

**Our Grails: Conversations on Our Most Prized Sneakers**

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**Abstract**

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This thesis is a cultural, sociological study that examines identity through the pursuit and ownership of grails, sneakers considered to be most prized by an individual. Framed through conversations with 24 sneaker collectors, it identifies these cherished artifacts as the coalescence of individuality, life experience, and personal aspirations. Applying design as a complimentary storytelling medium, its aim is to capture what it means to know one's self through a sneaker.

***Our Grails: Conversations on  
Our Most Prized Sneakers***

## ***Defining a grail***

To properly frame this thesis, it's imperative to establish the concept of a grail. Although this exercise seems counterintuitive given the project gradually unravels this definition, a starting point must nevertheless be established as a general foundation. For our purposes, a grail is a sneaker that is most prized and typically hardest to obtain by an individual. Commonly marked by its rarity, a grail's status is often recognized by other sneaker collectors. Furthermore, a grail is characterized by some form of pursuit, often involving the investment of time and money. In sum, it is an artifact of devotion, requiring determination, patience, and luck.

## ***Table of Contents***

***03*** Introduction

***04*** Background / Related Works

***07*** Research

***15*** Discussion

***17*** Ideation & Design

***23*** Conclusion

***25*** Acknowledgements

***26*** Works Cited

## ***I. Introduction***

I spent my formative years in Portland, Oregon under the shadow of two gargantuan stylemakers. Eight minutes north of my childhood home lies Nike World Headquarters; twelve more minutes and you'd be staring at the Adidas U.S. Headquarters. Exploring their campuses from time to time, I bore witness to massive shrines in dedication to planet Earth's greatest athletes, entertainers, and influencers. In addition to these individuals, the objects that adorned their feet were given equal prominence by way of paintings, sculpture, and exhibits. It was here that sneakers made their impression on my mind; I was, and still am, inspired by these simple but powerful artifacts.

In the early stages of this thesis project, I was on a journey as a designer to create something new in the space I have been so fascinated by for most of my life. Early explorations centered on developing a thoughtful and environmentally conscious sneaker buying interface. Subsequently, my idea shifted to creating a website that visualizes the hype surrounding these shoes. But as I went along, these ideas pushed me further from that feeling I got when I was a kid: the pure appreciation and joy from admiring a pair of sneakers.

Sneakers, from a design standpoint, are in fact marvels of human ingenuity and innovation. Looking at the plethora of innovative colorways, technology and packaging, and everything in between, the physical and visual quality of today's sneakers are undeniable. However, I contend that their intangible qualities give sneakers much of their value. For one, sneakers are cultural artifacts, capturing the rich qualities of our environments and societies. Sneakers reflect the lives that we lead and common threads that bond us. Yet I felt the urge to look even closer, at a granular level, to dig deeper into the meaning of our sneakers. I began to ask, what do sneakers say about us as individuals?

By happenstance, a friend prompted me to share a story with him about my most coveted sneakers from childhood. The flood of memories and emotions I got from describing the significance of these shoes made evident the power of this simple object. Upon reflection, I found it interesting that the physical characteristics of the sneaker were not the first things I pictured in my head; rather, it was the act of recreating my own mythology that occupied my thoughts. It's hard to describe the feeling of gratification I got after this conversation. All that I can say was that it became unshakable. I thought for certain that other people would be willing to share stories about their own grails. What could we learn about ourselves from our most cherished sneakers? This question became the genesis of the thesis you are reading now.

To begin this journey, I planned out formal, structured interview sessions and attempted to recruit a diverse set of participants to discuss grails. Disseminating a screening survey

through online forums and word of mouth, I received approximately 90 respondents across North and South America who were interested in participating in this research. From these respondents, I selected 24 individuals to interview about their sneaker grails; within this group, some had already owned their grails, and some were still hunting. I asked participants why these sneakers were special to them, what actions they'd take (or had taken) to acquire them, and their attitudes towards wearing these prized objects. I also invited participants to speak on their most nostalgic memories around sneakers and how their loved ones perceive their passion for collecting. Organically, a variety of topics came up in the discourse that led us off script, but many of these moments contained the richest stories from all of my conversations. In addition to these talks, I asked participants to share both audio recordings describing their grails and pictures of their sneakers and the most meaningful pairs that they currently owned. Not only was this a basis to begin our interview sessions, but it enabled a further glimpse inside their world and their passion for sneakers. Insightful stories of community, family, fond moments in time, and personal aspirations repeatedly emerged during these dialogues. Participants' reflections on the self and what their pursuits symbolize were equally profound. As detailed in the following sections, these grails provide intriguing glimpses into the psyche of sneaker collectors.

