineering sneaker industry (constituted by companies such as Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and Under Armour). Instead, we find that sneaker consumers generate alternative and negotiated meanings for sneaker consumption that are not completely determined by structural forces yet are not entirely free of them. Sneaker customization, then, is utilized as a popular grassroots project which, in some ways (although never conclusively) challenges the corporate dominance of both the athletic sneaker and the culture that surrounds it.

This project is part of a larger study, with projects previously published that elaborate in detail some key contexts and processes of sneaker customization to which this piece only alludes. We have written about the history of sneaker industry marketing, arguing that the sneaker industry's shift toward racialized marketing was effective in situating the sneaker as an emblem of urban Black America, even as it did so in ways that materially and ideologically exploited and harmed the Black community (Wallace 2022). Additionally, we have written about Black sneaker consumers' contradictory attitudes toward the sneaker industry and how they used sneaker customization as a political and philanthropic response (Wallace and Andrews 2022). We also outlined how consumers were conscientious about how *The Industry* (sneaker producers such as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok) utilized and exploited *The Culture* (a proto-community organized around the interests, aesthetics, and embodiments of urban Blackness expressed in and through a common passion for sneakers). With the political functions of the sneaker explained (with a special focus on race), this data expands upon the intercultural dynamics of sneaker consumption and customization. Specifically, whereas these previous publications detail the sneaker industry's historical practices of sneaker marketing, advertising, and community engagement (i.e., the "industry" side), this project aims to identify how everyday individual sneaker customizers resist/decode/counter the commercial positioning of sneakers, and how they use sneaker consumption and customization to negotiate/encode/express meanings at an everyday level (i.e., the consumer side). We analyze how the symbolic and affective meanings that consumers attach to sneaker consumption operate, sometimes in conjunction with, more often in opposition to, but always in tension with, the meanings that the sneaker industry attempts to embed through its ever-expansive means of marketing and advertising.

With data derived from interviews with 15 sneaker customizers, we narrate the contested terrain of the sneaker through three interrelated tensions expressed by the participants. The first is the tension between those who customized sneakers to express their individuality and those who, in doing so, effectively conformed to dominant trends within corporate sneaker culture. This was linked to the second tension between those who cus-

tomized sneakers because they appreciated artistry and those who viewed sneakers as a commodity and vehicle for profit. Both trends reflected, in more concrete terms, elements of the third tension, which was that between those customizers exhibiting an affective (emotional) attachment to sneakers and those with an instrumental (economic) attachment. Participants spoke of these self-proclaimed dichotomies in hierarchical terms, in which the individualistic/artistic/affective approach to sneakers was viewed as more legitimate and more authentic to grassroots sneaker culture. Conversely, those whose attachment to sneakers was conformist/entrepreneurial/instrumental were viewed less favorably since they were perceived as being externally driven and as the corollary of the sneaker industry's manipulative marketing tactics.

However, while sympathetic to this hierarchy presented by participants, we argue that neither side of the tension is as consistent or straightforward as it seems. In doing so, we demonstrate how, through recourse to multifarious practices of sneaker customization, acts of consumption are neither totally structurally determined nor acts of unfettered agency. The artistry of sneakers may be in tension with the commercialism of sneakers, but the two motivations are more intertwined than participants readily acknowledged. Overall, the contested terrain of sporting consumption is a complicated interplay between mass commercial domination and symbolic consumer creativity (Willis 1990), emblematic of the equally entangled interplay between late capitalism and everyday agency within the current moment. Consumers ascribed their own autonomous meanings to sneakers and the act of consuming them, in ways that resembled dominant (acceptance), oppositional (rejection), and negotiated (mixed) perceptions of sneaker industry narratives (see Hall 1980; Wilson 1996). In general, though, we found that consumers *spoke back* to the industry through the act of customization. Through the commodity of the sneaker, we thus present a story of how marketing and advertising in late capitalism is powerful but far from totalizing, and how its top–down symbolic manipulation is susceptible to bottom–up challenges from consumers.

