

**Wearer-As-Designer: A Practice-Led Ethnography of Sneaker Subculture  
and Tacit Craft Knowledge**

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-led thesis investigates how leather's material, cultural and philosophical potential can be reimagined through creative practice, ethnographic fieldwork, and the co-production of archival records. Working with leather as both subject and medium, the research explores how craft processes- restoration, customisation and conversion, can generate new forms of value, attachment and sustainability when applied at wearer level. Through iterative making, design interventions, and embodied experimentation, the study interrogates leather as a durable, and flexible material, challenging assumptions shaped by historically embedded perceptions of environmentally harmful production.

Central to the enquiry is sustained engagement with a specific sneaker-focused subculture, whose artisans embody tacit knowledge and alternative approaches to production and consumption. Ethnographic methods including fieldwork, observation, interviews and participant engagement, provide situated insight into how this community navigates adaptation, ownership and creative practice. These findings are translated into a series of practice-led investigations that test how subcultural techniques and philosophies can inform wider approaches to leather garment design and use.

The project culminates in the development of a living archive, realised through the co-created research platform *Sole-Zine*, alongside a series of material experiments. This archive preserves endangered craft skills while communicating them to new audiences. Through this interrogation of practice, research, and dissemination, the thesis proposes the philosophy of the *wearer-as-designer*: a reframing of fashion consumption that promotes emotional and material durability, extended garment lifecycles, and more responsible relationships with leather.

This research contributes new knowledge by demonstrating how practice-led enquiry, community engagement and archival methodologies can intersect to protect craft knowledge, shift perceptions of value, and provide an actionable framework for sustainable, participatory fashion.

**Keywords:** practice-led research, ethnography, material culture, sustainability, leathercraft, subculture, repair, customise, archive.

## CONTENTS

	Page
List of Illustrations	6-8
Biography	9
Introduction: Rethinking Leather Alternatives Practice-Led Research Framework	10-20
Literature Review: 1. Leather as Material Culture: Durability, Ethics, and Circular Value 2. Sneakers: Subcultural Knowledge, Research Gaps, and Craft Erasure 3. Craftsmanship, Making, and Tacit Knowledge in Practice-Led Research 4. Emotional Durability, Circular Design, and Community Practice 5. Affect, Embodiment, and The Garment-Body Relationship	21-32
Methodology: 1. Ethnographic Fieldwork (Participant Observation, Workshops, Sneaker Festivals, Artisan Engagement) 2. Semi-Structured Interviews (Craft Practitioners, Academic Interview) 3. Practice-Led Action Research (Making, Material Experimentation, Skill Transfer, Reflective Cycles) 4. Archival Production and Dissemination ( <i>Sole-Zine</i> , Exhibitions, Conference Presentations, Published Papers)	33-46
Chapter 1: The Metamorphosis of Leather- Past + Present 1.1 From Utility to Cultural Material (9,500 BCE – c.1989) 1.2 Leather, Subculture and Post-War Identity (c.1990 – 2010) 1.3 Sneaker Subculture and Contemporary Transformation (2010 – Present)	47-55
Chapter 2: Re-Defining Current Customary Fashion Consumption 2.1 The People – Unique Seekers as Cultural Agents 2.2 The Providers – Artisan Craftspeople and Tacit Knowledge 2.3 The Networks – Co-Creation and Communities of Practice	56-72
Chapter 3: Framing Leathercraft- Practice + Process 3.1 Restore – Repair as Cultural Practice 3.2 Customise – Making as Knowledge Production 3.3 Convert – Transformation and Re-Authorship	73-86
Chapter 4: The Wearer as Designer- Progress + Protect 4.1 Elevate – Emotional and Material Value 4.2 Preserve – Pedagogy, Practice and Legacy 4.3 Protect – Future Frameworks for Fashion Education	87-95
Conclusion	96-99

	Page
Contribution to Knowledge	100-102
Afterword	103-104
Bibliography	105-120
<b>APPENDICES: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE</b>	121-293
<b>APPENDICES 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK + SUBCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT</b>	121-131
Appendix 1.1 Kayla Owen – Workshops + Festival Attendance	121-122
Appendix 1.2 Kayla Owen – Sample Fieldnotes	123-131
<b>APPENDICES 2: INTERVIEWS WITH CRAFTSPEOPLE</b>	132-178
Appendix 2.1 Transcript: Kayla Owen + Lee Brannigan ( <i>Sole-Zine</i> Vol. 02) Restore	133-149
Appendix 2.2 Transcript: Kayla Owen + David Charlesworth ( <i>Sole-Zine</i> Vol. 03) Convert	150-163
Appendix 2.3 Transcript: Kayla Owen + Kris Boyle ( <i>Sole-Zine</i> Vol. 04) Custom	164-178
<b>APPENDIX 3: ACADEMIC INTERVIEW</b> Transcript: Kayla Owen + Professor Yuniya Kawamura	179-183
<b>APPENDICES 4: ACTION RESEARCH, REFLECTIVE CYCLE</b>	184-189
Appendix 4.1 Fig. A1 Practice: Kayla Owen, Sneaker Making	185
Appendix 4.2 Fig A2 Practice: Kayla Owen, Embossing	186
Appendix 4.3 Fig. A3 Practice: Kayla Owen, Bag Making	187
Appendix 4.4 Fig A4 Practice: Kayla Owen, Leather Engraving	188
Appendix 4.5 Fig A5 Practice: Kayla Owen, Reflective Cycle	189

<b>APPENDICES 5: ARCHIVAL + DISSEMINATION</b>	190-291
Appendix 5.1 Fig. A6 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 01, Paradise)	191
Appendix 5.2 Fig. A7 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 02, Restore)	192
Appendix 5.3 Fig. A8 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 03, Convert)	193
Appendix 5.4 Fig. A9 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 04, Custom)	194
Appendix 5.5 Fig. A10 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 05, Steel City)	195
Appendix 5.6 Fig. A11 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 06, TrimmTrabTales)	196
Appendix 5.7 Fig. A12 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 07, Community)	197
Appendix 5.8 Fig. A13 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 08, Mad On adidas)	198
Appendix 5.9 Fig. A14 Practice: Kayla Owen, <i>Sole-Zine</i> (Volumes 09, The Block P)	199
Appendix 5.10 Figs. A15-A45 Practice: Kayla Owen, Exhibitions + Installations	200-246
Appendix 5.11 Practice: Kayla Owen, Conference Presentations	247-248
Appendix 5.12 Practice: Kayla Owen, Publications	249-250
Appendix 5.13 Published Paper Sample 1 Owen, K. (2025) ‘Re-Fashioning Leather: A Study to Bring to the Fore a New Awareness of How a Specific Material Does not have to be Finite as Nature’, <i>Fashioning Highlight</i> , (SI1), pp.296-303.	251-270
Appendix 5.14 Published Paper Sample 2 Owen, K. (2020) ‘Fashion’s Pimp Up Posse: Leather, Sneakers, and Community ID, <i>Zonemoda Journal</i> , 10(1S), pp.197-212.	271-291
<b>APPENDIX 6: ARTEC3D PRACTICE SCANS</b> Figs. 46 and 47 Practice: Kayla Owen, Digitisation for Future 3D Social Heritage Archive Project	292-293