## ***II. Background / Related Works***

This thesis is grounded in research and commentary relating the individuals' relationship to their possessions, including everyday objects like sneakers. In addition, research into the specific phenomenon of hype and contemporary sneaker cultures were scrutinized. Although these topics were used to refine the direction of research, they also helped explain subsequent observations later in the research. This project takes influence from a variety of disciplines not limited to design; much of this work was informed by cultural anthropology, ethnography, and to a further extent, sociology. By exploring these related fields, the thesis frames personal narratives in the broader social context to gain a greater understanding of these cultural artifacts (specifically our most prized ones). Investigating footwear beyond aesthetic, material, and technological qualities, it aims to analyze identity through the lens of a revered sneaker.

### ***Significance of Possessions***

One particular landmark study investigating the significance of everyday artifacts comes from *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, written in 1981. Developed by Eugene Halton and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, their work explores the symbolism behind human possessions. Specifically, the authors contend that these objects "express a very general aspect of their owners...they are in some ways the salient characteristics of the self, a global measure of one's own standing" (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton). While objects are commonly thought to gain traditional value from their rarity, monetary expense, and age, the authors explore the cultivation of meaning in terms of experience,

memories, individuality, and community (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton). Several aspects of this study were referenced in my own work exploring sneaker grails. In particular, similar questions employed in this study were used in the thesis to elicit a similar quality of responses from research participants. The work of this paper, however, was to specifically expound upon the author's inquiry of objects classified as "special" and to further investigate the intentional actions individuals undertake to acquire such objects.

It was equally important to reference the design of the products in the cultivation of meaning. Extending upon the concepts broached in *The Meaning of Things*, Gilal, Gilal, and Zhang discuss embedded symbolism as a design factor in their paper "Linking Product Design To Consumer Behavior." In particular, the authors explain why people gravitate towards this quality: "symbolically designed products [enable] them to communicate lifestyle, self-image, and personal values to their social circles over a purely utilitarian possession" (Gilal et. al). Early phases of this thesis project focused closely on this concept, examining footwear design from the industry perspective. The manner in which footwear designers explicitly develop meaning in the sneakers they craft was, at one point, a key area of interest. Upon more study and reflection, this idea became difficult to conceptualize due to the multiple stakeholders involved in creating, marketing, and selling a sneaker. Nonetheless, the frame of symbolic design provides useful comparison to this thesis, juxtaposing what designers communicate in their work versus the differing meanings that consumers ascribe to the same objects.

### ***Meaning Of Clothing / Footwear***

Margo Demello in *Feet & Footwear*, posits that "feet and footwear carry not only the weight of the body, but a great deal of symbolic, social, and cultural weight as well" (Demello). Demello goes on to claim that "buying shoes is a decision that is often fraught with significance, in part because shoes are seen as a reflection of the personality of the wearer" (Demello). It's not a stretch of the imagination to picture how shoes might communicate someone's fun and outgoing personality, for example. They might signal to peers that this individual has refined taste and fashion sense. Or, these sneakers could also convey their priorities in life, such as simplicity and comfort. It's logical to assume that these thoughts and behaviors drive decisions to purchase these objects. However In "The Meaning of Objects and the Meaning of Actions" by Colin Campbell, the authors make light of this apparent conflation of object meaning and the meaning behind actions associated with the object. Specifically, Campbell offers critique of the tendency of social scientists to presume "that the behaviour of individuals reflects decision-making and choice" in regard to acquiring objects of personal fashion (Campbell). Campbell goes on to point out that people aren't always in a position to make a choice about their fashion. These individuals could very well be constrained by their options, or they commonly enact impulsive purchasing behavior. In our case, however, this is not a presumption, as we define grails as objects of intentional pursuit. In fact, the actions and use behind sneakers is precisely the matter which this work aims to examine. Thus, it is the goal of

this thesis to go beyond Campbell's critique to directly determine from consumers the actual significance behind their actions when deciding to pursue these artifacts.

### ***Sneakers and Socialization***

In the early process of this study, I was repeatedly directed towards Malcolm Gladwell's report titled "The Coolhunt," written in 1997. In it, Gladwell chronicles grassroots vanguards who establish what is 'cool' in fashion, the corporate hunters who track them, and the mass consumers who are ultimately influenced by the cat-and-mouse game (Gladwell). Now fueled by social networking platforms and mega-influencers, the ability to influence what is cool has undoubtedly increased in amplitude.

