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Self-Concept Development through Fashion Products: A Case Study among Sneakerheads in Indonesia

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Abstract

Fashion in Indonesia, particularly among urban communities, plays a vital role in shaping self-identity and expressing personality. This trend includes sneakers, which hold significant symbolic value for fashion enthusiasts. Nike Air Jordan is not only a fashion product but also a cultural icon and symbol of sporting achievement. This study explores how Nike Air Jordan sneakers contribute to self-concept formation among members of the Indonesia Sneaker Team (IST) community. Using Symbolic Interaction Theory and the self-concept framework, qualitative data were collected through structured interviews with seven key informants—IST leaders, active members, collectors, and content creators—selected via purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted following Daymon and Holloway's framework. Findings indicate that Nike Air Jordan symbolizes identity, nostalgia, and personal values. The "Mind" element reveals meanings tied to basketball passion, admiration for Michael Jordan, and streetwear culture. The "Self" element shows increased self-confidence, a sense of "coolness," and unique style expression. The "Society" element describes how sneakerheads navigate personal identity in social contexts. Self-concept formation occurs through self-image (appearance and confidence), self-esteem (positive feedback from others), and ideal-self (inspiration from Michael Jordan's values). These insights contribute to consumer behavior literature on fashion products and provide strategic guidance for marketers targeting sneakerhead communities.

Keywords: Consumer behavior; Fashion products; Self-concept; Sneakerheads; Symbolic interaction theory

INTRODUCTION

Humans are inherently social beings whose minds develop throughout their entire lifespan. As social creatures, we cannot separate our lives from other human beings, and all aspects of culture, life, and social systems are formed through social interactions and conflicts of interest between individuals (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014). Social psychologist Roy Baumeister noted that, as individuals, we tend to pay attention to ourselves and collect information from both internal and external states and responses that affect our behavior (Phua & Kim, 2021).

Since the early stages of human growth—around ages four to six—we can define ourselves in terms of external observable characteristics such as hair color, height, or favorite activities (Rahman, Yasmin, & Haque, 2020). However, within a few years, these characteristics may change to more abstract, internal, or psychological qualities, including our competencies and skills (Kim & Choi, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2020). As we develop further, we become capable of defining ourselves by the unique and individual qualities of our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs rather than simply by observable external characteristics (Kwon & Shim, 2019).

Our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs can be influenced by how other people judge us. Judging is a natural instinct, and it is normal that we are all somewhat judgmental at times.

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People tend to be judged through what they wear, such as in job interviews where interviewees are evaluated based on their first appearance.

A notable incident occurred in August 2019 when a viral photo of a Gojek driver wearing Nike Air Jordan sneakers worth forty-three million rupiah became a phenomenon demonstrating how people judge others based on their attire. The photo, originally posted on Instagram by @wijaya_marcello, went viral after being reposted by @dramaojol.id, receiving about thirty thousand likes and six hundred comments. In the comments section, users described the driver as "fashionable," "hype," and "good looking," providing evidence that people judge others through their clothing as their first impression.

When others judged the driver positively for wearing Nike Air Jordan sneakers, they indirectly formed a sense of belief in the driver's mind that he is good and worthy. These positive beliefs form what we call self-esteem, defined as the positive or negative feelings we have about ourselves. Self-esteem influences how we judge ourselves and our self-perception, which relates to the concept of *self-concept*.

Self-concept is our personal knowledge of who we are, encompassing all thoughts and feelings about ourselves physically, personally, and socially. It includes our knowledge of how we behave, our capabilities, and our individual characteristics. People nowadays are drawn to buy, wear, and collect sneakers because they are known as scarce, unique items that can become a medium of *self-concept* for their owners.

The sneakers industry has evolved significantly from its origins. Originally called plimsolls, sneakers were worn for their comfort due to canvas and rubber sole materials. By 1917, the market for athletic sneakers grew larger with mass production, beginning with Converse's All-Star basketball shoe. Over time, lifestyle changes occurred where workers who were once obliged to wear formal attire began choosing casual dress, making sneakers their equivalent.

In Indonesia, unlike Western countries, the invasion of sneakers did not emerge from sports. The sneaker trend in Indonesia started between 2015 and 2016, originating through thriving music cultures like Hip hop and R&B influenced by figures like Kanye West. The collaboration between Kanye West and Adidas creating the Adidas Yeezy became the beginning of expanding sneaker trends in Indonesia.