3. Methods

This study is part of a larger project that uses a qualitative, social constructivist methodology to understand the meanings, motivations, and cultural politics of sneaker customization (Wallace 2019; also see Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The main method of gathering data was in-depth semi-structured interviews with individual sneaker customizers. Interviews are a useful way to facilitate personal communication and provide rich illumination of personal experience, meaning, values, context, motivation, and behavior (Smith and Sparkes 2017). The first author utilized what Patton (2002) calls homogenous criterion sampling to recruit the 15 participants who were interviewed. All participants met the criteria of being 18 years or older, having customized shoes in the past 10 years, and having lived in the United States for at least 5 years. Of the 15 participants in the sample, 13 were men, and two were women (which, despite our preference for a more equal gender disparity, roughly reflected the proportion of men and women at the sneaker conventions where data were collected). Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 38, with eight participants in their 20s and seven participants in their 30s. All participants were born in the United States. 10 of the 15 participants identified as Black/African-American, three identified as mixed (two were white and Black, one was white and Filipino), one identified as Latino, and one identified as Pakistani. Eight of the participants customized sneakers with the intention of selling them, five of the participants customized only for themselves, and two of the participants customized as part of organizational initiatives. To find individuals who met the sample criterion, the first author attended two local sneaker conventions where he met 13 of the 15 participants. Participants who appeared to be wearing or selling customized sneakers were approached and asked if they had experience with sneaker customization. All of the 13 participants who answered affirmatively and agreed to be interviewed preferred to conduct the interview at that moment during the sneaker convention.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the first author conducted one interview with each participant. Interviews ranged from 15 to 45 min, with the average being around 30 min. Interviews were transcribed after they were conducted. Once transcriptions were complete, data were de-identified, and pseudonyms were given in place of participants' names. Transcriptions then were systematically coded twice to identify themes, which are presented below. We used thematic analysis as a method of data organization and expression. Broadly, thematic analysis aims to identify or interpret patterns or "themes" within qualitative data (Clarke and Braun 2006). A data point qualified as a theme if it constituted a "general pattern of meaning" (Clarke and Braun 2006), which we defined as a point that was semantically or latently present in three or more participants' responses, corresponded in some way with pre-existing theoretical frameworks and were relevant to our research questions. As presented below, in order to convey the interplay between consumer agency and the broader social structure, we present our themes as a series of tensions.

4. A "One-of-One" vs. "What's Hot": Individuality vs. Conformity

By far, the most common meaning of customized sneakers for participants was as a symbol to express their individuality. Many viewed custom sneakers as a mode of distinct self-expression amidst what they perceived as the monotony and homogenization bred by the sneaker industry. Shane summarized the notion best in response to being asked why he chose to customize his sneakers: "Just to stand out. Just to have a one-of-one, a shoe that no one else has". The majority of participants customized sneakers that differentiated themselves from their peers. Echoing the claims made in previous literature on sneakers (Miner 2009; Turner 2019; Wilson 1996), participants expressed their reasons for customizing sneakers in the following pattern:

> *Thomas: They really express who I am as a person. . . I like to have my shoes pop out just like I like to pop out.*
>
> *Brett: Just a way of expression. [My sneakers] are something I haven't seen before so I decided to make it myself. . . I was tired of wearing what everyone else was wearing. So I decided to be different for a little bit.*
>
> *Ken: Just to change it up. To be different from everyone else walking around.*
>
> *Charles: Well for the Nike IDs [customizations through Nike's website], they're my own thing. They're my own creation. Obviously someone else did it, I didn't do it with my own hand but it's still something unique to my own self. It's something personal and something that nobody else would have. Something that would kinda turn heads.*

These comments support Sassatelli's (2007) argument that the consumers of late capitalism wield commodities as means of constructing identity through difference, in an attempt to "ground their humanity in being different from the 'objectivity' of things . . . they have sought to distinguish themselves from the perceived passivity, docility, and transience of the many objects that surround them" (quoted in Lury 2011, p. 206). The pursuit of difference as an end in itself was evident and exemplified through the practice of sneaker customization. The custom sneaker, first and foremost, signified the individuality of the one who designed and adorned it, even if, in Charles' case, customization still benefitted Nike.

However, while the pursuit of individuality was the most common theme, all participants acknowledged that *conformity*—here defined as consuming or customizing in order to impress others and "fit in"—was prevalent within sneaker culture. Ironically, most participants commented that *others* demonstrated conformity with their consumption habits, but they *themselves* were not concerned with fitting in. Not all, however, viewed conformity with the pessimism common to a late capitalist consumer culture that fears and admonishes similarity (Featherstone 2007). Brett, an individual customizer, could not conceptualize sneaker culture without conformity, stating, "I think shoes always start with the self, but the main purpose is for everyone else to admire them. That's why we do it".

Similarly, Thomas, an individual and professional customizer, stated that the reception of his custom sneakers from others gave him a form of validation:

> *I love that look when you're walking around and you got some heat on your feet and somebody double-takes. If they're in that culture, they're gonna look at you and they're gonna know what it is. Sneakers mean a lot for that.*

Although Brett and Thomas' comments support Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) view of goods as communicative to others within groups, nonetheless, the idea of considering the thoughts or opinions of others was discussed pejoratively among most participants. All other participants stated that they only made sneakers for themselves without regard to how they would be perceived by others, yet they all believed that *others* within sneaker culture were overly mindful of what others thought. Participants alluded to an interesting and almost paradoxical tension, in which those who consumed and customized sneakers to express their individuality were perceived as most authentic to the sneaker subculture, whereas consumers who were thought to be outwardly focused on fitting in and blindly following trends in the sneaker industry were perceived as inauthentic. This dynamic clearly complicates this spectrum, creating an ironic twist wherein the hyper-pursuit of individuality (for its own sake) becomes, in and of itself, a signification of conformity.

