

Sole-Zine x The Block P: Nike Air Max 95 and the Liverpool Style Protagonists.

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Biographies

Kayla Owen

Kayla's ethnographic research investigates the potentiality and interface within the craftsmanship of restoration, customisation, and conversion, and the subgroups associated with these processes. Her Ph.D., *Wearer as Designer*, originating a new approach to leather attire, highlights opportunities for the re-alignment of community practice, the preservation of a specific material and related techniques and processes, which could be harnessed within a fashion garment context to build plural networks adopting ethical thinking and approaches. The development of *Sole-Zine* as a place to preserve and nurture this artisan craftsmanship is central to this research.

Paul Owen

Paul is a practice-based researcher seeking to redefine and challenge the existing conventions around fashion identity. He investigates tribes, subscribers, and cohesive socio groups who are defined by their obsessions with symbols of value, status, and individuality within community, and the sense of belonging. His ongoing collaborative project *Sole-Zine* focuses on working-class men and their interest in sportswear, particularly sports footwear, documenting how their style evolves and informs subculture.

Keywords

Trainers, Subculture, Obsession, Style, Liverpool, Nike Air Max 95.

Introduction

This photo essay examines the Nike Air Max 95 (AM95) style protagonists in terms of menswear, identity, subculture, and the obsessive nature of personal style, within geographically defined communities. Highlighted through a collaboration between the publication Sole-Zine and retailer The Block P.

In Liverpool, the AM95 (Figure 1) has a special cultural connection with the trainer community. Known locally as '110's', pronounced *one tens*, a reference to its retail price not long after its release in 1995, it is seen as a significant fashion accessory for young men. The demand is so high, that the city has its own store, The Block P – the only retailer worldwide dedicated to this shoe. This small independent retail space specializes in sourcing and re-selling rare AM95's and has become a site of menswear cultural exchange and influence.

By working with Charlie McDonough, (founder of The Block P) and the surrounding trainer community, this project developed over several months. Through an ethnographical approach the research explores the role of the protagonists, producers, and audiences, recording critical discourse around obsession, style and identity and acts as an archive of the evolving story of the AM95.



Figure 1: Nike Air Max 95 OG, 2024. Paul Owen.

Sole-Zine

Sole-Zine (Figure 2) is a printed poster-zine founded by academics Kayla Owen and Paul Owen launched during the Covid-19 pandemic (August 2020), and dedicated to documenting, exhibiting and preserving stories from British trainer culture. Through *Sole-Zine*, we have been able to publish narratives, record behaviours, and capture beliefs, which had not previously been considered in academic contexts. The visual language of *Sole-Zine* is designed to appeal to the participants rather than academics and acts as a methodology to create two-way communication with these people. Since the first published volume, *Sole-Zine* has gained a level of trust and understanding within the community and has led to

collaboration with leading experts, including retailers, artisans, deadstock specialists and collectors. *Sole-Zine Volume 09*, (Owen and Owen 2024), explores the story and legacy of the AM95 in Liverpool.