Previous studies have highlighted how fashion items can serve as a medium for self-expression and *self-concept* formation. For instance, Kwon and Shim (2019) found that branded apparel enhances perceived social status and personal confidence, while Rahman et al. (2020) demonstrated that footwear brand associations significantly influence the self-image of urban youth in Southeast Asia. Similarly, Phua and Kim (2021) explored how luxury fashion consumption is linked to self-congruence in social identity construction. However, other studies, such as O'Cass and Siahtiri (2014), caution that the influence of fashion on *self-concept* may vary depending on cultural background, suggesting that the Indonesian context—with its blend of collectivist values and emerging individualistic tendencies—offers unique insights.

Nike Air Jordan became a major competitor to Adidas Yeezy in Indonesia. Air Jordan is a basketball sneaker brand created specifically for renowned NBA player Michael Jordan. The phenomenon began when Michael Jordan wore his first Nike Air Jordan I in black and red, which was threatened with sanctions by NBA Commissioner David Stern worth five thousand

US dollars each time Jordan wore the sneakers, as the NBA only allowed athletes to wear white-colored sneakers.

This controversy became phenomenal and a trending topic. The sneakers sold well and were pursued by many people, not only because of rule-breaking but also due to Michael Jordan's brilliant debut season in the NBA, averaging twenty-eight points per game and earning rookie of the year status. The strong character and greatness of Jordan combined with Nike's marketing strategy made Air Jordan enthusiasts increasingly popular.

The development of the sneakers industry in Indonesia led to the rise of "Sneakerheads"—individuals who collect sneakers with various or specific brands and possess extensive knowledge about sneakers. They consider sneakers as fashionable items for their lifestyle and follow cultural trends, especially in sneaker usage, typically collecting expensive, popular, or limited-edition sneakers from international brands.

The Indonesia Sneaker Team (IST) emerged as one of the most interesting sneakerhead communities in Jakarta. Originally formed in an online forum named Kaskus under the name Sneakers Addict, the name IST was adopted in 2011. With over seventy thousand members spread nationwide across Indonesian regions, Indonesia Sneaker Team is known as the biggest sneakerhead community in Indonesia.

This research differs from prior studies by focusing specifically on sneaker culture within Indonesia, analyzing how a globally iconic product—Nike Air Jordan—is locally reinterpreted within urban sneakerhead communities. Unlike earlier works that examined fashion broadly, this study narrows its lens to investigate how sneakers operate as symbols of personal identity, community belonging, and aspirational lifestyle in a rapidly modernizing yet tradition-rooted society.

This research aims to analyze how wearing Nike Air Jordan sneakers contributes to *self-concept* formation from the perspective of sneakerheads in the Indonesia Sneaker Team community. From a practical perspective, understanding how products such as sneakers influence consumers' *self-concept* offers valuable implications for marketers and product designers. For marketers, the findings can inform targeted branding strategies that align with consumers' identity aspirations and cultural values. For product designers, insights from this study can guide design choices—such as colorways, collaborations, and limited editions—that resonate with consumers' self-perceptions and reinforce brand loyalty. In sum, this research not only contributes to theoretical discussions on *self-concept* and consumer behavior but also provides actionable guidance for creating more culturally attuned and emotionally engaging products.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the constructivist paradigm to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of sneakerheads in the Indonesia Sneaker Team regarding wearing Nike Air Jordan sneakers to form their self-concept.

Primary data were collected through structured interviews with key informants selected based on specific criteria: must be a sneakerhead, active member of Indonesia Sneaker Team community for at least two years, own at least two pairs of original Nike Air Jordan sneakers, and be knowledgeable about sneakers, specifically Nike Air Jordan.

Seven informants were interviewed: the leader of Indonesia Sneaker Team, four active members, a top collector of Nike Air Jordan I sneakers in Indonesia, and a famous Nike Air Jordan content creator.

Secondary data were obtained from various internet articles about sneakers and media coverage of the Indonesia Sneaker Team community through official websites and social media platforms.

Data analysis followed Daymon and Holloway's framework: transcribing and listening, organizing data, coding and categorizing, interpreting data, and evaluating interpretation. Triangulation was used for data validity testing, specifically data triangulation using various data sources to ensure credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzes how wearing Nike Air Jordan sneakers contributes to self-concept formation among sneakerheads in the Indonesia Sneaker Team community through the lens of Symbolic Interaction Theory and self-concept components.

Informant Characteristics

Based on established criteria, seven key informants were selected representing different segments of the sneakerhead community. The informants include Rifqy Aditya Putra (IST leader Jakarta region), four active IST members (Alamsyah, Remon Nessa, Teki, Birmawan), one top collector (Priast), and one content creator (Buntario). All informants have been active in the community for more than two years and own multiple original Nike Air Jordan pairs.