I'd be remiss to ignore the general concept of hype that dominates the current sneaker landscape. Hype, defined here as the perception of scarcity or desirability that creates excessive demand over a product or service and includes its subsequent reverberations, undoubtedly influences the shoes that people decide to pursue. Hype, in the context of sneakers, is a major component of modern sneaker collecting. Nowadays, being a part of sneaker culture lies in (successfully) navigating the chaos of the hype. This phenomenon has tangible manifestations and acute consequences. On the industry side, businesses have tried to control the system as best they can. In 2019, distinguished retailer Bodega partnered with Shopify to build custom defense software to eliminate computer bots from spoiling their sneaker releases (Wakabayashi). Larger manufacturers have repeatedly employed methods to mitigate the exploitation of tier systems when it comes to high demand sneakers. Some of the more extreme examples of sneaker hype on the consumer side include Jeff Staple's sneaker collaboration with Nike that was released in 2005 and Air Jordan's Concord XI pre-Christmas release in 2011. With mobs and riots caused in Seattle, Atlanta, Oakland, and NYC, these moments live in sneaker hype infamy (Welty)(Woolf). Although Gladwell's is not an empirical research study into this topic, his inquiry does provide insight into key factors at play that explain, on a broad scale, the demand that is manufactured around specific sneakers. It must be acknowledged that these factors likely play a role in why certain individuals prize specific sneakers. Where hype doesn't influence consumer motivation, it can, at a minimum, impact the pursuit of the artifact and add to the difficulty of obtaining it. For the purposes of this paper, I will not go into the minutiae of this topic, but it remains of interest for future research.

### ***Sneakers and Identity***

Another related sneaker study I looked at was Jin Woo Choi and Minjeong Kim's "Sneakerhead Brand Community Netnography" as a starting point to further inform the culture and fandom attached to sneakers. Choi and Kim generally assert that in online sneaker communities, nostalgia and inequity are main drivers of sneaker purchases in tandem with loyalties to various sneaker communities (Choi and Kim). Another study, "I Wear, Therefore I Am: Investigating Sneakerhead Culture, Social Identity, and Brand Preference Among Men," explores similar themes of identity within sneaker culture.

Conducted in 2021, this study frames sneakerhead culture within the social identity theory, positing that individuals' individual identities in addition to loyalty to subcultures play into what collections they identify with (Matthews). Both of these works are insightful from an observational point of view to understand the thinking of sneaker collectors and the identities that they self characterize as.

To summarize, this thesis references studies in sociology and ethnography as a basis to understand the significance behind human possessions. Looking more to contemporary studies of fashion and sneakers, it follows a recent focus on community and identity for sneaker collectors. The work of this paper, however, specifically expounds upon sneakers classified as most prized to the individual and further investigates the intentional actions they undertake to acquire such objects.

### ***III. Research***

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study, including primary data collection. This study combined survey, photo & audio elicitation, and structured interviews to answer the research question and gain an understanding of the actions and motivations behind the pursuit of a grail sneaker.

Twenty-four individuals participated in this study. The ages of participants ranged from 20–58, with the average age being 28 years old. Seventy-five percent of participants self-identified as male and twenty-five percent self-identified as female. Participants were located across North America, with most hailing from the east and west coasts of the United States. Two additional participants hailed from Canada and Chile.

#### ***a. Survey & Screening***

To begin, I disseminated a screening survey to attract and recruit people for research on sneaker grails. Posting a description of my study through Facebook sneaker groups, sneakerhead groups on Reddit, and word of mouth, I received close to 90 responses from individuals across North America, and two responses from South America and the United Kingdom.

One of the primary criteria for selecting viable participants was the level of interest in sneakers and the diversity of interests stated by the collectors. Identifying a spectrum of individuals who had passion for various types of sneakers was necessary to obtain a rich collection of data. This selection process was undoubtedly subjective in nature, but I leaned on prior knowledge and intuition to identify suitable participants. Some of the limitations of this study were achieving a more balanced distribution of participants who self-identified as male and those who self-identified as female. Furthermore, an attempt

to recruit a diverse range of interests was made in earnest, but they largely reflect American metropolitan subcultures. Including more geographic diversity in addition to achieving greater gender representation is an area of interest for future iterations of this study.

***b. Photo and audio elicitation***

Photo elicitation was a method used to further step into and understand the participants' world. This method, in which photos were generated by the participants, was used to stimulate reflection and guide the early stages of the interview process. Participants were instructed to take pictures, in whatever style they saw fit, of their sneaker collections and most meaningful pairs that they owned (grail or not). An analysis could be made of the photos themselves, in part because they visually communicated the reverence individuals had for their shoes.





*Image 1: Several Sneaker Images Shared by Participants*

In addition, audio elicitation was equally valuable in preparing for the subsequent interviews. Not only did this allow participants to expound upon and clarify what their grail sneakers were, but it was also instrumental in making adjustments to the questions asked of participants to best facilitate conversation.

### *c. Structured Interview*

Almost all of the interviews were conducted remotely over a video conference platform. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 min; on average, a session ran for approximately 25 minutes. Audio and video were recorded with the participant's consent. Two interviews took place over the phone, but transcripts from those conversations were recorded in their entirety. As the interviews were conducted remotely, nearly all of the interview participants engaged in our conversations from their homes. This setting was conducive because the participants were in an environment of comfort, but participants were often in the presence of their own shoe collections. At times this facilitated the discussion, as participants frequently referred to specific sneakers that were within reach.

