

**The Rhetoric of Hype:
New Modes of Persuasion in the “Shoe Game”**

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Kenneth Burke (1966) describes humans as a “symbol-using animal” and helps to describe the way symbolic language influences our perception of reality (p. 2). His rhetorical theories of human motivation describe how symbols help humans establish groups and cultures that identify with one another. Rhetoricians following his symbolic perspective have argued that the interpretation of symbols is subjective to the interpreter. Individuals use their distinct interpretations of images and words to express complex meanings through a constant process of rhetorical negotiation. This perspective is understood as symbolic determinism and it suggests that the use of advanced symbols allows humans to communicate meanings that exceed the representation of an object itself. Early civilizations are often associated with pyramids, temples, and other iconic structures that exceeded architecture and implied larger symbolic questions about astrology and theology. Even today, modern nations are distinguished by flags and their citizens continue to gather at monuments and parks to commemorate their history and beliefs. Throughout this ancient and contemporary evolution of symbols, rhetoricians have considered how objects evolve to gain meaning. In our modern culture the unique marketing and commodification of sneakers demonstrates this transition from objects of material use – footwear – to symbols of distinction – valued collectors’ items.

Sneakers are symbolic objects that humans put on to identify themselves. They are explicitly identified with an activity – tennis, basketball, boating, etc. Conscious or not, the choice to wear a particular pair of sneakers associates the customer with a broader set of symbols. Sneakers have been marketed with multimillion-dollar athletic endorsements for decades. However, more recently, with expanding social media influence and the commercial success of hip hop and extreme sports, sneakers have expanded their symbolic representations

beyond activities. No longer categorized by sport or activity, sneakers are now increasingly associated with lifestyle and culture. Sneakers have become significant rhetorical artifacts. An analysis of the marketing of these commodities illustrates how language devices and strategies of persuasion are used to manufacture *hype*.

What is all the hype?

The expansion of rhetorical appeals associated with sneaker marketing has fueled a boom in sneaker sales. “The international sneaker market has grown by more than 40% since 2004, to an estimated \$55 billion” (Weinswig, 2016, para. 2). As the market has grown, the economy of sneaker sales has revolutionized sales appeals associated with urgency and exclusion. Where previously customers could purchase a pair of shoes in the same design as that of their favorite player in a particular sport, sneakers are now released throughout the season, with multiple player collaborations and limited releases at select locations. As demand has increased, supply has been distributed to maximize demand. The limited availability of a sneaker creates a value determinism that increases its meaning for consumers. The pre-release anticipation and waitlist demand for a limited-release sneaker drives up value itself. The object representation of the sneaker is exceeded by the hype it is associated with.

A number of companies have found success in decreasing production runs and increasing the hype or demand associated with the object. Initially, this model of marketing was adapted by streetwear brands limited edition cotton t-shirts, screen printed by the hand, selling for triple digits. The bespoke artistic production and limited quantities drove price and demand for early streetwear companies like Bathing Ape, Obey, Stüssy, Supreme, and others. However, companies like Nike have been quick to adopt a similar marketing strategy regularly hyping a

shoe release or “sneaker drop” as a consumer media event. Shoe collectors, also known as “sneakerheads,” are often lined up outside of stores or waiting in digital queues to get a pair. Many eager to acquire in-demand releases will often pay an exorbitant seller’s fee to skip the line. The eagerness to acquire – both for those in line and those willing to pay a hiked price – represents a new buyer identity, “the hypebeast,” or “the nickname given to the consumers hungry for whatever hyped streetwear is released in a given week” (Cochrane, 2017, para. 2).

The hypebeast carries a distinct persuasive power to contribute to the symbolic demand for sneakers. By examining the rhetoric of hype that surrounds the sneaker economy we can learn how the values and symbols associated with sneakers have evolved. Sneaker manufacturers, everyday sneaker consumers, and “sneakerheads,” are influenced by this hype. I contend that hype is created by the strategic language devices that create urgency and exclusivity. I will examine the reviews of self-identified hypebeasts to explain how hypebeasts imbue sneakers with symbolic meaning. It is worth considering how sneakers have exceeded their use for a sport or activity and evolved to represent lifestyle. A rhetorical analysis of reviewers’ sneaker descriptions can help to illustrate how the value of a sneaker exceeds its initial cost based on its symbolic uniqueness. Finally, an analysis of several hypebeasts’ sneaker reviews reveals how sneakerheads act as *entrepreneurial prosumers* or persuasive sales agents to frame the symbolic value of a sneaker and drive up its acquisition value.