Although taking into consideration others' opinions on sneakers was generally stigmatized, even those who stated they only customize sneakers for themselves implied that the reaction of others was meaningful. For example, Charles, an individual and industry customizer, stated that "no sneakers I make are for anyone else. They're for myself because I like them. I don't care what the hype is or what others think". Yet, Thomas also pointed out that he only wears customized sneakers at sneaker conventions and other settings where he thinks they will be appreciated. Similar to Thomas, Charles judged their originality by how much the sneakers "turned heads" as well as the regularity with which people commented that his sneakers were "one-of-ones" that they had not seen before. To Charles, as well as other participants, the originality of their sneakers was judged by the extent to which *others* identified them as original.

Aware or unaware of the inherent contradictions, the majority of participants positioned conformity as the enemy of originality and a perpetual detriment to the sanctity of sneaker culture. Justin, a professional customizer, stated, "the way the sneaker game is now, a lot of people are just here for show. Here for whatever's hot, or whatever has a label on it or a brand name on it. Like that's all people wanna wear". Also alluding to the pervasive influence of social media on contemporary sneaker culture, Ken, an individual customizer, stated the following:

> *I think everyone really does it for other people to see. I think that's the nature of sneakers. I mean hopefully it expresses a part of you, but you definitely show it off. And the validation comes from the "like" button on Instagram or Twitter or whatever.*

These two comments reflect the above admissions of external influence from Thomas and Brett, although Justin and Ken stated them with a tone of condemnation that indicated clear disapproval.

This sentiment that some within sneaker culture were only in it "for show"—common among participants—was often paired with negative attitudes toward popular sneaker industry brands and those who are thought to consume them. Yet, it was also acknowledged by some participants that blind consumption of the latest "hot" brand was due to the prevalence of the advertising of that brand. In other words, many participants—especially those who viewed themselves as immersed within the grassroots sneaker culture—viewed sneakers whose popularity was constructed from the bottom–up (from authentic subcultural engagement) as more legitimate than sneakers whose popularity was infused from the top–down (via rapacious industry marketing). Put more directly, meaning that was given to a sneaker organically was more likely to be adopted and respected than meanings that were circulated through the sheer blunt force of money. For example, Taylor, a Black

male professional customizer, was willing to admit that he previously consumed sneakers in order to fit into what he perceived as his place in society. He stated the following:

> *I was raised in the 90s, so that's pretty much when sneaker culture popped off, when larger companies realized that they could, you know, use prolific athletes to help influence the masses. So, you know, as a young kid not knowing anything about that, I just saw my favorite athletes, like Michael Jordan, playing and wanted those. . . So I kind of, by default, felt like that was a way of life. Like sneakers. . . it was the way to be fresh. It was the way to be respected. All the ladies and everybody near me was like, 'oh he always fresh. He always got the J's [Jordans]'. So it was like when you walk through, you feel like it feeds that male ego or something. Like yeah, I'm the man.*

In this case, Taylor discusses the ways in which he was interpellated by the messages emanating from Nike's advertising that, as documented at the time by Wilson (1996), positioned Jordan sneakers as a way to not only "Be Like Mike" but as an essential symbolic commodity in the construction of a hegemonic Black masculinity. Now, after two decades of becoming more reflexive about his attachment to sneakers, Taylor shared that he encourages Black youth to not formulate their sense of identity and self-esteem through sneakers and to instead focus on expressing individuality through academics and community service.

Darren, an African-American professional street customizer whose upbringing was similar to Taylor's, also echoed the notion of sneakers being crucial for acceptance into his peer group and, subsequently, a vital object of self-esteem. Darren stated the following:

> *[I] came up in the inner-city where, you know, having the flyest kicks is part of your day-to-day. If you ain't got on some clean shoes or at least something that, you know, people are notable of, your status level or even your security level—when it comes to insecurity and confidence—it's a little stagnant. You needed them.*

Though certain groups would be quick to misconstrue the comments of Taylor and Darren as evidence for pathological Black consumption habits, their comments more closely reflect Gilroy's (1993) argument that Black racial identity is often formulated by a complex attachment to certain brands and styles. Put differently, perhaps customization demonstrates the racial and spatial elements to the practices of "symbolic creativity" that Willis (1990) detailed as a working-class phenomenon, a stylistic subversion of the White mainstream (typified by the sneaker industry) by those excluded from it and marginalized by it. In other ways, however, industry marketing is more effective than ever, as both individuality and conformity through sneakers are realized through (branded) consumption.