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Fig. A1 Kayla Owen: Practice – Sneaker Making	184
Fig. A2 Kayla Owen: Practice – Sneaker Embossing	185
Fig. A3 Kayla Owen: Practice – Traditional Bag Making	186
Fig. A4 Kayla Owen: Practice – Leather Engraving	187
Fig. A5 Kayla Owen: Reflective Cycle	188
Fig. A6 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (01)</i> <i>My Mersey Paradise</i> (Summer 2020)	190
Fig. A7 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (02)</i> <i>Restore</i> (Autumn 2020)	191
Fig. A8 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (03)</i> <i>Conversion</i> (Winter 2020)	192
Fig. A9 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (04)</i> <i>Custom</i> (Summer 2021)	193
Fig. A10 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (05)</i> <i>Steel City</i> (Spring 2022)	194
Fig. A11 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (06)</i> <i>Trimm Trab Tales</i> (Summer 2022)	195
Fig. A12 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (07)</i> <i>Community</i> (Summer 2022)	196
Fig. A13 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (08)</i> <i>Mad on adidas</i> (Summer 2023)	197
Fig. A14 Kayla Owen: Practice <i>Sole-Zine Volume (09)</i> <i>The Block P</i> (Summer 2024)	198
Fig. A15 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Charlie McDonough Founder and Owner of The Block P Retail Store</i> (2024)	202
Fig. A16 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s</i> (2024)	203
Fig. A17 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s</i> (2024)	204
Fig. A18 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine x The Block P:</i>	205

	<i>For the Love of 110s (2024)</i>	
Fig. A19	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s (2024)</i>	206
Fig. A20	Kayla Owen: Conference Presentation <i>Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/2024)</i>	208
Fig. A21	Kayla Owen: Conference Presentation <i>Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/2024)</i>	209
Fig. A22	Kayla Owen: Conference Presentation <i>Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/2024)</i>	210
Fig. A23	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine Compendium Displayed at Art of the Terraces Exhibition (05/11/2022–12/03/2023)</i>	212
Fig. A24	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) at FTC FutureScan5 (7/09/2023 – 8/09/2023)</i>	214
Fig. A25	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) at FTC FutureScan5 (7/09/2023 – 8/09/2023)</i>	215
Fig. A26	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) at FTC FutureScan5 (7/09/2023 – 8/09/2023)</i>	216
Fig. A27	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) Research Poster at the Big Idea's Exhibition (8/06/2022)</i>	218
Fig. A28	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/2022)</i>	220
Fig. A29	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/2022)</i>	221
Fig. A30	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/2022)</i>	222
Fig. A31	Kayla Owen: Practice Live Data Collection for Special Edition of <i>Sole-Zine 07: Community. The Ultra Issue (26/11/2022)</i>	224
Fig. A32	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)</i>	226
Fig. A33	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)</i>	227
Fig. A34	Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)</i>	228

Fig. A35 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange</i> (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)	229
Fig. A36 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Light Night 2020: Light Night at Home</i> (17/05/2020)	231
Fig. A37 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange</i> (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)	232
Fig. A38 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange</i> (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)	233
Fig. A39 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 5, 20:20 Print Exchange</i> (01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)	234
Fig. A40 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 4</i> (24/02/2020 - 21/03/2020)	236
Fig. A41 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 3 – Architectonic</i> (01/07/2019 - 04/07/2019)	238
Fig. A42 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 2</i> (03/02/2018 - 05/05/2018)	240
Fig. A43 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin 2</i> (03/02/2018 - 05/05/2018)	241
Fig. A44 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Fractured Identity</i> (12/11/2017 - 14/11/2017)	243
Fig. A45 Kayla Owen: Exhibition <i>Second Skin</i> (09/10/2017)	245
Figs. A46 and A7 Kayla Owen: Practice Artec3D Test Scans (2019)	292

## BIOGRAPHY

Kayla Owen has worked in the fashion industry and academia for almost thirty years. She has designed and manufactured fashion collections, presented garments on catwalks and exhibited work nationally and internationally. Currently working as Programme Leader for MA Fashion Innovation at Liverpool John Moores University, she continues to establish and maintain several industry collaborative relationships which are integral to her role in academia. Kayla is a member of the International Textile and Apparel Association, of the Fashion Research Network, is a Fellow of the Higher Education Authority and co-founder and editor of *Sole-Zine*, a poster-zine dedicated to documenting and archiving British trainer culture.

Her practice-led research has been widely published, and has recently been presented at the following institutions; the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; Università Iuav di Venezia, Venice; Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence; Università de Bologna; University of Leeds; The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Exhibition Research Lab, John Lennon School of Art and Design, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, and as part of the *Locating Menswear* international network which is designed to investigate the cultural and industrial connections between London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Milan, and which is led by Professor Andrew Groves, Director of the Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster.

Working predominantly with leather, Kayla explores the notion of *second skin* and on deconstructing the fashion leather aesthetic by investigating the common boundaries between new advancements in production, developments in garment manufacture processes, and the groups/ stakeholders which are associated with these practices. Kayla seeks to re-frame leather as an ethical and sustainable material, and in doing so, develop new ways of thinking around leather garments at consumer and owner level with the aim of cultivating ethical and sustainable philosophies and fresh approaches to our wardrobes.

Kayla's current ethnographic research investigates the potentiality and interface within the craftsmanship of restoration, customisation and conversion, and the subgroups associated with these processes. Her research, *Wearer as Designer: A Practice-Led Ethnography of Sneaker Subculture and Tacit Craft Knowledge*, highlights opportunities for the re-alignment of community practice and the preservation of a specific material (leather) and related techniques and processes which could be harnessed within a fashion garment context to build plural networks which adopt ethical thinking and approaches. The development of archival records as a place to preserve and nurture this artisan craftsmanship is central to this research.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis interrogates the fundamental philosophy of fashion as a communicative practice. As Barthes (1967) argues, fashion operates as a system of signs through which garments signify meanings beyond their material function. Similarly, Polhemus (1994) suggests that style acts as a form of non-verbal communication, enabling individuals to express identity, belief, and belonging through dress.

Building on this theoretical framing, the study narrows its focus to a specific material—leather. Rather than positioning leather as a passive subject of analysis, this research engages with it through a practice-led lens, where material engagement, making, and alteration become central modes of inquiry. The study therefore situates leather within contemporary debates around sustainability, value, adaptability, seeking to reposition it- and leather fashion more broadly, as a site of ethical, material, and experiential transformation.

Chapter One traces the metamorphosis of leather across three interconnected temporal and cultural phases, positioning it as a material whose meanings are continually reshaped through use, context, and cultural interpretation. Rather than treating leather as a fixed or historically stable, the chapter frames it as a dynamic cultural material that moves between utility, identity, and commodity, reflecting broader shifts in human-material relationships over time.

Structured across three sections, the chapter begins with leather's earliest role as a functional resource in prehistoric and early societies, where it was primarily valued for protection, durability, and survival. It then examines how leather became culturally coded within post-war subcultures, particularly through its association with identity formation, resistance, and stylistic expression between the 1990s and early 2010s. Finally, it explores contemporary transformations within sneaker culture, where leather is reconfigured through systems of design innovation, digital circulation, and global systems of consumption.