The following questions, among others, were posed during the interviews: (a) What's your earliest, or most vivid, memory about shoes or sneakers? (b) Why are your grail sneakers special to you? (c) What did it / do you think it would feel like to get this shoe? (d) Do you see a point in the future where you would acquire these shoes? (or when / how did you acquire these shoes?) (e) What are your thoughts around wearing your grails? (f) What does this brand mean to you? (g) Does anyone in our life know about your grails? (h) What do you think these grail shoes say about you?

The process to make sense and classify the information gathered in these interviews was an inductive analysis to reveal patterns about sneaker collectors' sentiments and

motivations behind the pursuit of their grail sneaker. Subsequently, themes were conceptualized and progressively refined over the course of several weeks to make sense of the meanings that participants held. The following sections are brief snapshots of the most enlightening concepts that were frequently observed in the process of these interviews. Though not exhaustive, it begins to paint the picture of why individuals cherish these grail sneakers. To outline every theme developed in this study would be tedious, and quite ordinary, so many of them were excluded from this paper. However, some of these minor themes return at other points of this paper to support larger observations.

### ***Community***

Grails were commonly referenced in connection to a particular location or community where an individual lived or worked. Certain silhouettes were staples of specific cities and neighborhoods, thereby becoming a staple of that individual's style. One man who is a New Balance sneaker collector, referenced the brand's collaboration with a Boston-based streetwear brands one reason he loved his grail:

*It's like a match made in heaven with Boston brands. It was made in the U.S., so that's a really big reason why I love the shoe. And the colors of the shoe—it has grays, tans, and blues. It's supposed to evoke the image of Cape Cod, like a nice summery day on the beach. And so it's really representative of Massachusetts, where I lived for 12 years.*

### ***Role Model***

Several individuals talked about an influential figure or role model that made them fond of a particular grail. Whether it was a family member wearing a certain shoe or a favorite athlete competing in them, the sight of someone admirable being associated with a particular piece of footwear made an indelible impression. Two participants referenced their fathers as primary influences on their love of sneakers and the ones they chose to collect:

*Vans are huge and a huge part of Southern California culture. My dad grew up in Southern California so he kind of brought that in for me. He grew up right by where they had the first store. So there's a point of I think nostalgia for him to wear Vans and have his kids exposed to that. So yeah, that has kind of been why I stuck on to Vans, like the type of sneakers that I choose to collect and wear over others.*

Another participant went on to say about his grail sneaker:

For me, [it] Definitely has to do with my dad. You know, he played basketball. So my earliest memory is, he had a [Air Jordan] Concord 11 used to just always be around the house. At the time, I was probably like five or six. I would just slip my little foot in his big Concord. That was my favorite thing to do.

Interestingly enough, many role models were noted by the participants to be trailblazers in their respective fields when it came to footwear. One participant cited a prominent designer and their contributions to streetwear:

*I also really liked Kiko Kostadinov—like actual ready to wear. And this was just all of it together. They're like the best kind of fashion, running shoe crossover in terms of style, color, wear ability—taking elements of running shoes, but synthesizing them together in interesting ways. He was doing this before anybody else was.*

One other participant had this to say about his favorite athlete and his role in popularizing low top basketball sneakers:

*I was just always a Kobe [Bryant] fan growing up, and I really loved when he made the decision to put out low tops and wanted to play in low tops. And then throughout my playing career, I always ended up playing in low tops. I didn't like playing in high tops and so that kind of drove me towards the Kobe line. I always appreciated it, and so I liked the silhouettes, they always performed really well. And so that was a big thing for me. So I liked what that stood for.*

### ***Outlier / Individuality***

Standing out was a repeated theme, with each person's grail uniquely expressing this facet of their identity. Not only did some individuals want to stand out from the crowd, but they also wanted to differentiate themselves amongst their own sneaker subcultures.

*I probably get nods from like sneakerheads walking around SoHo from the shoes, but then also they would be just cool to me because I don't really feel part of that culture that much. I don't do [Nike] SB's. I don't do Jordans. I'm not queuing up outside the Nike store on Broadway. I'm not on Stock X. I'm not flipping, I'm not a reseller. I'm not into that market at all.*

The interest and drive to get these shoes also serves as a badge of distinction to some because it represents refined taste or level of determination. Each of these qualities reflect positive traits that one values about themselves.