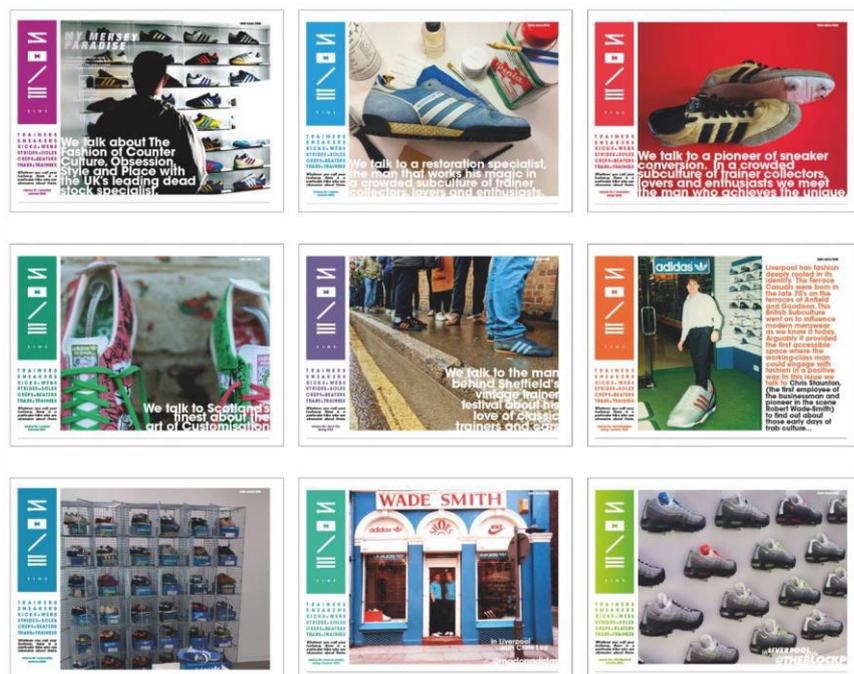


Figure 2: Sole-Zine Volumes 01-09, 2025. Paul Owen.

Sole-Zine Volume 9 investigates why the AM95 is so prominent in the dress codes and culture of Liverpool, exploring the connection to community and the trust in the protagonists. During the research phase in 2024 we spent several months in The Block P, 36 Renshaw Street, Liverpool, L1 4EF. Here we witnessed an overwhelming sense of belonging, community and safety. The more time we spent amongst the subscribers, the more we could see a depth of feeling for this shoe, and what it meant to be part of the subculture. They have shared experiences, values, opinions and often question the wider social hierarchies, authority, value, status, and the perceived knowledge of other sneakerheads (a term used to describe a sports shoe collector or enthusiast with knowledge of sneaker culture). They are all in unison and celebrate the fact that they share a *uniform* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The shared uniform as seen on the shop floor at The Block P. 2024. Paul Owen.

Our methodological process follows the outsider/ insider researcher theory as proposed by Hodkinson (2009) in *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*. Hodkinson, theorizes three methods, outsider-in, outsider-out and insider-in. We used the insider-in approach building on our own lived experiences. 'In youth subcultural research, there are always questions about the position of a researcher in relation to his/ her research subjects.' (Kawamura 2016: 9)

Often with subculture, if you are not part of that community, you are not trusted, and therefore the knowledge is never shared. Throughout the course of the research, we often questioned if we could gain reliable access to this community, questioning our background as academics, and being of a different generation who don't necessarily follow the same trends or popular cultures. However, we managed to capitalize on our previous experience in industry, our personal love of trainers and our published work in *Sole-Zine*, where we actively built trust and social capital over a sustained period with the community. Ultimately, this is what provided us with access and exchange of authentic viewpoints.

The Block P

Founded in 2022 The Block P store (Figure 4) quickly became a destination for sneakerheads looking for rare and special AM95's. The alternative for these customers is to purchase online, where options are limitless, from e-commerce retailers to independent re-sellers, all of which come with varied guarantees of value and authenticity. For McDonough, it is very important to have both a physical and online presence. The store is a space for the 110 community to come together and connect, joined by a common interest. The online outlet (in 2025, The Block P amassed 94.3k followers on their Instagram account) is fuelled by this same camaraderie, with similar interactions and exchanges taking place. There is no hierarchy, one is not a substitute for the other, both have a different value in the world of The Block P and the 110 enthusiasts. 'It's a place where they can come and feel safe and chat to a group of lads who are passionate, genuinely love what they do, and have the same common interest in 110's' (McDonough cited in *Sole-Zine* Vol. 09 2024: 1).



Figure 4: Charlie McDonough, founder of The Block P in-store, 2024. Paul Owen.

So, whilst many other independent sellers and resellers continue to saturate the digital marketplace, The Block P even though they have no contract or affiliation with Nike, have the cachet to be recognized (by Nike) as a retail destination. Occasionally you will even find

the staff from the Nike European Headquarters making a special trip to see the latest acquisitions of The Block P wall (Figure 5). Customers who visit are assured that what they will find there, will always be the genuine product and personally vouched for by experts. 'It's the 110 hotspot of the whole world' (Sole-Zine Vol. 09 2024: 3).