Across these phases, leather is established as a site where meaning is continually produced through material engagement. This framing is not only historical but also methodological, informing the practice-led dimension of the research, in which

restoration, customisation, and conversion are used as active tools for understanding material adaptation and reinvention.

Building on this historical and conceptual framing, the research turns to contemporary ethical leather production methods, with a particular focus on durability, flexibility, and longevity. This shift is not purely analytical but practice-led, as the study engages directly with a specialist subgroup of craftspeople working within sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion.

Rather than observing these practices from a distance, the research is developed through iterative engagement with making, where methodologies are tested through material intervention. By examining how artisans revitalise and reconfigure leather footwear, the study identifies transferable approaches that emerge through practice itself, rather than being imposed theoretically.

If these techniques are extended into broader garment contexts, a new design paradigm may emerge- one in which the wearer is positioned as an active agent within the making process. This aligns with the practice-led premise of the research, where knowledge is produced through doing, adapting, and materially engaging with garments over time. In this way, both material and emotional durability are enhanced, foregrounding the role of memory, time, and place as outcomes of practice rather than abstract objects.

This research proposes that the value and appeal of leather fashion are not fixed qualities but culturally constructed and therefore open to reconfiguration. Through practice-led enquiry and ethnographic engagement with sneaker subcultures, the study demonstrates how value in leather garments can shift away from novelty, trend-led consumption, and surface aesthetics, towards durability, care, repair, and material intimacy. By foregrounding processes of making, maintenance, and preservation, leather is repositioned as a material whose value emerges through use, time, and personal investment rather than immediate visual impact, trends, or transient relevance.

In this context, leather fashion becomes valuable not because it is new, flawless, or aligned with fast-moving trends, but because it carries evidence of wear, repair, and

embodied experience. These reframing's challenge dominant fashion narratives that privilege rapid turnover and disposability, suggesting instead that value can emerge through longevity, craft knowledge, and sustained relationships between wearer, maker, and material. The research argues that rethinking how leather is designed, nurtured and preserved has the potential to reshape consumer attitudes towards ethical engagement, and long-term ownership.

By foregrounding style elevation, adaption, and self-creation as meaningful forms of fashion engagement, this thesis advances a practice-led contribution to fashion design research and material culture studies. It positions wearer participation and craft-led transformation as approaches that can extend garment lifecycles while contributing to contemporary debates surrounding sustainability, preservation, and alternative models of fashion authorship.

This study extends the researcher's previous practice-led enquiry, addressing a critical gap between advancements in leather production and their application within design-led manufacture. By situating material innovation within hands-on creative practice derived from a specific subculture, the research offers a distinct methodological contribution, positioning material-led design as a necessary driver for future progress in leather fashion and sustainability. The exploration has been initiated and carried out in practice, with extant literature being used to provide context and validation. Historical mapping and ethnography have been integral methodologies, as this provided an archive for reference and situated context for the full term of the research. This study also extends scholarship in fashion studies, material culture, and craft-based design research by examining how newly emerging understandings of leather production intersect with artisan skill transmission. It reveals how this dynamic enables new alignments between material practice, design innovation, and sustainable fashion education.

Throughout the four chapters, this thesis traces the evolving relationship between material- specifically leather, and the techniques and processes through which it is produced, used, and reinterpreted across different contexts. It moves from an examination of leather's origins as a utilitarian resource to its emergence as a culturally coded material, before situating it within post-war subcultural identities and, finally,

exploring its contemporary transformation through sneaker subculture. Together, these stages establish the research landscape and provide a critical foundation for understanding leather's material, cultural, and design potential.

## **RETHINKING LEATHER ALTERNATIVES**

Whilst this research champions leather and wholly endorses its value, durability, and flexibility, it is important to balance this with an analysis of the vast array of alternative leathers available. Most 'vegan leather' for example, is merely a greener-sounding version of 'pleather', or 'plastic leather', usually PVC or polyurethane. These products tend to have a lower carbon footprint than their animal-leather counterparts but come with a whole host of other problems; they are derived from plant-warming fossil fuels (gas, oil, coal) and can take hundreds of years to biodegrade. Compared with high-quality bovine leather, they are not as durable and cannot be restored or reused. Because these materials are very advanced in their processing, they are not cheap to buy. Overcoming vegan leather's reputation for poor quality has been a big challenge for the fashion industry.

However, there are fashion designers who are finding a way. Stella McCartney, for example has refused to use animal leather since she began her label in 2001. She has developed some very luxurious-looking bags and shoes from virgin and recycled polyester over the years, including her bestselling Falabella bag (McCartney, 2009). This can be seen in the practices of other brands, such as, Nanushka, founded by Sandor in 2005, which utilises a combination of virgin and recycled polyester and polyurethane in its accessories. Similarly, Alfredo Piferi, former Head of Design at Jimmy Choo and founder of his eponymous vegan-footwear label, employs a range of alternative materials within his designs. His work, shortlisted for the 2023 British Fashion Council/ *Vogue* Designer Fashion Fund, demonstrates a high level of aesthetic refinement and technical finish.

However, these material innovations are not without limitation. Variations in performance, particularly in relation to flexibility and wearer comfort, highlight ongoing challenges in replicating the properties of traditional leather. Piferi's designs rely on a combination of bio-based inputs, such as corn-derived materials, alongside synthetic compounds including polyurethane. As such, while these approaches may be

positioned as more responsible alternatives, they remain dependent on synthetic infrastructures and cannot yet be understood as fully sustainable solutions.

There is a clear appetite for materials that behave like leather but don't use plastic- or at least use less of it. Since 2017 Stella McCartney has worked closely with Berkeley-based bio-materials start-up Bolt Threads (Bolt Threads, 2017) to develop a range of prototypes, as well as several commercially available handbags, crafted from the company's mycelium-based Mylo. Mycelium is essentially a network of fungal threads, which Bolt Threads has been growing and processing into sheets in a lab powered by renewable energy. However, in July 2023, the company announced it had decided to 'pause' production of Mylo after failing to raise the funds needed to scale it (International Leather Maker, 2023). Stella McCartney has since released two bags crafted from a plastic-free alternative-leather produced by National Fiber Welding, (NFW), called Mirum (Mirum, 2023), which is made from natural rubber, natural fibres, plant-based oil, and pigments such as biochar and rust.

Hermès announced in 2021 that it was developing a mycelium version of its Victoria bag in collaboration with Californian biomaterials company MycoWorks (MycoWorks, 2021). Similarly, Balenciaga's Autumn/Winter 2022 runway show featured a full-length coat, priced at approximately €9,000, which appeared to be constructed from black lamb leather but was instead produced using a 'pure mycelium' material known as Ephea, developed in partnership with SQIM (SHOWstudio, 2022). Within a *wearer-as-designer* framework, such developments signal not only material experimentation at a luxury level, but also an expanded field in which design authorship is increasingly distributed across brands, biomaterial laboratories, and emerging ecological systems of production.

Despite these high-profile prototypes, such materials remain largely unavailable at commercial scale and are not yet consistently price-competitive with leather. Questions also persist regarding their long-term durability, structural stability, and capacity to support embodied wear over time. Rather than functioning as resolved alternatives, they operate as transitional materials that expose the friction between innovation narratives and the practical realities of making, wearing, and maintaining garments.