*I just didn't want to be a sneakerhead that just has a bunch of Jordan 1's or a bunch of [Nike] Dunks or just a bunch of basic shoes. I wanted to stand out a little more. When people look at my feet, [they] are like, 'Oh damn, those are crazy. Like those are nice, we don't see those often.'*

Concurrently, multiple people brought up subtlety, in particular the effortless ability to distinguish themselves by their shoes. Several respondents self-described themselves as introverts, and the grail sneaker was a way to break that mold in some respects:

*I'm not a super flashy person. So I think that's what really caught my eye about those because there's still a little bit of color and like personality to the shoe. But they're still pretty stealthy.*

### ***Thrill and Joy***

When asked what it might feel like to get a grail (or what it did feel like for those who got it), a range of emotions from disbelief to adrenaline were expressed. Often individuals described the feeling of getting a grail as a rush; one even likened the search to the feeling when gambling. One participant described what finally getting his grail would feel like:

*I would be so ecstatic. With old shoes like this, there's kind of an added thrill to it because this is a pair of shoes that somebody had to buy, and then keep in good condition, and then find again to sell. So it's just an insane thrill because it's like: A—I can't believe I finally tracked this down. B—I'm so excited to share this with people, you know, to sort of understand how much the stars truly had to align for me to get this pair of shoes. And then C— I'm just excited to get them in hand and feel them and touch them and wear them. But I think the immediate sensation is just the thrill of like, 'oh my god, I can't believe this is finally happening.'*

After finally getting his grail after a five year journey, another sneaker collector described what it felt like once the high subsided:

*I was stoked. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is it. This is amazing. I did it.' It took five years, I almost cried man. I can't believe it. I stared at them at home for a solid hour. I was just checking them all out and everything. And then it was weird. I got low key depressed because part of me felt like maybe I was just collecting because it was leading up to that moment of someday when I get this shoe, that'll be it. And I'll call it a day. But you know, I had only been collecting for five or six years in total when I got that shoe. And then I was like, 'Am I done?' This was my whole thing and part of being a sneakerhead is chasing your grail. So when you get it, it's like: 'Is that it?' You kind of know no other shoe that you get is going to give you the sheer amount of joy that you got when you got your grail.*



*Image 2: Participant's grail, the Nike SB Dunk High 'Send Help'*

### ***Authenticity***

Several individuals personified their grails as embodiments of their identities. Specifically, multiple people referred to their grail as “them.” Grails reflected a sense of authenticity that surpassed all other articles of clothing. A postgraduate student described their running shoe grail, the Reebok Floatride Run Fast Pro, like so:

*If it was in a fight, it chose a single weapon against an army and [it's like]: 'I think I can get this done.' It's this kid that gets out there with what seems to be very little, but just has the optimal amount of energy in order to get through whatever it's facing and gets it done. I would like to think I am that.*



*Image 3: Participant's grail, the Reebok Floatride Run Fast Pro*

Another man described his grail sneaker in the context of his friend group:

*It was like feeling different. Our crew wore the Jordan 1. Everyone was wearing [that] but it didn't sit right with me. I need to find my own identity. I need to find my own style.*

For a few participants, authenticity signified having a genuine interest in a particular sneaker or aspect of the culture. More specifically, it conveyed that the individual wasn't a collector solely for the hype. One man described the community surrounding the Nike sub-brand ACG as one that represents authenticity in the sneaker landscape:

*ACG is very special in the landscape of major sportswear brands, because I think it has an authentic following that is healthily skeptical of the brand. You know, they're not excited about everything. They want to see products that they feel acknowledges history and provides them utility. They don't want to just see whatever. Not to diss any fan base here, because I love [and] I own [Adidas] Yeezys, but I feel like the Yeezy fan base is much more interested in anything that'll come out. They're happy to get pumped about 50 different 350 v2 colorways, which is not a bad thing I don't think. But I think the ACG community is very healthily skeptical, very organic.*

### ***Achievement***

Grails seemingly marked a level of personal achievement for a noticeable amount of participants. Some of these goals were tangible milestones, and others were symbolic in nature. Several mentioned that finally getting a grail was the culmination of hard work and determination. In addition, achievement was also conceptualized as growth and movement to a new life stage, as one woman describes here:

Everyone at school was always talking about: 'That person has fake [Jordans]!' So I felt kind of safe [getting them]. But what it meant for me was jumping out of not being able to afford something. Because that was literally my first big purchase when I was younger.

Surprisingly, a few individuals expressed that a grail was symbolic of career aspirations, like this collegiate student-athlete whose grail was a New Balance track & field spike:

*I won state in the new balance [track] spikes. I don't know, they have a special attraction to me. And then me trying to go pro, New Balance has always been a dream company to sign with. So New Balance is a little special that way.*

In a similar way, to obtain a grail was described as reaching a pinnacle. One fashion boutique owner, building her own collection of luxury goods, described the acquisition of her grail, a Moschino sneaker:

*I came up with a list of all the designers I actually cared about, and I've just like slowly been checking those off. So Moschino, I want to say those were kind of later on the list. Because I started off with brands like Gucci and Louis [Vuitton]. So it was pretty special to cross off that brand.*

### ***Acceptance***

Acceptance was a common concept that individuals described in connection with specific grail pairs. Individuals commonly talked about this in the context of childhood and fitting in with their peers, but it even extended in adulthood and being welcomed in certain communities. One military veteran described the role Nike played in his love of his grail sneakers:

*[Nike's] maxim's is "everybody's an athlete with a little star on it: 'If you have a body, you're an athlete.' And it's not just a thing. I'm a disabled veteran. I am never going to be a runner again. Okay? I go below 11 minute miles and I collapse, lung damage. I got a disabled leg, ain't even gonna get to 11 minute miles probably ever again. But there's stuff for me at the company.*

### ***Conversations about Grails***

Many relayed that they have not explicitly expressed the significance of their grail shoe to the people closest in their lives. These participants perceived friends and family to be apathetic or simply unable to understand the significance or magnitude behind a grail sneaker if they were to tell them. Nevertheless, there were people who felt like the ownership of such a sneaker communicated in a way the individual would not.