Some participants even took small but significant personal actions to combat what they perceived to be the ascendance of conformity. Paul, a high-profile professional street customizer, took a stance by denying any customization requests that were related in some way to the latest "hot" brands. Tracing the shifts in sneaker customization over the past decade, Paul stated that previously, people solicited him to create something brand new. Now, people increasingly want him to create copies of what they have seen others wearing, or what the industry has created but they could not afford. He argues the following:

> *the custom shoe game has been butchered into something that's not so custom anymore. The word custom—making something unique to the individual—has been lost. Now, there's a lot of "I like this, can you make it for me?" Or "I saw this guy do this, can you do it too?" It's just a lot of conformity.*

Paul said that unless there is some sort of artistic or original twist to it, he turns down requests that he views as mimicry, despite losing a considerable amount of business for having this approach. He argued that it is necessary, though, in order to stay true to what his business' stated mission is and his vision of what should be at the foundation of sneaker culture, what he calls "true customs. . . one of ones, pieces of art". For Paul, signifying individuality and upholding sanctity was worth the potential loss of business.

Paul took his critique even further, extending it not just to sneaker consumers but to his fellow street-level customizers. He argued that it was not just that consumers follow the

latest "hot" trends, but the very act of customizing shoes has itself become a "hot" trend. Paul noticed a slow evolution that resulted in a contemporary sneaker culture in which the design or the meaning of the custom sneaker was not the primary component. The fact that a sneaker was a custom, and people acknowledged it as so, was enough. It was not so much that consumers customized certain designs to be signifiers of some part of their identity (which, for Paul, was the only legitimate reason to customize); the fact that the shoe was a custom was its own signifier, regardless of how it looked. Somewhere along the way, according to Paul, the various sneaker blogs and magazines that derided the trend of customization as detrimental to sneaker culture reversed course. At some point, they abandoned their disdain and began to use custom sneakers as a source of viral content for increased digital clicks and subscriptions. Paul viewed this transition as the impetus not only for everyone wanting customized sneakers but also for a plethora of people thinking that they can create customized shoes to sell. He states the following:

> *You know, when I first started. . . everything that was being put out was really a one of one. But then, it just became a fad. It became where every Tom, Dick and Harry was a customizer. As long as you own the airbrush or some markers or some paint, you're a customer now.*

Whereas once, only "true" artists and professionals were providing high-quality customs at the street level, Paul perceived the market as currently being diluted by those who customize just to make "a quick buck" through trendy designs. Paul concludes as follows: "This used to be a way to get something outside of the norm. And now, it's almost become a way to fall in line with what everybody else is doing". Paul's comments exemplify the ways in which creative grassroots labor is contemporaneously commodified by late capitalist culture industries, just to be subsequently "diffused" and "defused" (Clarke [1976] 2007) of its original subversive character.

5. "True Artistry" vs. "A Quick Buck": Art vs. Business

Building from Paul's previous comments, another tension about which participants spoke passionately was that between those who used sneakers as an artistic outlet and those who used sneakers as a business venture. For some participants, these two uses worked in tandem. For others, the two were dichotomous, the belief being that customization was *either* true artistry *or* a calculated means to make money. Participants who believed art and business could co-exist often viewed custom sneakers as pieces of art that could also be bought, sold, and overall reduced to their economic value.

Many participants identified sneaker customization as a form of art, and by extension, those who customized sneakers were considered as artists. Three participants described their sneakers as a blank canvas to be shaped, decorated, and enhanced as they saw fit. Charles viewed customization as an artistic expression that was not only a challenging and exciting experience but was unique in that the artist can wear and show off the finished product throughout their entire day. Charles's comments place sneakers as an example of Featherstone's (2007) aestheticization of everyday life, in which individuals apply style and flare to items that have traditionally lacked distinguishable qualities. Wayne also viewed custom sneakers as a form of art that was distinctively enmeshed with the identity of the artist. Echoing the transcendence of sign-value over use-value (Baudrillard 1983), Wayne stated the following:

> *You can't separate sneakers from art. It's not any different from taking a canvas and painting your ideas and writing a message on it or making a statement. It's the same thing with shoes. It's just now, it goes beyond protecting our feet, it's part of our outfits and part of who we are.*

Cody described the joy of the experience of customizing sneakers as follows:

> *Being able to take a blank canvas and do whatever you want with it, it's the same thing with shoes but just a three-dimensional form. So to be able to have your moment of*

> *freedom to do what the other designers did and just see what you can create, it's pretty dope. It's a different medium for art, it's beautiful.*

Again, participants indicated that the final product was not the sole focus; to many customizers, the journey—the process of customizing—was more important than the destination. Most participants who referred to their sneakers as artwork were ones who designed them by hand, but even Charles, who customized his shoes online through industry websites, viewed his creations as a form of art. Charles even tried to use industry websites to express artwork that he enjoyed. He attempted to put his favorite painting, The Scream by Edvard Munch, on a pair of Vans but was refused due to copyright infringement issues. Other participant methods of artwork on their shoes included painting, drawing, airbrushing, stenciling, dip-dying, writing, and switching up laces to create different patterns.