Value the Hype

According to Hypebeast reviewer Reggie Casual describes ‘hypebeasts’ as valuing apparel objects that are limited, rare, and in-demand (2017). The limited, rare, and in-demand descriptors are examples of what Burke (1966) describes as “terministic screens.” He argues that

language comes to represent values that select and deflect the motives for meaning. Other rhetoricians have taken up the concept of terministic screens, describing them as, “terms through which humans perceive the world, and that direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others” (Stob, 2008, p. 131). An example of a terministic screen in sneaker marketing might be a sales message that emphasizes Nike’s Kobe X Fundamentals sneaker release as a must-have rarity associated with visual distinction and exclusivity rather than accessibility and affordability. From functional to artistic, the terministic screens associated with sneaker marketing have shifted to represent the urgency and exclusivity of sneaker sales and the hype economy.

For hypebeasts like Reggie Casual (2017), the “sneaker drop” provides an opportunity to buy low and sell high. The new language of sneaker marketing encourages buyers to collect, gain appreciation, and resell. This is not without reason. The shoe economy promises a steady return. There is now a booming resell marketplace for sneakerheads. One leading ecommerce site with a focus on sneaker sales, StockX, has seen over 10 million dollars in lifetime sales with 50% of that sales growth occurring in 2020. According to Cowen Equity Research, the average consumer brand experienced a 9% decline associated with Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in March 2020 (Kernan, Chen, Zuber, and Orr, 2020). During this same month, StockX users accelerated returns with double-digit gains (Wade, 2020). In this sense, the shift in marketing language and the use of economic terministic screens helps buyers justify high cost purchases with little risk. A StockX report notes that a pair of Ferris Bueller edition Nike SB Dunks skyrocketed 50% after Kylie Jenner wore them on Instagram, and sales of Jordan brand shoes rose more than 40% during ESPN’s Michael Jordan docuseries “The Last Dance” (Einhorn,

2020). The hype associated with a release and the subsequent attention to market price has created a new approach to marketing sneaker sales.

Hypebeasts use a new language of economic terministic screens and hip-hop vernacular as a criterion for purchasing, promoting, and reselling a sneaker. The development and utilization of this symbolic language of value is backed with a host of hype terms and screens. A new language helps to create symbolic associations between hypebeasts who communicate and disseminate reviews across social media accounts, YouTube channels, and magazines and web publications. Burke and the symbolic determinists are right to describe how these shared terministic screens craft identity construction. Colloquial terms such as hyped, copped, and flipped underscore the emphasis of the hypebeasts' trade: promoting, acquiring, and re-selling sneakers for profit. These terms create a vernacular that allows identification and community amongst sneakerheads. If this population seems obscure, it should be noted that StockX is the fourth most popular website for Gen Z males and claims to have a 69% market penetration amongst Gen Z sneakerheads (Einhorn, 2020).

Hyping the Value

Those outside of the hypebeast community apply a different set of values when purchasing their footwear. These choices are represented by their own language choices and terministic screens. Due to the niche specificity of the sneaker market and its insider vernacular, many remain unaware of the appeal and might struggle to understand the triple digit appraisals of sneakers. It is the rhetorical devices and terministic screens that create a separation of identity and characterize the values of hype integral to the hypebeast. If all shoe companies used the same terministic screens to market their products, the identity of the hypebeast would cease to

exist. If all consumers valued shoes simply as utilitarian objects, then hypebeasts would be unable to resell sneakers for profit and would be unable to sustain their economy. It is the persuasive use of language, and the values imbued within it, that reveals the rhetoric of hype that energizes the lifestyle marketing of sneakers. The new language of hype used by sneakerheads and marketers functions to separate *prosumers* from consumers. Whereas prosumers buy professionally to add value and gain equity, consumers assess the value of sneakers without the same economic criteria for analyzing their footwear purchases (Tapscott and Williams, 2006).

The choice to identify as a hypebeast turns buyers into investors. As prosumers, hypebeasts describe the challenge to make “stark choices” in a volatile economy. In an interview, a hypebeast described how reading the sneaker market is a unique challenge:

(T)he only information a buyer has regarding a particular pair of sneakers on the secondary market is the feedback provided by others... The buyer doesn't really know if the price is artificially inflated, on a downward swing, or if the model is “in-demand” (Tomaszewski, 2014, para. 12).

The social currency derived from hype rises and falls like the stock market but with direct reference to the latest social and cultural trends. Successful investors are not only gaining material wealth, they are creating a portfolio that represents their cultural currency – their *coolness*. Hypebeast Reggie Casual (2017, para. 4) describes this as an investment strategy, with collectors valuing popular footwear brands and labels that “enhance their personal profile.”