My family and my girlfriend always tell me that I keep to myself a lot. So I feel like sharing more things like [my grail]—I feel like that gets to know me better without trying so hard.'



*Image 4: Participant's grail, the Nike x sacai LDV Waffle*

Another woman said her grails express her interests and aspects of her identity:

*I think they express. You know, I have these varied interests. And I'm not cookie-cutter or [a] follower in terms of trends. I am going to pursue what I enjoy and what excites me or what I find interesting, and do it in my own way.*

## ***IV. Discussion***

The previous sections paint a small, albeit rich, portrait of the significance of the grails in these individuals' lives. Working through these conversations, these were the most salient insights that were developed from the interviews:

### ***Coalescence of Identity***

More than all others, a grail sneaker represents an individual's interests beyond sneakers, personality traits, and core values. A grail is symbolic of what one has to offer to the world. Arguably, the most striking aspect of these dialogues was how closely individuals did perceive their grails to symbolize the convergence of their identities. Many deemed their grail to be an authentic representation of them and who they want to be. A grail, and to a larger extent the brand of that particular sneaker, also represents values and attitudes that one is proud to outwardly project. Feelings of loyalty, compassion, grit, and pride come from owning and wearing these shoes. Depending on the grail sneaker, owning it

signifies service to the culture that garners respect within the larger community of sneakerheads. Each of these qualities reflect positive traits that one values about themselves.

### ***Symbol of Aspiration***

A grail sneaker represents a type of journey, and is symbolic of the achievement of the self and others. A grail is a reminder, or even motivation, to obtain some higher level of achievement. It often meant closing a circle or completing the personal mythology around a particular sneaker. Like a chapter being closed, checking something off of a to-do list, or even completing a level in a video game, owning a grail symbolized triumph and the culmination of a long voyage. On a deeper level, there appeared to be a real sense of a grail journey mimicking a much personal life journey. A plethora of emotions accompanied the thought of finally capturing a grail, but excitement and joy were the feelings that individuals described most commonly. After the initial wave of exhilaration wore off, some expressed a sense of appreciation they would feel when finally being able to reclaim a piece of their history.

### ***Instrument of communication***

A grail serves as a mouthpiece. It subtly expresses to others aspects of an individual that are often unsaid. Throughout these conversations, it was apparent that the concept of a grail was one of profound personal meaning. Even though participants shared an extraordinary amount about their grails in the context of these interviews, they didn't typically share the significance of these artifacts with the people in their lives. Nevertheless, the grail sneaker communicated some of the qualities and interests that participants valued most about themselves.

### ***Redefining a grail***

An understated goal of this research was to reframe the motivations of the individuals that industry designs for. While symbolically designed products carry a certain attraction, the true value of the object is uniquely perceived by the individual. There are many descriptions of what a grail is, but for these individuals a grail represents an undefinable experience. A grail transcended the physical object and became a symbol and a keepsake. To some, their grail marks the moment of an exciting adventure. For others, the love of a particular sneaker allowed them to connect with a community of people with similar interests. To a further extent, these same sneakers function as a gateway for acceptance and a source of inspiration. Across all of these stories, the shoe is the capsule that houses these rich timestamps.

Surprisingly, Many of these grail sneakers were not particularly rare or expensive. In fact some participants have the ability to easily obtain their grail sneakers, or in other cases, the individual owned multiple pairs of the shoe. A grail here was much more about the

memories and emotions associated with the artifact rather than the pursuit involved in acquiring it. Nevertheless, it's clear that this distinction does not make it any less of a grail in the eyes of the individual.

### *Putting grails in perspective*

This study serves a reminder to the level in which consumers ascribe meaning to these products. These sneakers have been assigned a certain value based on their constituent parts and materials, and suggested value ascribed to them by the manufacturer, but the true significance and worth of the sneaker lies with the consumer who wants to obtain it. Along the lines of obtaining a grail, several of these individuals admit they may never own their most prized sneakers. It's a sad truth indeed, but nevertheless it does not change the love of the artifact. Consequently, this phenomenon suggests that the idea of the sneaker holds an undeniable degree of importance. On one level, this thesis demonstrates to a certain degree in which a sneaker can hold value without a physical embodiment.