Engaging in the practice of sneaker customization was a natural development from previous art-related skills, talents, or experiences. Most participants who sold sneakers viewed them as a way to capitalize on their artistic prowess through a medium that was more popular and visible than traditional artistic forms. For instance, Nicole majored in graphic design in college and had experience with photography and drawing. She started customizing because: "I wanted to just try it because I saw a lot of people doing it and I wanted to try my hand in it. And it also was another way for me to make some money". Justin's story involved a higher level of investment in sneaker art, as he attended a prominent art school in California with the intent of becoming a sneaker designer. After failing to obtain an internship with Nike or Adidas, he returned to the East Coast and started his own art business, which included customized sneakers. He stated that even his non-sneaker products, which he designs, have "always been dripped in the culture around sneakers". Justin and Nicole had no qualms about mixing artistry with business.

Not all professional customizers agreed, however. For participants who viewed artistry and business as contradictory, there was a sense that the commodification of customized sneakers provoked a collective decrease in the quality and originality of the art produced. While it was widely acknowledged that it was acceptable to sell sneakers, participants shared Jameson's (1991) pessimism toward cultural commodification, positioning sneaker customization as an endeavor that should be about the pursuit of true artistry first and profit second. This view was even shared by participants who themselves customized sneakers and sold them. Most of these professional customizers rationalized this paradox by arguing that they customized for the art first and the money second, but accused other professional customizers of only being concerned about the money first and the business second. As a result of focusing on money rather than artistry, participants said that other customizers only catered to what's "hot" instead of seeking originality. The privileging of profit over artistry, then, was seen as the incentive for conformity (described above) and thus responsible for the dilution of sneaker culture. For instance, following up his complaint that every "Tom, Dick, and Harry with an airbrush" calls themselves a customizer now, Paul argued that true artistry was what separated the "real" customizers from the "fake" customizers. When asked what separates him from the other professional customizers he derides, Paul said the following:

> *Well you're dealing with an artist, a real true artist with 30 years' worth the airbrushing experience under their belt. You know, someone that's been doing it before it was a fad and someone that is passionate about it. . . there's a lot of things that we can do that other artists just simply can't. Like these people who call themselves customizers, there's some things we can pull off or they can't, or even that they wouldn't even dare to try.*

Justin agreed that certain customizers' skillsets are only bound to the latest social media trends, explaining that "Any artist. . . I guarantee you whatever the trending topic is on Instagram right now, that's what their [sneaker] sketches will look like". Cody, another professional customizer, also pointed to passion as what makes him distinct, saying the following: "I'm not looking to make a crazy company just off customizing sneakers. It's

just a close passion of mine, being an artist. I just love doing it every day, morning or night". Those customizers who declared that they had passion were wary of sneakers that looked passionless, which they often viewed as coming from people with superficial art skills, often working in the commercial sneaker industry. Customizers who made "passionless" shoes were dismissed by participants as merely conforming to the latest trends, only interested in money, or both. According to these participants, passionless sneaker customization has increased in the past few years to the detriment of sneaker culture.

Especially significant to our exploration of sneaker consumption as a contested terrain, participants also viewed true artistry as the reason to consume on the street level instead of through conventional retail outlets. Many participants thought that industry sneakers followed an algorithmic formula based on the latest trends or cheap knockoffs—if not stolen, uncredited replicas—of what street-level customizers were already doing. On the other hand, street customizers that were truly artists (as in, not just following the money) were viewed as more capable of transcending and innovating the industry's replicative and monotonous designs. Justin, speaking about that industry formula based on trendiness, said the following: "I'm not about to conform to that. I do what I want. I draw or I create what I feel. What people say is popping or what's trending at the time, I don't feel like that's real art". Paul agreed with Justin and considered the quality of his art to be so renowned that he no longer viewed the industry as a factor in his business. Paul states the following: "My niche is carved out. What [Nike] does doesn't affect me, because they're not gonna find an artist like me. I don't really worry because I can create. . . People come to me to get something that Nike can't mass produce". Paul offered the hypothetical example of a Martin Luther King Jr. tribute design for a custom sneaker. If the industry or lower-skilled street customizers were to make that shoe, Paul claimed that they would only add some words from King's "I Have a Dream" speech with some symbolism of Black History Month. Paul, however, could provide a portrait of King and add an artistic twist such as having King look up to the clouds with the speech's words in them, symbolizing King's religious motivation and his vision that at the time seemed unattainable. According to Paul, the industry did not have artists skilled enough to design a shoe that intricate. Paul said that he has customized portraits on sneakers for many people and that he is allowed to do so because he is a commissioned artist. For participants, passionless customization led to depthless superficiality in sneaker culture, but passionate customization was the answer to restoring artistry and originality.

For some of the customizers who viewed sneakers as a business, those who focused on the artistry were deemed more genuine than those who focused on the business aspects. As described above, they were able to reconcile their business practices of selling sneaker culture with their underlying intentions of promoting and innovating it. Other participants, however, did not see anything wrong with approaching custom sneakers as strictly business. These participants did not understand it as a dichotomy of either art or business but viewed themselves as being in the "art business". Steven said that sneakers, to him, were an "investment", adding that he merely took advantage of his love for art and sneakers. He began customizing when he realized that he "could make a lot of profit off of sneakers, because at this point, sneakers are a big business". Steven had no issue with customizers being driven by profit, as long as it did not detract from the quality of their art.