Figure 5: 'The Wall', at The Block P, 2024. Paul Owen.

Liverpool

Liverpool is celebrated for hosting the European Capital of Culture. Historically known for the Toxteth riots, The Beatles, Aintree Races and two Premiership football clubs. In recent times, the region has seen significant social, economic and cultural regeneration. Today, it is a multi-faceted, modern city, reaching beyond the clichés of music and football with synergies to culture, the creative economy, tourism, retail, fashion, beauty and style.

Liverpool has something unique in its identity when it comes to fashion and style. The people are passionate about how they dress, and there is something definitive and serious about the sense of style that comes from this place. 'Northerners are peacocks. Fashion is our armour. In fact, like music and football, it's our identity' (Jones 2017:). The popular phrase *Scouse not English*, supports this, highlighting a strong local identity and an example of insider-in way of thinking. 'It is a city that revels in its own sense of individuality, its uniqueness, its aloof and insular attitude towards the rest of the country' (Thornton 2003: 18).

Subculture and Community

History tells us that Liverpool Football Fans from the late 1970s and early 80s pioneered what we know today as the *Terrace Casual* subculture. In 1983, the *Face* magazine published an article depicting the 'Casual look'. As Hewitson (2008) writes in *The Liverpool boys are in town: The birth of terrace culture*, 'Times were changing. Going to the match would never be the same again, it was no longer just about the football and a bit of scrap, it was now also about the clothes and the attitude' (Hewitson 2008: 11).

Since then, Liverpool has long held certain sports brands in high acclaim. Italian and German labels introduced to the Northwest of England, Fila and Sergio Tacchini tracksuits and adidas trainers became staples for this tribe, and a *three-stripe* footwear fashion culture was born. It is fair to say that the Casuals left a legacy in Liverpool that continues to influence the young men of the city. 'The Casual would redefine how a generation of kids would dress for the next 25 years or more' (Hewitson 2008: 13).

The Casual look has evolved from adidas Samba's, Trimm Trab's and Forest Hills's, and continues to embrace new style codes. In 2025, the first-wave Terrace Casuals are seeking three-stripe nostalgia, the second wave are more open to evolving and adopting new styles and have taken on the AM95 as part of their wardrobe. Now we see Gen Z men in Liverpool, firmly and wholly committed to the AM95. McDonough states '110's are a way of life in Liverpool. This is like what the three-stripe culture used to represent' (Sole-Zine 2024: 4). We discovered a multigenerational feeling of pride about the sense of style that the Casuals left that is integral to Liverpool's trainer culture. As McDonough explains 'The older generation want pairs they had when they were younger creating more hype around the vintage pairs... it reminds them of buying their first pairs all those years ago, bringing back happy memories.' (Sole-Zine 2024: 4).

Style and Identity

Fashion is always chasing the next big thing, and in the trainer community, there are very few styles that dominate the landscape. In Liverpool we have discovered a deep and affectionate connection to the AM95. From the city centre to the suburbs, in pubs, clubs, offices, colleges, and classrooms, this silhouette is ever-present and is significant to men from working-class

backgrounds. It is a style code that has defined the city's fashion appearance from grassroots. The Block P and their community attribute forces such as nostalgia, design innovation, music culture, exclusivity, nonconformity, place, and community as points of reference and drivers for this obsession. Equally they find it difficult to define why such a training shoe has become the favourite in such a localized vicinity, 'There's something culturally about the 110 and Liverpool, I can't explain it' (McDonough cited in Sole-Zine 2024: 3).

Accompanying The Block P to LacesOut! trainer festival, Liverpool in 2024, (Figure 6), extended our observation and conversations with visitors from outside of the city. LacesOut! is one of Europe's most prominent trainer gatherings, which has united sneakerheads from Liverpool and the rest of the U.K since 2014. We spoke to trainer enthusiasts, buyers and re-sellers all of whom collectively believe Liverpool to be the centre for the 110 community:

'They are an expression of who I am'

'110's are in my blood'

'Neon's all the way'

'It's our thing'

'If you know you know'

(Sole-Zine 2024: 3).