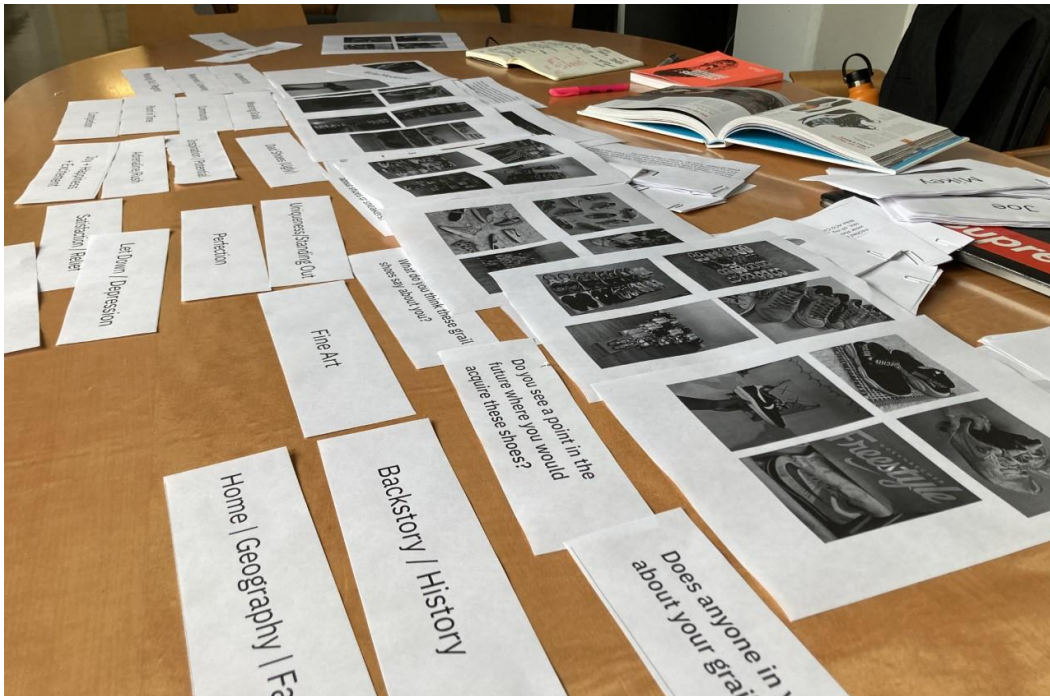
## *V. Ideation and Design*

### *Publication Overview*

With such a rich collection of stories, my direction now focused on sharing these narratives in a compelling way. I landed on creating a print publication consisting of stories and excerpts from my interviews; my aim was to create an artifact that embodies the journey a sneakerhead embarks on to find their grail sneakers. I gravitated towards making a book, primarily because of its tactile form. Sneaker culture is becoming less about the physical object, so this is a direct response to that observation. Furthermore, the book (at least our traditional conception of a physical book) is quite susceptible to change and aging but still holds immense value—like a sneaker. Finally, publication design was unfamiliar territory and a type of design that was new to me. My curiosity to explore these spaces is one of my core motivations as a designer, so the opportunity to do that here was something I looked forward to.

When embarking on this process, I can only describe it as a constant dialogue between myself and the interview transcripts. As I scoured through the written records of my conversations, it became important for me to identify the portions that captured both a portrait of the individual and their grail journey. This content was constantly being refined as I repeatedly went back to the original source for clarification, context, and to mine for previously overlooked material. Concurrently, I found it necessary to include imagery that evoked the scenes that sneaker collectors discussed in our discussions. Adding to pictures that participants already shared, I was curating a set of images that could be used throughout the publication.

Soon after the curation process came organization. I began to plan the layout of the book by creating a series of page maps. As I refined the content, these page maps became more detailed and the structure became clearer with each iteration. At the conclusion of this phase, I decided to organize this publication by vignettes of each individual I interviewed. I believed this expressed each individuals' grain story while best capturing the spectrum of topics covered during the interviews. Afterwards, I turned my attention to material decisions, refining the final form, and final production.



*Image 5: Initial Publication Planning Process*

**Our Grails** Sneaker  
Grails

Cover	Blank	Table of Contents	Blank	Introduction	Chapter 1: The Grail	Chapter 2: The Grail	Chapter 3: The Grail	Chapter 4: The Grail	Chapter 5: The Grail	Chapter 6: The Grail	Chapter 7: The Grail	Chapter 8: The Grail	Chapter 9: The Grail	Chapter 10: The Grail	Chapter 11: The Grail	Chapter 12: The Grail	Chapter 13: The Grail	Chapter 14: The Grail	Chapter 15: The Grail																																																																																																																																																																																											
Chapter 1: The Grail	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	119	120	121	122	123	124	125	126	127	128	129	130	131	132	133	134	135	136	137	138	139	140	141	142	143	144	145	146	147	148	149	150	151	152	153	154	155	156	157	158	159	160	161	162	163	164	165	166	167	168	169	170	171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181	182	183	184	185	186	187	188	189	190	191	192	193	194	195	196	197	198	199	200	201	202	203	204	205	206	207	208	209	210	211	212	213	214	215	216	217	218	219	220	221

Image 6: Page Map of Publication

**Final Publication: Our Grails**

The culmination of this effort was a 221-page book, titled *Our Grails*. Divided into four chapters, each section highlights an overarching theme that emerged from these conversations. Descriptions and pictures of each grail, excerpts and short stories,, imagery of specific scenes and environments referenced in conversation, and photographs taken from participants combine to create a collection of rich, introspective portraits.