Ten of the participants in the study actually started their own business involving sneakers and saw custom sneakers as an avenue for them to become entrepreneurs (including seven of those who expressed a concern for sneaker commodification). Six of the ten sneaker entrepreneurs—Darren, Paul, Ken, Wayne, Cody, and Justin—started an entire fashion brand around their customized sneakers that extended into clothing, hats, and other fashion wear. Those who were unapologetic about viewing sneakers as a business were also unapologetic about conforming to the latest "hot" trends. They viewed this pursuit as merely fulfilling market demand. To them, making custom sneakers according to one's exclusive tastes and interests was admirable, but it would stifle sales and lead to sneakers just sitting on one's shelf. Nicole explained her rationale for making shoes

that people wanted, stating, "Shoes are expensive. . . you can't just make them and then hope someone buys them. Because then they're just sitting there. They're customs, so if nobody likes how they look at that time, what are you gonna do?" For Nicole, customizing according to what was popular was common sense, while trying to subvert the popular trends for the sake of "artistry" was simply bad business.

The ultimate goals of selling sneakers differed, however. For many participants, the goal was to make money and sustain a career in selling sneakers. Most approached customization as a part-time hobby, but six participants created and sold customized sneakers full-time. Cody viewed his business success as a means to broaden his profile; not to make himself more money but to increase his platform in order to circulate his artwork to consumers. Wayne created his brand to gain exposure for his design skills, with the hopes of one day being noticed by the industry companies (the same ones he strongly critiqued, a paradox he acknowledged) and being offered a job. Justin created his brand to disseminate his artistic vision, although he was also hoping it would lead to bigger and better opportunities. For Darren and Taylor, their brand was created to ultimately empower the youth from where they grew up (see Wallace and Andrews 2022).

For some participants, the business of sneakers was at odds with the personal meanings of sneakers, creating dilemmas. For example, Amber started off by making sneakers that were meaningful to her but ended up selling her favorite sneakers when someone saw her wearing them and requested them. Also, Cody stated that the business aspect has detracted from his passion for art and customization. The expectations of his customers have added a level of stress that he aimed to avoid when entering the business. Cody states the following:

> *I could sit down and do this all night, customize shoes and make art or whatever, I'm happy. But nowadays it's turned more into the business aspect. So I've been doing more customizations for people and commissions. . . if there was a time where I could breathe, I would love to do like 3 to 5 pairs just as a collection for myself. But right now I do it more for others. But I wanna get back to doing just my stuff, without the pressure and stress and anticipation of making somebody else's day.*

As Cody's musings illustrate, even for those who subscribed to the belief that sneakers were both a symbol of artistry and a profitable commodity, situations arose where they were forced–however reluctantly–to choose one over the other.

6. 'I Finally Got 'Em': Customized Sneaker as an Affective Commodity

Although we have discussed the (sub)cultural functions and identity-construction mechanisms of sneaker consumption and customization, customization was not always utilized instrumentally by participants as a rational calculation in pursuit of a predetermined end. It is insufficient to assess the contemporary consumer's motivations, desires, and behaviors as if they were purely driven by economic rationalism. One must consider the affective elements of objects and the meanings they signify, and specifically how they provoke emotional responses to various ideological narratives mediated through marketing, advertising, and promotional discourse (Andrews 1998). Brennan (2004) refers to affect as emotions, passions, attitudes, moods, or desires that provoke physiological responses that, in our case, are stimulated and transmitted through consumer goods. Because "cultural practices are implicated in, and constructed out of, their ideological, economic, libidinal, aesthetic, material, and emotional effects" (Andrews 1998, p. 6, italics added), affect must at least be in dialogue with ideology, especially considering the primacy of affect in sneaker industry marketing and advertising (Wallace 2022).

For most participants, the emotional, affective elements of custom sneakers were enough of a reason and justification for their creation and adornment. Ideologies and the pursuit of identity certainly shaped the significations of sneakers and customizations, but the affective implications, as Andrews (1998) writes, "[bridged] the gap between ideology and everyday existence" for participants. In laying out his theory of symbolic creativity, Willis (1990) found that clothing felt differently for individuals in certain contexts and that

individuals manipulated their clothing styles to "produce the right effect, to induce the right feeling or mood, involving subtle dressing strategies and choices of colours or styles" (p. 89). Customized sneakers were used in this way. While participants said they were not always able to put their feelings toward wearing custom sneakers into words, some of the descriptive phrases used included the following:

> *Charles: They just feel great.*
>
> *Shane: It's spectacular. . . it feels amazing.*
>
> *Wayne: It's a style, a pride thing.*
>
> *Darren: It's a statement, like it gives you a sense of confidence that you might not have without them.*