Figure 6: LacesOut! trainer festival, 2024. Paul Owen.

The Slipper

One of the most significant events we witnessed during this project was the product launch of *The Block P 110 Slipper* (Figure 7).



Figure 7: The Block P Slipper, 2024. Paul Owen.

The AM95 inspired slipper was created by The Block P team and was launched officially on the 6th of July 2024 (Figure 8). It pays homage to the original AM95 design and allows 'our

community to express themselves in a way which is truly unique to us' (McDonough cited in Sole-Zine 2024: 4). The demand for the slippers on the day of release was so high, we witnessed them sell out within a few hours. To us this was reminiscent of a Supreme drop or special archival re-release by adidas, where security (Figure 9) was required and the 110 subscribers queued for hours wanting to be the first in line.



Figure 8: *Queue for the Slipper Drop, at The Block P, 2024. Paul Owen.*



Figure 9: Security at the Slipper Drop, The Block P, 2024. Paul Owen.

The Block P is moving from a space for cultural exchange into one of cultural production where the brand is championed by the community. Anecdotal evidence and personal observation suggest that Nike sees The Block P and 110 slippers as fandom and a way to celebrate the original AM95 trainer. The Block P have confirmed to us that Nike employees who visit their space, are always positive about the environment they have created and have never expressed an interest in challenging their product lines, on the contrary, they have a genuine enthusiasm for the culture.

It is evident that there are transitional values between the AM95 and The Block P 110 slipper. The value of the physical object has been constructed, maintained and perpetuates throughout the subgroup. Although the trainer itself holds a significant social status which is steady-fast, the slipper brings a new level of obsession. Scrolling through re-seller sites online such as Vinted and eBay provides further evidence of its current value and status - a product which originally retailed for £35, is now trending with other resellers 'flipping' - buying and quickly reselling for profit - for upwards of £70.

The desire for the slipper is gaining as much attention as the actual AM95, consequently The Block P have expanded their slipper range adding further colourways and drop dates. We witnessed the second release in November 2024 where demand was even higher, and noticeably it was not only young men buying the product, but women and girls, and older men too. Just as the AM95 trainer is increasingly worn by all genders and ages, so too is The Block P 110 slipper.

Conclusion

The AM95 trainer's association with youth culture has ensured it has remained popular for thirty years and is still significant in the fashion landscape. The original adopters are now at least forty-five years old, making this an intergenerational phenomenon. One that is undefinable but undeniable within the region. Kawamura (2016: 38) states 'subcultures can be constructed around any beliefs, attitudes, interests, or activities', as we have found in our research with the AM95 community.

Working with the key protagonist has solidified our observations and thinking - that this once innovative and ground-breaking trainer designed initially for road running, has become iconic to Liverpool's everyday style codes, for both early adopters from the 90s and the young men of the city in 2025. And even though the AM95 continues to receive praise in the streetwear community globally, on a local level there is no other training shoe that compares.

For me 110's will always be a staple in the culture of Liverpool. For them to be overthrown, another shoe would have to come in and take over, but with the history Liverpool has with the 110's, I don't think that will ever happen (McDonough cited in Sole-Zine 2024: 4).

To this subculture, the original neon version will continue to be the **greatest of all time** and any 110 devotees will covet this colourway for their collection. We believe like McDonough, that there are 'more 110 enthusiasts in Liverpool than anywhere else in the world and it is intergenerational' (Sole-Zine 2024: 4).

McDonough is part of a new wave of 110 aficionados. In these digital times, he and his team working from a bricks and mortar store have been innovative and entrepreneurial, capitalizing on Liverpool's love of the AM95. The slipper has now been adopted by the

community and extended its reach beyond young men. This has been a surprise finding but equally feels integral and fascinating to the story of the 110 subculture.

In this photo-essay we have attempted to capture the sense of the community found in Liverpool around the 110. Through this research, we aim to make visible this extraordinary subculture, something which remains underrepresented in academia. Continuing to explore specific style codes within men's fashion and footwear to preserve, archive and highlight these important narratives and behaviours.

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