As reported in Lauren Indvik's 2023 *Financial Times HTSI Women's Fashion Special* article 'Could You Quit Leather', a ready-to-wear designer (speaking anonymously) described Mylo as difficult to work with in practice, noting its rigidity and inability to be stitched; 'when we used it to make trousers, we had to bond it to jersey fabric, but it was so stiff the model [we photographed in it] couldn't sit down' (Indvik, 2023: 40–41). In this context, material resistance becomes a critical factor in shaping design outcomes, reinforcing the argument that wearer experience is not only aesthetic but structurally embedded in how materials behave under embodied use. While accessories such as bags were considered more achievable, garment construction exposed significant limitations in flexibility, movement, and comfort.

Alongside these experimental developments, a parallel material ecosystem is emerging through agricultural by-product and hybrid bio-based materials, including pineapple leaf fibre (Piñatex) and apple-derived leather substitutes. In 2021, Gucci introduced a range of sneakers made from Demetra, a material composed of at least 70 percent plant-based raw materials from renewable sources (Gucci, 2021), including viscose. The remaining composition consists of polyurethane, fillers, resins, coatings, and dyes, producing a hybrid material that still relies on synthetic binding systems for performance and stability.

From a *wearer-as-designer* perspective, these hybrid constructions reveal how agency is distributed across multiple material factors; plant-based inputs, industrial binders, and user expectations of durability, flexibility, and aesthetic continuity. While such materials offer increased adaptability compared to early biomaterial prototypes, their reliance on synthetic reinforcement complicates claims of full sustainability and exposes ongoing tensions between ecological aspiration and material performance.

Rather than existing as a binary shift away from leather, these developments indicate an expanding field of material negotiation. In response, incremental changes within traditional leather systems, such as regenerative agriculture and the integration of renewable energy in tanning processes, demonstrate how established material infrastructures are also being reconfigured. These position leather not as a static material, but as part of an evolving system shaped through continuous negotiation between wearer, maker, and material environment.

Following this contextual background, Chapter Two examines the contemporary fashion industry landscape, with particular attention to over-consumption and shifting consumer behaviours. It considers how intersecting socio-economic conditions, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), the rise of remote working practices, and the cost-of-living crisis, have contributed to the reconfiguration of fashion consumption patterns and processes of value formation.

Within this framework, the redefinition of customary fashion practices through the networks of people, providers, and communities associated with sneaker subculture becomes a key site of analysis. These relationships act as critical indicators of shifting value systems, offering a starting point for examining alternative modes of consumption, cultural meaning and material engagement.

This discussion sets the context for emerging creative communities and subcultures that seek to nurture and extend the lifespan of fashion through repair, adaptation, and handcraft knowledge. Within this study, particular attention is given to craftspeople operating within sneaker subcultures, where leather-based attire is understood as a material system that can be nurtured, restored, altered, and re-designed. Through the cross-fertilisation of skills and the transfer of tacit knowledge, these practices are applied to leather garment contexts, revealing how subcultural value systems may inform more sustained and reflective approaches to ownership, care, and use.

The durability of leather enables garments to be repaired, restored, and recontextualised over extended lifecycles, positioning it as a productive site for rethinking attitudes towards dress and material value. Rather than functioning as a simple narrative of upcycling, leather becomes a medium through which memory, use, and bodily engagement accumulate over time. As Clarke and Miller (2002) suggest in *Fashion and Anxiety*, garments are understood through processes of projection and embodiment, where prolonged tactile engagement produces imprints of both body and object. These imprints act as records of situated encounters between wearer and garment, reinforcing fashion as an extension of lived experience.

Such processes of material and emotional inscription were further intensified during the pandemic (2020-2021), a period in which domestic confinement prompted renewed engagement with handcraft, repair, and self-directed making. As Sampson

(2020) argues, artefacts are never detached from the symbolic meanings ascribed to them, and these meanings are continually reworked through use and interpretation. In this sense, fashion operates as an ongoing process of negotiation between subject and object, where garments are appropriated, adapted, and reconfigured within everyday life.

This raises a broader question of why such adaptive and creative agency should not extend more explicitly to the consumer level. Within a *wearer-as-designer* framework, acts of repair, customisation, and transformation become forms of situated authorship that challenge disposable models of consumption. In this context, reworking leather garments supports alternative value systems grounded in care, longevity, and material engagement, rather than accelerated cycles of replacement.

Reconsiderations of contemporary fashion consumption- shaped by intersecting environmental, economic, and social pressures, have therefore opened space for renewed interest in creative community practice, nostalgia, and handcraft as modes of cultural and material continuity.

An exploration in Chapter Three follows, focusing on sneaker subcultural practices of restoration, customisation, and conversion, thereby foregrounding the cultural and material agency embedded within acts of making and re-making. This chapter challenges dominant fashion industry paradigms by articulating a slower, more adaptive approach to leather use, in which the wearer is positioned as an active participant in processes of transformation, and garments are understood as evolving objects shaped through care, investment, and continuity.

Field research is analysed as a core methodological component of the thesis, contributing directly to its conceptual development and findings. Engagement with practitioners, providers, and artisanal craftspeople reveals a shared investment in uniqueness and specificity, alongside an emphasis on the production and acquisition of singular objects. These encounters provide insight into processes of making and wearing, reinforcing the argument established in the previous chapter; that value is not intrinsic to the garment but emerges through use, maintenance, and embodied interaction over time.

The findings further demonstrate that traditional craft practices such as shoemaking remain central to this ecosystem of knowledge yet also highlight their vulnerability within contemporary systems of production and consumption. Without effective mechanisms for transmission, many of these tacit skills risk erosions, underscoring the need to document, consolidate, and archive craft knowledge as a dynamic but fragile form of cultural heritage.

Building on this, Chapter Three frames leathercraft practice through the lens of sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion, situating these processes within contemporary shifts in fashion behaviour, particularly among Generation Z consumers. These shifts reflect an increasing prioritisation of longevity, participation, and material engagement, which resonate with the value systems identified within sneaker subcultures.

The emergence of these values has encouraged design approaches that position the wearer within the developmental lifecycle of the garment, whether through direct involvement in making processes, participation in digital communities, or engagement with sneaker-focused events where knowledge, identity, and practice converge.

By mobilising these networks of practitioners and participants, the research seeks to both sustain and extend emerging craft practices, while also translating subcultural knowledge into broader fashion contexts. In doing so, it tests the applicability of sneaker-based frameworks beyond footwear, extending them into garment-based leather practice and wider fashion systems that remain comparatively underexplored.

The final chapter further develops the principle of *wearer-as-designer*, exploring how this knowledge can be advanced, protected, and applied to reshape relationships with dress. It considers how practices of style elevation and design ownership, introduced in previous chapters, contribute to both emotional and material value. In doing so, it frames preservation through pedagogy, practice, and legacy, as a generative framework for rethinking fashion education and contributing to more ethically and environmentally responsive systems.

If sneakers function as signifiers of identity and as witnesses to lived experience across time and place, then garments must be understood through the same lens. This

recognition reinforces the importance of preserving not only material objects, but also the tacit knowledge, practices, and meanings embedded within them for future transmission.