Steven, an individual and professional customizer, stated that emotions are what drive his creative process of customizing shoes: "All the shoes that I customized came out of emotions. I would use them to represent me or what I'm going through at a certain time". Paul stated that even the act of customizing sneakers evoked certain indescribable feelings and said that he "fell in love" with each pair of sneakers he made for others, though he later said that sneakers had become an addiction. Shane also said that the feelings that sneakers create for him have made his hobby develop into an almost unhealthy insatiability, stating the following:

> *I don't even know if I would call [sneakers] a hobby now. It's more like an obsession. Because even with buying a brand-new shoe, the hunger is not done, the hunger is not complete. I'm still looking for some new kicks right away.*

Shane's comments support Campbell's (1994) argument that commodities cannot satisfy needs because consumers desire the emotional stimuli that commodities engender rather than the commodities themselves. Though customizing sometimes made it more impossible to quell the insatiable need to possess every possible style or design, it also served as an outlet for managing this emotion.

Participants alluded to three specific feelings that customized sneakers evoked: the feelings of self-affirmation, nostalgia, and customizing as a therapeutic practice. The first, and one of the more surprising, feelings that sneakers evoked for participants was one of self-affirmation. For many participants, both traditional and custom sneakers served as a signifier of achievement, as if they were the material manifestation of individual progress in the face of social adversity. For Black working-class participants especially, sneakers represented the successful transcendence of their austere upbringing. For these participants, the ability to buy and wear the sneakers that they coveted—but could not afford—during childhood affirmed to them that they, in some capacity, have achieved success in later life. This pattern can be expressed in the participants' own words:

> *Cody: When I was a little kid. I couldn't get the name brands. I wasn't allowed to. It cost too much. . . you know, the typical parents stuff. So when I was able to get my first pair of Nike's, it meant something. So then once you start to learn about it and you learn the whole lifestyle about it. . . as you grow and get older, it just becomes a part of you.*
>
> *Wayne: For me, [sneakers] are also very personal. I grew up not having a lot, so now that I'm able to buy a pair of shoes or 2 or 3 for a couple hundred dollars, and make that money back and be able to spend again. . . it's like an art. It's entrepreneurship.*
>
> *Amber: If [the sneakers] are some that I've wanted since I was a kid, it makes me feel like 'I finally got em.' You just want to cherish them.*

Sneakers were, in a way, a convoluted emblem of the (neoliberal) American Dream. They were, in a vernacular sense, material evidence of having "made it" within the consumption-defined late capitalist American formation.

The participants listed above were referring to the traditional sneakers that their peers growing up would wear. For other participants, customization was used to mimic the traditional sneakers that they could not afford. As Brett states, "If I didn't have the money

to buy the shoes I liked, I would spend all of my time drawing them and adding my own details to the concepts". For Brett, customization filled the gap between what he could afford and what others had. Similarly, Nicole stated, "I remember when I was younger, I always wanted to have a lot of shoes, but I couldn't get them because I couldn't afford them. But now I sell to buy what I need, or customize what I want". Even currently, Nicole uses customization as a way to have the designs she likes without having to pay high prices for them. Nonetheless, these affective comments represent how the contested terrain of sporting consumption is not always transgressive or self-reflexive. For participants, custom sneakers were a commodity used to communicate meanings both internal and external to the self. However, out of these responses emerges deeper questions, such as the following: why were sneakers chosen as a demonstrator of achievement over other objects? For what reason does achievement need to be demonstrated through consumption at all? Is it more to reassure oneself or to signal achievement to others? These comments could be read as the sneaker industry advertising—not only being successful in generating affective attachments (and its close association to sustained profit) but also having an even greater affective impact than they could ever imagine.

Although the above responses allude to childhood as a time to overcome, sneakers also exemplify the more positive aspects of childhood. Nostalgia was a feeling that arose from sneakers and also became manifest in certain customizations. Having the ability to buy sneakers that were popular during participants' childhoods (most commonly the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s) was representative of simpler times. Adding upon the pattern of self-affirmation, Ken, an individual customizer, stated the following:

> *[Buying sneakers] started off as aspirational. Because when I was younger, I couldn't get all the shoes that I wanted. So it's like, you get to a certain level of success when you get older and it's kinda aspirational and nostalgic. Because now I can go back and buy all those shoes that I couldn't get when I was younger.*

For Ken, buying the sneakers that he could not afford during childhood was not an act of "catching up" but an enjoyable way to remember the past.

Participants also mentioned a feeling of nostalgia when customizing their sneakers. A common way to do this was to embed sneakers with cartoons from childhood, either to wear and gain recognition or as a way to stimulate sales. The four participants who engaged in this practice (Justin, Steven, Amber, and Charles) indicated that the designs were meant to spark nostalgia not only for themselves but also for others who grew up in the era in which that cartoon was prominent. For example, Amber customized her sneakers with designs from the popular 2000s-era cartoons SpongeBob SquarePants and The Boondocks in order to sell them to fellow consumers her age. Many of Justin's sneakers included prominent Black and Latino cartoons from the time that he was growing up. For Justin, this was important because it gave today's Black and Latino youth a form of representation to identify with. Steven also sold sneakers with cartoon designs, stating that his designs "gave that emotion off... everyone who knows that cartoon, they know what it was and they feel that feeling". For these participants, designs inspired by popular cartoons were meant to create a bond with others through shared nostalgia.