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Informant	Age	Role	Years in IST	Air Jordan Collection
Rifqy Aditya Putra	28	IST Leader Jakarta	8 years	15+ pairs
Alamsyah	25	Active Member	4 years	12 pairs
Remon Nessa	32	Active Member/Rapper	6 years	18 pairs
Teki	30	Active Member/Content Creator	5 years	22 pairs
Birmawan	27	Active Member	3 years	8 pairs
Priast	35	Top Collector	10+ years	50+ pairs
Buntario	29	Content Creator	4 years	14 pairs

Source: Processed by researchers (2024)

Analysis Based on Symbolic Interaction Theory Elements
Mind Element: Meaning Construction

The Mind element analysis reveals how informants construct meanings around Nike Air Jordan through meaning, language, and thinking processes.

Meaning Construction Process

Informants assign multiple symbolic meanings to Nike Air Jordan sneakers. Following Mead's concept that humans act based on meanings they assign to objects, the analysis shows consistent patterns across informants:

Identity and Personal Representation: Putra explains that Air Jordan represents his identity: "Air Jordan means my identity. Air Jordan sneakers represent myself as someone who idolizes Michael Jordan and reflects my identity as someone who loves basketball, sneakers, rock hardcore music." This demonstrates how the product becomes a symbolic extension of personal identity.

Historical and Cultural Connection: Teki provides deeper meaning through historical connection: "Jordan is a brand that has history, so when wearing Air Jordan, it feels like walking

with Michael Jordan's history, we are inside Jordan's history. So we just walk with pride." This shows how material objects carry cultural narratives that users internalize.

The mathematical relationship between meaning assignment and identity formation can be expressed as:

Identity Formation = Personal Values × Historical Connection × Social Symbolism

Nostalgia and Emotional Bonding: Multiple informants mentioned nostalgic connections. Rifqy states: "Nostalgic feeling when you own a pair of Jordan, you see his career, his struggle, which indirectly can give you motivation from shoes." This demonstrates how products trigger emotional memories and aspirational connections.

Language as Non-Verbal Communication

Following Blumer's premise that meaning arises through social interaction using language (verbal and non-verbal symbols), informants use Nike Air Jordan as communication tools:

Visual Communication Strategy: Putra explains his approach: "I like mix and match but basically because I'm a sneaker person, I want to stand out, not me standing out but the shoes must stand out. When I wear Jordan, I like to play with colors, for example, if I wear Air Jordan bred (black-red), I must wear clothes that follow the shoes like black pants, red shirt."

Sneaker Contact Priority: Buntario describes a unique communication pattern: "From bottom first then up, not just for me, for everyone. We look at everyone from bottom first, then up. Sometimes people look from top to bottom, we look the opposite, bottom first. Even if from bottom it doesn't match, we won't continue looking up, just pass by."

This behavioral pattern represents a distinct subcultural communication code where footwear becomes the primary assessment criterion, inverting conventional social interaction patterns.

Thinking Process (Minding)

Mead's concept of "minding" - the reflective pause while mentally rehearsing next moves - is evident in informants' decision-making processes:

Anticipatory Socialization: Alamsyah describes his mental process: "When I'm meeting with Nike, I can't wear ordinary Nike shoes to meet Nike bosses. There's prestige influence, but it's not about prestige, it's about how to make a good first impression so they don't underestimate me."

Role-Taking Behavior: Nessa explains his mental preparation: "As a performer, sneakers besides clothes are absolutely important things to pay attention to. I really think about image or appearance. When I perform and people want to see me perform, I have to give the best, not just showing the work, but everything, the looks."

Self Element: Looking-Glass Self Formation

The Self element demonstrates how Air Jordan contributes to both the "I" (spontaneous self) and "me" (self as seen by others) components.

The "I" - Spontaneous Self Expression

Confidence and Coolness Enhancement: Alamsyah describes his spontaneous self-perception: "I am the coolest person in that room. Cool means my style is different from others, I know what I wear, I know the history, I know the story, so if someone wants to ask, I will definitely tell them about that shoe."

Identity Assertion: Nessa expresses his spontaneous identity formation: "Looking in the mirror, it's become a habit, and it's become routine, and I really can't imagine not wearing sneakers. Instead, I often imagine how it would be if I didn't wear sneakers, for example wearing dress shoes or other shoes, I can't imagine it. The point is it's already an identity, this is really me, and there's a sense of comfort, so more confident."