The research therefore proposes an open and collaborative model of knowledge exchange centred on material practice, specifically leather and the craft processes that shape it. In doing so, it extends considerations of circularity and aligns with broader developments in sustainable tanning and production systems, while also advocating for more adaptable and responsive forms of consumer engagement.

This approach supports the view that community formation enables alternative ways of seeing, valuing, and engaging with dress to emerge. Through shared knowledge and participatory practice, the research articulates a transferable framework capable of critically engaging with existing fashion systems across ethical, environmental, and social dimensions, while promoting a slower and more considered approach to leather-based practice.

As these ideas circulate within creative communities, they generate further opportunities for collaboration, pedagogy, and exchange. Positioned within wider debates in fashion studies, material culture, and sustainability, the research contributes to the development of new practice-led and theoretical frameworks. By addressing the intersections between leather production, craft knowledge, and wearer engagement, it establishes a foundation for future research and curriculum development, offering insights that encourage critical reflection on authorship, material value, and ownership within evolving fashion systems.

## **PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

Practice within this study operates as both a method of inquiry and a site of knowledge production. Rather than treating practice as a secondary outcome of theory, it is positioned here as an active and generative process through which understanding is formed, tested, and refined. In the context of fashion and material culture, practice is not simply the application of design decisions but an embodied form of thinking, one that emerges through making, unmaking, and remaking. It is through these iterative actions that relationships between material, wearer, and object become visible and critically legible.

Within this research, practice functions as a mode of translation between conceptual frameworks and material realities. Ideas around repair, restoration, customisation, and conversion are not only discussed but enacted, allowing theoretical positions to be experienced through tactile engagement. This positions practice as a form of situated knowledge, where understanding is grounded in the constraints, resistances, and affordances of materials themselves. In this way, the studio or making environment becomes a space of negotiation, where decisions are shaped as much by material response as by pre-existing intention.

Importantly, practice also functions as a reflective tool. Each intervention into a garment or material carries with it the potential to reveal broader questions about authorship, value, and longevity. The act of working directly with worn or altered objects foregrounds the temporal dimensions of fashion- its capacity to accumulate history, memory, and use over time. Through this lens, practice becomes a way of tracing how garments evolve beyond their initial design moment, shifting focus from origin to ongoing transformation.

Furthermore, practice in this study supports a repositioning of the wearer as an active agent within the design process. By engaging directly with acts of alteration and adaptation, the boundaries between designer and wearer become increasingly porous. This challenges traditional fashion hierarchies and suggests a more distributed model of authorship, where meaning is continuously re-authored through use and intervention. Ultimately, practice functions here not as illustration, but as infrastructure; it structures the research, generates its insights, and anchors its theoretical concerns in material reality.

Taken together, the themes of *wearer-as-designer*, practice-led inquiry, and preservation establish a framework in which fashion is understood as an ongoing, participatory system of material knowledge production. Rather than a linear process from concept to object, design is framed as cyclical and iterative, shaped through making, wearing, maintaining, and transforming. Garments are therefore understood as evolving sites of interaction where meaning, value, and authorship are continuously renegotiated through practice.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A wide range of scholarly perspectives have examined leather as a material within the fields of fashion studies, material culture, and practice-led design research, encompassing design practice, production systems, ethical considerations, and material alternatives. The literature reviewed within this thesis spans books, peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, exhibitions, and primary interviews, forming a multidisciplinary knowledge base. Critical analysis of these sources establishes the theoretical and contextual foundation for the research and identifies a significant gap within the field, particularly regarding the integration of craft-based knowledge, material experimentation, and wearer participation within leather-focused fashion research.

The review is structured around five recurring themes identified across the literature: 1) leather as material culture; 2) sneaker subculture; 3) craftsmanship; 4) emotional durability and community; and 5) fashion affect and embodiment. While these themes appear across diverse disciplinary contexts, this thesis advances the field of practice-led fashion and material culture research by examining them through the lens of a *wearer-as-designer* framework. In doing so, it positions this approach as an emerging and underexplored area of scholarly enquiry, offering a new context for understanding authorship, material value, and ethical engagement within contemporary fashion systems.

## **LEATHER AS MATERIAL CULTURE: DURABILITY, ETHICS, AND CIRCULAR VALUE**

This thesis makes use of a wide range of scholarly perspectives which examine leather as a material within fashion studies, material culture, and design research. Foundational texts such as the first ever published record that chronicles the history and transformation of leather, from prehistoric caves to the houses of haute couture by Quilleriet (2004), the reproduced leather anthology by Allyne (2016), a book which has been selected by scholars as being culturally important and Harris and Veldmeijer (2014) pioneering volume, all consolidate leather's historical and cultural significance, evidencing its enduring presence across civilisations. The common occurrence of animal skin products through time, attest to its enduring versatility, utility, and

desirability. These works collectively establish leather not merely as a textile, but as a culturally embedded material shaped through processes of making, wearing and repair. This aligns with material culture scholarship, where objects are understood as active participants in social life shaped by and shaping human behaviour. (Miller, 2010; Ingold, 2013). In this sense, leather is not only a matter of style but a culturally embedded material, functioning as a medium through which identity, values, and relationships are expressed and sustained.

Ingold's (2013) theorisation of 'making' as a process of correspondence between maker and material reinforces leather's capacity to generate knowledge through handling and transformation. Leather, in this context, is not passive but responsive, its durability, patina, and ageing processes contributing to its cultural and emotional value. This literature substantiates leather as a material uniquely positioned to support sustainable initiatives of long-term use, repair, and reinterpretation.

Leather lovers recognise the individuality that comes with using and wearing leather, they are champions of its sustainable qualities. Re-framing leather as an ethical material and by-product, this thesis aims to educate a new generation, to conceive a new belief system and material awareness of leather's superiority. Leather fashion items that are decades old, still exist in a like-new condition today. Leather can outlive us, improve with age, and is a true testament to its quality, value, and properties. There is a common misconception that leather, and the tanning industry, is not ethical or environmentally conscious. This thesis seeks to oppose this myth by highlighting current industry sustainability initiatives and emphasising leathers durable properties. To create a sustainable leather fashion system, a paradigm shift is required to acknowledge and disseminate the potentiality of leather, and an examination of the way it is constructed, and manufactured is key.

Contemporary debates surrounding sustainability further reinforce leather's relevance. While early scientific literature identifies environmental concerns within tanning processes (Saravanabhavan *et al.*, 2006; Weijun *et al.*, 2015), more recent industry reports (UNIC, 2019) demonstrate significant advances in ethical production and circular practices. Leather production means the recycling of a waste product; cowhides are a by-product of the meat and dairy industries, meaning no cows are killed

for them. If unsold, hides are simply thrown away, becoming part of the larger waste problem.

As a by-product of the meat and dairy industries, leather contributes to waste reduction, positioning it within circular economy frameworks (Blum, 2021). This research considers circularity, whilst discarding stagnant beliefs to develop new thinking. Leather is circular beyond any other material. It can be repaired, restored, enjoyed for a lifetime, and passed down through generations. Leather craft is the ultimate upcycling activity, turning an industry's trash into treasure. Therefore, focussing on leather fashion means durability, longevity, and flexibility, encouraging an ethos of nurture and preservation beyond any other material. In contrast, so-called 'vegan' alternatives are frequently petroleum-based and lack durability, challenging assumptions about their sustainability. Leather's long-life span, and the fact it requires very little care, means that once manufactured the carbon footprint of leather fashion is much smaller than alternative materials.