Cartoons were not the only signifiers of an earlier time period added to sneakers. Cody and Ken both recognized the inclusion of hip-hop designs as an evocative commemoration of the era when that music was released. For example, Ken added a Wu-Tang ice cream cone, a famous symbol of the popular early 1990s rap group Wu-Tang Clan, to one of his sneakers. Ken said that others would routinely see the shoes and tell him that they remembered that era when Wu-Tang was popular, which validated the shoes for Ken. Similarly, Cody stated that a pair of Nike's with a design reminiscent of Kanye West's 2004 album College Dropout made him think of his love for that album, which caused him to reflect upon how much life has changed since that time. Although largely benign, this pattern demonstrates that the ideological association between hip-hop and sneakers that began with Adidas and Run DMC in the 1980s is still apparent today (Wallace 2022).

Lastly, participants described the act of wearing and/or customizing sneakers as therapeutic. Steven, as outlined earlier, stated that he customized sneakers in a way that represented his emotions and what he was going through at the time that he made them. Thomas, referring to the act of customizing sneakers, said, "it helps me feel free as a person, and it relieves stress and gets me in my zone. It's like a form of meditation". It was not the sneakers themselves but the act of customizing that was a stress reliever for Thomas. For Brett, customizing shoes by hand with paint was preferred to online industry customization because the experience of working on a sneaker and seeing the process from start to finish was therapeutic. As elaborated in Wallace and Andrews (2022), multiple participants viewed the process of customizing as therapeutic, especially for disadvantaged inner-city youth. Darren viewed an interest in sneaker culture and fashion consumption as a way for inner-city youth to process, organize, and express their raw emotions in what he called a productive way. Wayne said that his passion for customizing sneakers kept him out of trouble and served as a way to "get a lot of kids off the street" to this day. This lends support to Lee's (1993) point about late capitalism's increasing emphasis on the experience of consuming rather than the materiality of what is consumed, as the experience of consuming and customizing had affective implications for participants regardless of what the final product became.

7. Conclusions

We have argued that sporting consumption should be understood as a contested terrain. Apparent in our three interrelated tensions—individual versus conformity, artistry versus business, and affect versus instrumentality—is that participant understandings of sneakers, themselves, and other sneaker consumers were constructed in explicit or implicit negotiation with the commercial sneaker industry, and more broadly, late capitalist consumer culture. Participants share a "common" culture (Willis 1990), linked by factors of class, race, space, and consumer interest. Nonetheless, they differ in the meanings they grant to customization and the values they attach to those meanings. Some viewed sneaker customization as an avenue to stick out amongst the monotony of mass culture, while others used it to fit in with what they saw around them. Some customizers were passionate about the artistic process and products of sneaker customization because of how it differed from the sneaker industry, while others justified the callous commodification of sneakers as a way to keep up with the industry. All participants—individual or conformist, artistic or entrepreneurial—had an affective attachment to sneakers that, for some, demonstrated a humble embrace of industry marketing, and for others, demonstrated a bold rejection of it.

While we have presented a narrative that focuses on creative individual agency within consumer culture, it is clear that underlying each comment and act of sneaker customization is the messy pursuit and expression of identity. The relationship between identity and commodities is often complex and paradoxical. Dittmar (1992) describes it as indicative of the idealism–materialism paradox of modern society: the way in which, on one hand, identity is perceived as being unique, autonomous, and not heavily influenced by people, society, and culture, yet on the other hand, identity is so clearly defined and moderated by the exchange, possession, and use of commodities (Lury 2011). Indeed, the contested terrain of sneaker consumption vividly exemplifies Miles's (1998) statement that "not only does consumerism structure our everyday lives, but it does so by offering us the illusion of consumer freedom when, at least to a certain extent, such freedoms are inevitably constructed and constrained" (p. 5). Nonetheless, sneaker customization demonstrates how contemporary consumers use symbolic creativity (Willis 1990) in their consumer practices to *speak back* to the culture industries. In doing so, they engage in sport-related consumption to assert themselves as authentic, if not contradictory, agents in the ongoing construction of meaning and identity in late capitalist consumer culture.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, B.T.W. and D.L.A.; methodology, B.T.W.; validation, B.T.W.; formal analysis, B.T.W. and D.L.A.; investigation, B.T.W.; resources, B.T.W.; data curation, B.T.W.; writing—original draft preparation, B.T.W.; writing—review and editing, B.T.W. and D.L.A.; supervision, D.L.A.; project administration, B.T.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review of University of Maryland—College Park (protocol code 1280632-1, 18 June 2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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