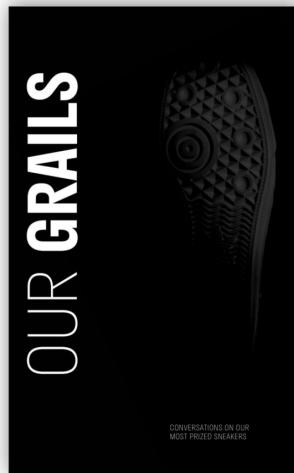
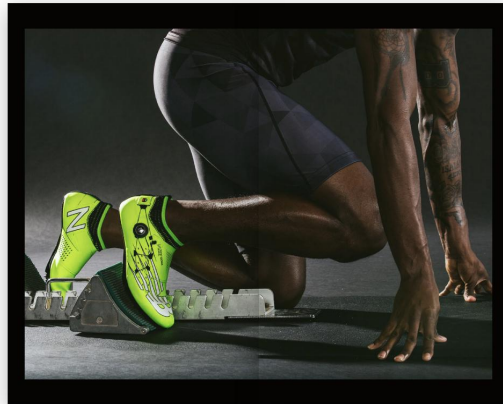
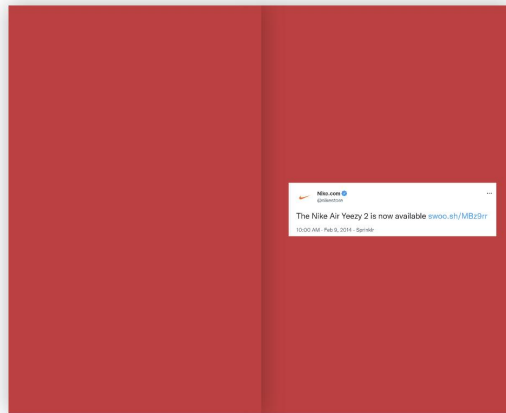


Image 7: Cover of Our Grails Book



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*Image 8: Spreads of Our Grails*



## *Installation*

The University of Washington gives graduates the opportunity to display their work in the Henry Art Gallery at the conclusion of the year—during this time of writing, my installation is currently being featured here. Some of the highlights of this installation include the *Our Grails* publication, artwork made of sneakers, shoeboxes representing the 24 people interviewed for the thesis, and an audio station featuring voice recordings of participants. Each of these stations gives visitors the opportunity to consume individual stories and interact with the concept of a grail in a variety of ways.





Image 10: *Our Grails Installation at The Henry Art Gallery*

## VI. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis set out to explore identity through the lens of grail sneakers. Using studies in sociology and ethnography that explore the significance behind our possessions, this work aimed to expound upon more current studies in fashion and investigate the actions sneaker collectors take to obtain their most prized pairs. A qualitative research approach which included primary data collection helped answer the

research question and gain an understanding of the actions and motivations behind the pursuit of a grail sneaker. Gaining insights through interviews with 24 sneaker collectors, it identifies these cherished artifacts as the coalescence of individual identity, life experience, and aspirations. Furthermore, grail sneakers served as rich tools of interpersonal communication.

On a personal note, The process of developing this thesis and creating the resulting publication was invigorating and a great source of inspiration. It was also one of the biggest challenges I've ever faced as a designer. Through and through, I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to put this together and to meet some wonderful individuals along the way. I found that this research and design process elicited so much passion and joy from genuine sneaker enthusiasts. The exercise of merely talking about grails was a profound experience for everyone involved. My hope is that designers with the ability and influence in the sneaker communities find similar ways to provoke these feelings of joy, catharsis, and authenticity in a space becoming dominated by the hype around sneakers and the increasing immateriality of the culture.

Looking ahead, I'd like to extend the work of *Our Grails*, specifically editing the publication further and developing a refined second version. My goal is to recreate this book for wider distribution, including giving a copy to each of the research participants. Not all of them will get their grail, but at least they can have this book as a keepsake in place of it. Lastly, I hope this work inspires anyone reading this to consider a grail in their own life. It might not be a sneaker, but I would encourage reflection on what object holds a similar place in their daily life. If it's not already apparent, there's an incredible wealth of knowledge to learn about the self through one's grail.

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