This body of literature validates the thesis's central claim; that leather, when understood through contemporary production methods and long-term use, can be positioned as a sustainable material. Its capacity for repair, restoration, and longevity consolidates its value beyond alternative materials, reinforcing an ethos of preservation central to this research.

## **SNEAKERS: SUBCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH GAPS, AND CRAFT ERASURE**

Sneaker culture has been widely documented in non-academic publications yet remains under-theorised within academic discourse. Foundational texts such as Vanderbilt (1998) discusses the history of sneakers, the background of major manufacturers, marketing strategies, and the social environments that surround sneaker development, and Garcia (2003) known as the godfather of the sneaker subculture, provide historical and anecdotal accounts of the culture. While more recent publications (Heard, 2009; Corral *et al.*, 2017) explore its aesthetic and cultural significance. However, these texts predominantly target enthusiasts rather than scholars, certain socio-groups are under-represented, and the craftsmanship of leather

from a sneaker context is not significantly recorded, highlighting a gap in rigorous academic engagement.

Kawamura's (2016) seminal work provides one of the few sociological analyses of sneakers, framing them as objects embedded within systems of fashion, identity, and subculture. Yet, even within this scholarship, limited attention is given to practices of restoration, customisation, and conversion. This absence is significant, as these practices represent key sites of tacit knowledge and craftsmanship.

Sneakers also operate within gendered and socio-economic frameworks (Gill, 2011), often reinforcing exclusionary narratives. As such, certain communities and makers remain underrepresented. This literature review therefore establishes a critical gap- the lack of documentation and analysis of sneaker craftsmanship as a form of cultural production.

In response to this gap, exhibition visits formed an important supplementary source of insight throughout the research process. For example, the Design Museum exhibition *Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street* (2021) offered an accessible curatorial framing of sneaker culture, presenting multiple perspectives on design, production, and cultural meaning. Vast amounts of sneakers and related artefacts were on display, from high-end to vintage, prototype to invention and covering many iterations, from lucrative resale, designer icons and collaborations, footwear designed purely for athletes and highlighting moves to make the industry more sustainable. But the most pertinent element for this research, was that the entire design process was on show- the journey of sneakers.

The exhibition offered behind-the-scenes views of the most technically inventive shoes of today, such as adidas' FUTURECRAFT (adidas, 2020), and the biologically active footwear created using Kram/ Weisshaar, Satoshi's Strung shoe-making robot. This exhibition truly fixed sneakers at the forefront of design, the footwear phenomenon that continues to challenge performance design, inspire subcultures, and shake the work of fashion like no other garb.

By foregrounding sneakers, subcultural practice, and the associated artisans, this research extends existing scholarship by repositioning sneaker culture as a site of

knowledge production rather than solely consumption or style. It highlights the importance of subcultural practices as forms of tacit craft knowledge and addresses the continued absence of craft-based perspectives within sneaker studies and broader fashion scholarship.

## **CRAFTSMANSHIP, MAKING, AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH**

Whilst literature is available which outlines, how to work with leather, and how leather has been traditionally used (Schwebke, 1970; West, 2005; Sterlacci, 2010). The literature on craftsmanship and making provides a crucial theoretical foundation for this research. Frayling (1993) distinguishes between research *into, through, and for* practice, legitimising practice-led methodologies as sites of knowledge production. This is reinforced by Sennett (2008), who positions craftsmanship as an embodied process rooted in skill, repetition, and material engagement.

Ingold's (2013) concept of 'thinking through making' further develops this argument, emphasising the inseparability of knowledge and practice. Making is not the execution of pre-existing ideas but a generative process through which understanding emerges. This aligns with the tacit knowledge framework proposed by Polanyi (1966), where knowledge is understood as experiential and difficult to codify.

Within fashion and textile research, embodied knowledge is increasingly recognised as a significant area of inquiry (Groth, 2017). However, the specific practices of sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion remain largely under-documented within existing scholarship. Gill (2011) examines the sneaker industry's technological advancement in the production of elite footwear (Gill, 2011: 372-385), yet does not address practices of repair, adaptation, or re-appropriation, nor their ethical and sustainable implications within wider fashion systems.

This absence highlights a critical gap in the literature and underscores the urgency of preserving and documenting such knowledge, particularly as many artisan skills face erosions. Drawing on sneaker subcultures, where processes of elevating, personalising, restoring, and valuing fashion items are central, this research proposes a form of knowledge mapping that articulates these practices as transferable frameworks for

broader fashion contexts. In doing so, it positions sneaker culture as a productive site through which alternative models of material engagement, authorship, and value formation can be understood.

Existing studies that highlight the flexible and adaptive nature of sneakers include Maki's (2008) visual record of personalised footwear, which documents artists from around the world employing inventive techniques to produce unique sneaker outcomes. Similarly, *Sneakers* (Corral et al., 2017), a collection of one hundred interviews, positions sneakers not simply as products but as ideas, examining them through a subcultural lens. The work foregrounds the affective relationship between wearer and footwear, highlighting how sneakers shape behaviour, capture imagination, and generate strong emotional responses, including attachment, desire, and identification.

The Fashion Research Network exhibition in London (2016), *Mode in Flux: White Lines Project*, further informed this research through its exploration of interactive and adaptable clothing. The exhibition presented garments that transformed in response to environmental and bodily conditions, ranging from coats that convert into tents to textiles that shift colour and texture according to temperature or mood. This interest in adaptability was further developed through the British Textile Biennial exhibition *C.P. Company Cinquanta* (2021), which reinforced the value of flexible and modular design approaches. However, these encounters also highlighted that such forms of fashion remain largely peripheral, often restricted to high-end markets and limited accessibility.

Across these examples, fashion emerges as a site of interaction between maker, garment, and wearer, where authorship is distributed rather than fixed. However, in contemporary commodity systems, the distance between production and use often obscures the maker's agency once the object enters circulation.

This research challenges this separation by reconfiguring the relationship between design and use, positioning the wearer as an active participant in processes of alteration, adaptation, and creative decision-making. Within this framework, ownership becomes an ongoing practice rather than a fixed state, where garments are understood as evolving objects shaped through use, care, and intervention. Leather, in

this context, becomes a material that is not only durable but responsive to transformation, extending its lifecycle through embodied engagement.

This body of literature substantiates the methodological approach of the thesis, affirming practice-led research as a rigorous and necessary mode of inquiry. It reinforces the argument that craft knowledge, when documented and disseminated, contributes meaningfully to both academic and cultural discourse. However, it also reveals a notable gap in existing scholarship, the limited recognition of leather artisanship within restoration, customisation and conversion contexts. This absence further supports the positioning of sneaker culture as a key site for understanding how material knowledge, subcultural practice, and wearer agency intersect in contemporary fashion systems.

### **EMOTIONAL DURABILITY, CIRCULAR DESIGN, AND COMMUNITY-PRACTICE**

The concept of emotional durability provides a critical framework for understanding sustainable fashion practices. Chapman (2009) argues that extending product lifespans requires fostering emotional attachment between user and object. This is reinforced by Fletcher (2014), who advocates for slow fashion systems centred on care, maintenance, and longevity.