While hypebeasts are themselves exclusive, they depend on the population of general consumers to value the hype that sustains the beast. Burke (1945) describes how this relation between identification and persuasion is a constant symbolic exchange. He describes how a “speaker

persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications” and notes that an “act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests” (p. 46). Hypebeasts use stylistic identifications like a particular limited edition or rare release to communicate associations with lifestyles of success and exclusivity. The values that determine success and exclusivity in the sneaker trade are not only determined by their initial marketing but also their reselling and commodification. Where previously marketers were tasked with persuading buyers, the rise of the hypebeasts illustrates a market flip. Now marketers are tasked with advertising urgency and exclusivity while hypebeasts and social media influencers take on the work of persuading audiences to buy into the hype and value sneakers as a lifestyle symbol.

This marketing flip could only have occurred with an organic audience – no single brand created the strategy of marketing that gave rise to hypebeasts. Instead, hype emerges when the symbolic meaning of an object exceeds its material form. When sneakers came to represent more than footwear and created lifestyle identifications, new symbolic rhetorical appeals emerged. One hypebeast described the culture as energized by an “obsession over the ‘right’ item” that determines who gets to “be part of the tribe” (Cochrane, 2017, para. 4). The organic identification between hypebeasts and popular consumers has created new symbolic representations and influenced the aesthetics of lifestyle branding in new ways.

Conclusion

Like a man’s transition to wolf under the full moon, Kenneth Burke’s (1945) notion of identification illuminated an analysis of how hypebeasts evolve from consumers to prosumers to influence the rhetorical meanings of a commodity as common as sneakers. The analysis of entrepreneurial and emotional appeals included in streetwear marketing practices and adopted by

sneakerheads reveals how symbolic meanings are communicated to construct value. The hypebeasts embrace rhetorical appeals that present sneakers as more than just shoes. Like Kenneth Burke, sneakerheads and hypebeasts are symbolic determinists. Together, they have developed colloquial terms and created new forms of value that have changed the meaning of footwear. As hypebeasts increasingly influence consumers and guide shifting market trends, they demonstrate their rhetorical significance to the everyday shoe wearer in social media and entertainment artifacts like reviews, unboxings, interviews, and mediated events with brand collaborators.

The hypebeast feeds on rhetorical devices and utilizes persuasive strategies to morph meanings related to the urgency and exclusivity of a sneaker. Hypebeasts are not only motivated by logical appeals to “buy low and sell high” but also by a desire to “cop” the rarest “drops” from their favorite celebrity figures. No longer are sneaker sales associated with an activity like basketball or tennis; more than ever before, sneakers have come to represent a lifestyle choice reflective of the passions and aesthetic dispositions of consumers. The streetwear marketing strategy of appealing to urgency and exclusivity has reenergized the sneaker game. Hip hop artists, extreme sports athletes, and other celebrities have collaborated with leading sneaker brands to hype and release limited editions representing their style. These collaborations and unique one-off contributions not only contribute to the rarity of a sneaker but also serve to lend credibility to buyers. This notion of credibility and influence is integrally related to Aristotle’s description of ethos as one of the three artistic appeals. Aristotle describes ethos as a device a rhetor might use for, “making his own character look right and putting his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind” (Ross, 2010, p. 59). The capacity to signal identification with sneakers – representing yourself as a fan of a hip-hop

artist or even just carefully matching your favorite hat and shoe combination – functions to reveal something about the wearer. In this sense, sneaker companies, celebrities, hypebeasts, and consumers are engaged in a transformative rhetorical exchange that has revolutionized the meaning and status of the sneaker.

An analysis of sneaker marketing techniques and hypebeasts' very own words have helped to explain how sneakers can transcend their material value and come to represent a symbol of status and style. Thus, consumer collectors and resellers who participate in maintaining the hype are not only stakeholders and investors, they are rhetorical influencers who shape trends in the sneaker game. Like many other volatile markets, the sneaker game is subject to boom and bust cycles. But unlike other markets, sneaker sales are not contingent on traditional market evaluations. Instead, the sneaker game is related to a wide range of social and cultural currencies that rise and fall based on exclusive events, rare collaborations, and an intentionally limited supply in the face of growing demand. As the sneaker market continues to expand, future scholars of persuasion and economics should continue to analyze the rhetoric of hype and consider what factors might cause the sneaker bubble to burst.

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