Curiosity and Knowledge Seeking: The "I" also manifests through intellectual curiosity. Alamsyah explains: "My passion is sneakers, I really like sneakers and I will spend hours researching them without getting bored, without eating and drinking, I can stay focused on working on it. I research every story behind shoes because I'm curious."

The "Me" - Social Self Recognition

Image Formation through Others' Reactions: Nessa achieved recognition as a Jordan enthusiast through social feedback: "After that, I mostly wear Nike and Jordan products, and when I wear Jordan clothes, my shoes must also be Jordan, my hat is Nike, until some people often say, you're like a mannequin doll in stores, or you're like a Nike employee. For me, that's an achievement, that's something that's not easy to have a non-negative image."

Professional Recognition: Teki gained recognition in his workplace: "At my office, many people like sneakers but most are still new. So many people ask me about Air Jordan, it's fun because when I'm tired of work, it's refreshing when someone wears Air Jordan and we talk about Air Jordan."

Society Element: Generalized and Particular Others

Generalized Others - Social Expectations

The analysis reveals different societal perceptions of Nike Air Jordan wearers. Priast, as a senior collector, explains societal categorization: "People can be seen from several types. If someone wears Jordan and is old, it means they are people who never bought Jordan when they were young or didn't have money, crying in stores wanting to buy Jordan but not allowed. But if nowadays, young people wear Air Jordan because of hype, because of lifestyle."

Contemporary Challenges: Nessa faces new challenges due to widespread adoption: "Now I actually have a separate challenge wearing Air Jordan. I have a new challenge that can make me... before maybe few people wore Air Jordan, so people would recognize me more 'oh Remon always wears Jordan', now everyone wears Air Jordan, almost everyone has and wears Air Jordan."

Particular Others - Significant Relationships

Family Support: Alamsyah receives positive family reactions: "The reaction is very positive, because they become curious too, I also tell stories and eventually they buy. My father wears Jordan, but he only likes the shoes but doesn't research like me. Positive comments are definitely cool, and maybe because I'm a bit chubby, when I wear Jordan basketball shoes, it's more suitable for my posture."

Professional Networks: Air Jordan facilitates professional networking. Alamsyah explains: "Jordan gives me networking and new relationships, that's the most important thing."

Self-Concept Formation Analysis

Based on the three components of self-concept (self-image, self-esteem, ideal-self), the analysis reveals how Nike Air Jordan contributes to each component:

Table 2. Self-Concept Components and Air Jordan Influence

Component	Sub-Component	Air Jordan Influence	Evidence from Informants
Self-Image	Perceptual	Enhanced appearance perception	"I feel cool, confident when wearing Air Jordan"
	Affective	Positive feelings about appearance	"Feeling proud and comfortable"
	Cognitive	Knowledge and beliefs about self	"I know what I wear, I know the history"
	Behavioral	Actions based on self-perception	"Mix and match according to sneakers"
Self-Esteem	Reaction of Others	Positive social feedback	"People say I look like Nike employee"
	Comparison	Favorable comparisons	"Different style from others"
	Social Roles	Professional recognition	"Known as Jordan expert at work"
	Identification	Group belonging	"Part of sneakerhead community"
Ideal-Self	Ideal Values	Hard work, authenticity	"Inspired by Michael Jordan's work ethic"

Component	Sub-Component	Air Jordan Influence	Evidence from Informants
	Standards of Behavior	Consistency, commitment	"Commitment to Jordan brand only"
	Ideal Abilities	Basketball skills, knowledge	"Want to play like Michael Jordan"

<div align="center">Source: Interview results processed by researchers (2024)</div>

Self-Image Formation

Perceptual Component: Informants consistently report enhanced self-perception when wearing Air Jordan. Birmawan explains: "If honestly I have Jordan Off-White, wow, I definitely feel amazing. That's one of the wishlists, Air Jordan Off-White white-red, especially Travis Scott, that definitely elevates appearance, elevates handsomeness, elevates everything."

Cognitive Component: The knowledge aspect is crucial for self-image formation. Teki states: "I feel confident, I know the value of the shoes I wear, and I feel these shoes are really cool, so I can wear any pants or shirt freely, I'm sure people will look at my shoes first compared to clothes or pants."

Behavioral Component: Self-image influences behavior patterns. Nessa describes his routine: "I avoid wearing sandals, going anywhere I don't want to wear sandals. The point is it's become an identity, this is really me, and there's a sense of comfort, so more confident."

Self-Esteem Development

Positive Reactions from Others: The formation of positive self-esteem occurs through social validation. Nessa received consistent positive feedback: "I always get positive feedback from wearing Jordan. From parents too, when I buy new Jordan shoes, they definitely say 'wow, bought new shoes again, nice', so like that."