Circular design literature further consolidates this perspective, emphasising repair, reuse, and regeneration as central strategies for reducing environmental impact (Blum, 2021; WRAP, 2019). WRAP (The Global Environmental Action NGO) reports that the fashion industry is responsible for approximately 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The production and distribution of fibres, textiles, and garments contribute significantly to environmental degradation across water, air, and soil systems. In addition, only around 15% of discarded clothing is collected for reuse or recycling, with the remainder diverted to landfill or incineration. Synthetic fibres, which account for approximately 69% of global clothing production (WRAP, 2019), are predominantly derived from plastic polymers such as polyester and can take up to 200 years to decompose.

Within this context, approaches that reconceptualise garments as sites of experience and continuity offer alternative models of engagement. As Bravo (2020) suggests, repositioning clothing as lived experience enables wearers to actively extend the lifecycle of garments through care, reinterpretation, and reuse. Garments that carry meaning, ritual, and emotional value are therefore understood as existing beyond the logic of fast fashion consumption.

Contemporary scholarship and cultural critique consistently highlight the environmental impact of the fashion industry, while also foregrounding emerging practices and figures advocating for systemic change (Thomas, 2019; Little, 2018). Brooks (2019), for example, traces the lifecycle of a single pair of jeans, revealing the interconnected systems of production, consumption, and recycling embedded within fast fashion. Collectively, these texts reinforce the urgent need for systemic rethinking, where each item consumed remains materially and ethically present within environmental systems long after use (Siegle, 2011; Barber, 2022). This body of literature supports the central argument of this research: that meaningful change requires not only critique, but also education, dialogue, and the development of alternative modes of practice and engagement.

Alongside academic and industry literature, digital and web-based sources were used to further explore the positioning of alternative leather materials within circular design debates. Industry reports and sustainability initiatives provided additional insight into strategies aimed at extending garment lifecycles, alongside frameworks for knowledge-sharing and collaborative practice. These sources corroborate the methodological direction of this thesis, particularly its emphasis on engagement, exchange, and the consolidation of creative networks.

Fashion journalism also contributes a contemporary lens through which shifting consumer values can be understood. Publications such as *The Sunday Times Style*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *The Times Luxx* reflect emerging discourses around ‘fashion consciousness’ (Thomas, 2022), the ‘rise of resale’ (Pithers, 2022), ‘the quiet radical’ (Harris, 2019), and ‘renew your normal’ (Markhoff and Sutton, 2020). Taken together, these perspectives situate fashion within a broader cultural shift towards slowed consumption, reuse, and revaluation of existing garments.

Establishing the re-positioning of consumerism and buyer behaviour from both a user and fashion industry context. ‘The Craftsman’ (Goldfarb, 2009), and ‘Material Boundaries’ (Marr and Hoyes, 2016), also support a similar theory. Whereas, other more material-led or scientific articles, such as, ‘Carbon Dioxide Delimiting in Leather Production: A Literature Review’ (Weijun *et al.*, 2015) and J.J.Pizzuto’s ‘Fabric Science’ (2016) help decode the current landscape of leather production whilst exploring future potential.

Material frontiers provide invaluable design impulses for researchers, designers, educators, and students alike. Treating materials as an active source of design information and inviting the making of tacit knowledge through direct material handling, re-establishes/ establishes an intrinsic relationship between material, maker, and user which sees a connectedness emerge which drives new interpretations of materiality (Lefteri, 2014). ‘Materiologists are those designers who are happy to cross boundaries, explore the unexplored and are driven by materiality’ (Wagner, 2014).

These approaches challenge linear consumption models and encourage alternative relationships between consumers and garments. De Castro (2021) extends this argument through practical guidance on repair and re-wear, framing these acts as both personal and political to bring positive environmental impact as well as personal reward.

Within design research, co-design and communities of practice play a significant role in knowledge exchange (Sanders and Stappers, 2008; Wenger, 1998). These frameworks highlight the importance of collaboration, participation, and shared learning. Networks are an inherent part of professional and creative practice (Hoette and Stevenson, 2018). The sneaker subculture exemplifies this model, operating as a decentralised network where skills and knowledge are collectively developed and disseminated.

This literature validates the thesis’s emphasis on creative networks and collaborative making. It demonstrates that sustainable change is not solely driven by industry but emerges through community-led practices and shared engagement with materials. The review also establishes that current notable research is concerned with individual

facets which pertain to this study, rather than an analysis which explores the interface between each one.

## **AFFECT, EMBODIMENT, AND THE GARMENT–BODY RELATIONSHIP**

Fashion exists for an audience; it is a process of image making performed on the body. Users often subconsciously appropriate, subvert and alter garments to fit within their lives. Wearing is an active process of appropriation, alteration, and compromise. The relationship between body, garment, and identity is central to fashion theory. Entwistle (2001; 2015) positions dress as an embodied practice, situated within social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Roach-Higgins, Eicher, and Johnson (1995) conceptualise dress as a form of non-verbal communication, shaping and expressing identity.

Warwick and Cavallaro (1998) further explore the sensory and symbolic dimensions of clothing, while Ruggerone (2017) introduces affect theory to fashion studies, emphasising the emotional and relational capacities of garments. These perspectives shift the focus from representation to experience, aligning with Sampson's (2020) exploration of attachment and wear.

Sampson set up the Fashion Research Network in 2013 with fellow researchers Beard, Romano and Pantelides as a key forum for Ph.D. and early-career fashion researchers. Sampson was initiator of research into the meaning and value of worn shoes. Her 2020 book *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* is the first to focus exclusively on the significance of imperfect garments as important aspects of our material world and culture. The book centres on a single object- the shoe and calls on readers to reconsider the value of the marks of wear at a time when fast fashion reigns supreme and interest in used garments quietly increases.

*Worn* highlights the power of an indexical garment- one which was present at and possibly altered by a recollected event; it is a 'having-been-there' object, an object which bears indexical trace. The significance might range from the personal to the socio-cultural; from the sneakers you wore to your team winning cup final match, to buying your first leather jacket (Sampson, 2020). A narrative attached to a garment may be familial, social, or cultural rather than ownership. Elevating what an item

means to an individual and the material history of second-hand garments may lead to them seeking to keep their garments longer, own a preloved item or indeed, ‘re-look’ at their wardrobes and existing fashion items differently, more flexibly. These narratives foster understanding that to nurture and preserve fashion, and restoring items to their former glory is far superior to any re-issue or mass-produced fast fashion, more easily acquired.

Sampson (2020) argues that garments acquire meaning through use, care, and repair, becoming repositories of memory and emotion. This positions clothing as an active participant in lived experience, where material engagement produces ongoing records of bodily and environmental interaction. Worn garments operate as mediating layers between self and world, existing simultaneously as intimate objects and socially visible artefacts.

Through this lens, garments can be understood as accumulating traces of use, forming what Sampson describes as everyday material artefacts embedded within habitual practice. In this sense, wearing, maintenance, and repair become central to the construction of value, often exceeding the role of commerce, consumption, or exchange. Garments may therefore acquire a talismanic quality, where accumulated wear produces emotional and symbolic resonance. Examples such as a musician’s leather jacket or an athlete’s ‘lucky’ footwear demonstrate how objects can operate as relic-like artefacts, carrying traces of lived experience that extend beyond their material function (Sampson, 2020).