Social Role Recognition: Professional recognition enhances self-esteem. Teki's expertise is acknowledged: "Many people at my office like sneakers, but most are still new. So many ask 'Mr. Teki, want to ask about Air Jordan', so it's fun."

The self-esteem formation process can be modeled as:

Self-Esteem = Σ(Positive Reactions + Social Recognition + Professional Acknowledgment)

Ideal-Self Achievement

Inspirational Values: Michael Jordan's character provides aspirational goals. Putra explains: "Jordan is someone who is really crazy, 'I work hard for that shit'. Inspirational yes, and the inspiration is like if you want to chase targets, you have to work hard. The point is Air Jordan shoes are more about motivation again."

Competitive Character Development: Teki adopts Jordan's competitive nature: "From Jordan's character, he has a very competitive character, his competitiveness on the court and off the court. I also have that in myself, I don't just have a competitive spirit on the court, but I also have a competitive spirit that I bring into work."

Consistency and Commitment: Nessa demonstrates long-term commitment inspired by Jordan: "He is very committed to something and that's what I emulate from him. For example, if he's injured, I have to recover, yes I have to recover, I'm in a game but I'm sick, yes I have to play, yes I play, the person is full of commitment."

Integration of Symbolic Interaction Theory and Self-Concept

The relationship between Symbolic Interaction Theory elements and self-concept components can be summarized as follows:

Table 3. Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

Symbolic Interaction Element	Self-Concept Component	Integration Process
Mind (Meaning)	Self-Image	Identity symbols create self-perception
Mind (Language)	Self-Image	Non-verbal communication through fashion
Mind (Thinking)	Self-Esteem	Anticipatory socialization influences confidence
Self (I)	Self-Image	Spontaneous expression through style
Self (Me)	Self-Esteem	Social recognition builds positive self-regard
Society (Generalized Others)	Ideal-Self	Social expectations shape aspirations
Society (Particular Others)	Self-Esteem	Significant others provide validation

Source: Adapted from Symbolic Interaction Theory (Mead, 1934) and Self-Concept Framework (Rogers, 1959), processed by researchers (2024)

Theoretical Implications

This study reveals that fashion products, specifically Nike Air Jordan sneakers, function as powerful symbolic tools in self-concept construction among enthusiast communities. The findings support and extend existing theories in several ways:

Symbolic Interaction Theory Extension: The research demonstrates how material objects carry complex symbolic meanings that individuals internalize and express through consumption behavior. The "sneaker contact then eye contact" phenomenon represents a subcultural inversion of conventional social interaction patterns.

Self-Concept Theory Application: The study shows how external objects can significantly influence all three components of self-concept simultaneously, with feedback loops between components strengthening overall self-concept formation.

Consumer Behavior Insights: The findings reveal that product meaning extends beyond functional attributes to encompass identity construction, social positioning, and aspirational goal-setting.

Practical Implications

Marketing Strategy Development: Understanding the deep symbolic meanings consumers attach to products can inform more effective marketing communications that resonate with target audiences' identity construction needs.

Community Building: Brands can leverage the social aspects of product consumption to build stronger communities around shared meanings and values.

Product Development: Recognizing the importance of historical narratives and cultural connections can guide product development and storytelling strategies.

The comprehensive analysis demonstrates that Nike Air Jordan sneakers serve as multifaceted tools for self-concept formation, operating through complex interactions between individual psychology, social dynamics, and cultural symbolism within the sneakerhead community.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that Nike Air Jordan sneakers play a crucial role in shaping self-concept among sneakerheads in the Indonesia Sneaker Team community by serving as powerful symbols of identity, nostalgia, personal values, and social connections, as interpreted through Symbolic Interaction Theory. The Mind element reveals that sneakerheads attach layered

meanings to Air Jordans, including emotional ties to Michael Jordan and cultural history; the Self element shows these sneakers boost confidence and create positive self-image through social recognition; and the Society element reflects the balance sneakerheads maintain between individual identity and social feedback. Self-concept formation emerges through enhanced self-image, elevated self-esteem from positive social interactions, and an ideal-self inspired by Michael Jordan's traits of hard work and commitment. This research deepens understanding of fashion consumer behavior by illustrating how symbolic product meanings contribute to identity construction, offering practical guidance for targeted marketing in sneaker culture. For future research, exploring how digital and social media platforms influence self-concept development among sneakerheads, especially across different Indonesian regions or age groups, could provide richer insights into evolving consumer identities and community dynamics in contemporary fashion cultures.

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