This perspective aligns with a broader theoretical shift away from structuralist approaches to fashion, such as Barthes’ (2006: 7) framing of clothing as a system of social and normative codes. Instead, attention is directed towards the unspoken, intimate relationships between bodies and garments, and the ways in which materiality enables these embodied interactions to take form.

Similarly, Spivack (2021) conceptualises worn garments as narrative objects that embed personal histories within material form. Through use, garments become multisensory interfaces that mediate and shape experience, reinforcing the entanglement between wearer and object. This raises broader questions around how

value is constructed through embodied interaction and how wearing functions as a transactional and interpretive relationship between self and material culture.

Within this context, this research argues that awareness of garment production, maintenance, and repair should be embedded within everyday practice. It positions material culture as existing beyond the body while simultaneously becoming integrated with it through use. In doing so, it advances the *wearer-as-designer* framework, proposing that users can assume greater agency in shaping garments over time, transforming them into evolving extensions of embodied identity.

This body of literature substantiates the thesis's focus on emotional and material relationships. It validates the argument that garments are not static commodities, but dynamic entities shaped through interaction. By extending these theories into the context of leather and sneaker culture, this research deepens understanding of how affect, embodiment, and materiality intersect.

Collectively, this literature consolidates, substantiates, and validates the central premise of this research. It establishes leather as a durable, ethical, and culturally significant material; identifies critical gaps in sneaker scholarship; reinforces the value of craftsmanship and tacit knowledge; and situates emotional durability and circular design within broader debates on sustainability. However, the review also reveals a lack of integration between these domains. Few studies examine the intersection of material, craft, subculture, and wearer participation. This thesis responds to this gap by proposing a *wearer-as-designer* framework, positioning practice-led, ethnographic research as a means of generating new knowledge within fashion and material culture.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a practice-led, ethnographic and grounded theory-informed qualitative methodology structured through iterative cycles of engagement, reflection, and production. The study investigates whether a new way of understanding leather may contribute to the formation of creative communities that challenge fast fashion systems and contemporary consumer behaviours. To address this, the research engages directly with a specific subgroup of artisans within sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion culture, positioning their practices as both a site of enquiry and a source of knowledge production.

The methodological framework is situated primarily within interpretivism, seeking to understand subjective meaning, material attachment, and community value systems through lived experience and embodied practice. At the same time, the research incorporates elements of pragmatism through its focus on applied outcomes, transferable frameworks, and material experimentation. This combined positioning enabled the study to move between critical interpretation and practical intervention.

Grounded theory informed the analytical structure of the study, allowing conceptual categories to emerge inductively from fieldwork, interviews, workshops, and practice outputs rather than from a predetermined theoretical model (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). Coding began during the early stages of field engagement and continued throughout the research process through constant comparison across datasets. Themes including emotional durability, authorship, preservation, nostalgia, and material intimacy emerged progressively through this iterative analysis. Grounded theory therefore functioned not as a rigid methodological orthodoxy, but as a flexible analytic strategy through which theory could arise directly from subcultural practice. The methodology operates across four interconnected strands:

1. Ethnographic Fieldwork (Appendix 1)  
Participant observation, workshops, sneaker festivals artisan engagement
2. Semi-Structured Interviews (Appendices 2 and 3)  
Craft practitioners and theoretical contextual interview
3. Practice-Led Action Research (Appendix 4)  
Making, material experimentation, skill transfer, reflective cycles

#### 4. Archival Production and Dissemination (Appendix 5)

*Sole-Zine*, exhibitions, conference presentations, published papers

These strands did not operate sequentially but iteratively. Data collection, analysis, archival production, and practice development occurred simultaneously with emerging findings continually reshaping research questions, redirected fieldwork, and informing material experimentation. This circular model reflects Schön's (1991) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, positioning knowledge generation within practice itself rather than external to it.

No single methodological approach could adequately address the material, social, embodied, and cultural dimensions of the research problem. Ethnography alone would document practice but not materially test it. Practice-led enquiry alone risked isolating artefacts from lived community contexts. Grounded theory alone would generate conceptual categories without demonstrating them materially. The integration of methods therefore enabled:

- Observation of existing craft cultures
- Participation in embodied knowledge production
- Iterative making as analytical process
- Emergent theory development grounded in field data
- Archival preservation and dissemination of tacit knowledge

The methodology therefore mirrors the philosophy proposed throughout the thesis: relational, iterative, materially engaged and community orientated.

### **1. ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK (APPENDIX 1)**

#### **Participant Observation, Workshops, Sneaker Festivals, Artisan Engagement**

This research adopts an ethnographic approach to examine the material practices, social behaviours, and value systems operating within sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion subculture. Ethnography is particularly suited to studies concerned with lived experience, tacit knowledge, and embodied forms of practice, as it seeks to understand how individuals interpret, perform, and negotiate meaning within specific cultural contexts (Kramer and Adams, 2017). Within this study,

ethnography enabled sustained immersion within sneaker communities, allowing the research to move beyond observation alone and engage directly with the routines, interactions, and material processes shaping contemporary leathercraft practices.

The ethnographic dimension of the study combined participant observation, fieldwork, workshop participation, informal conversation, and semi-structured interviews (Appendices 1, 2, and 3). This mixed qualitative approach provided access to both articulated and unarticulated forms of knowledge, particularly the embodied skills and informal learning structures often absent from traditional fashion research. As Fine (2003) argues through the concept of ‘peopled ethnography,’ extended engagement within social groups allows researchers to observe the organised routines and behaviours through which cultural meaning is constructed (Fine, 2003: 41). This was particularly significant within sneaker subculture, where craft knowledge is frequently transmitted through practice, demonstration, and peer exchange rather than formal educational structures.

Participant observation functioned as a central methodological tool throughout the research (Appendix 1). Marshall and Rossman (1989) define observation as the systematic description of behaviours, events, and artefacts within a chosen social setting, while DeMunck and Sobo (1998) identify participant observation as foundational to anthropological fieldwork. Within this study, participant observation enabled direct witnessing of restoration techniques, material manipulation, workshop interactions, and forms of social exchange embedded within sneaker communities. Attendance at festivals, retail environments, and maker workshops allowed the researcher to document both technical processes and the affective relationships participants held towards leather objects.

Rather than adopting a detached observational role, the research operated through embedded participation. This included engaging directly in sneaker-making workshops, customisation activities, and leathercraft practices alongside participants. Such immersion provided insight into tacit forms of knowledge that could not be fully accessed through interviews alone. As Bernard (2017) suggests, participant observation involves not only observing communities but establishing rapport and learning to participate in ways that allow social behaviours to unfold naturally. This

embedded position enabled access to conversations, behaviours, and practices that revealed how value, authorship, and material attachment operate within the subculture.

At the same time, reflexive distance remained essential. While prolonged engagement strengthened trust and authenticity within the field, the research maintained awareness of the tensions between insider participation and critical analysis. Following Schön's (1991) reflective framework, observations and experiences were continually documented through field notes and reflective analysis to critically assess how researcher positioning influenced interpretation. This reflexive approach strengthened methodological rigour and ensured that ethnographic immersion remained analytically grounded rather than purely experiential.

Ethnographic fieldwork ultimately enabled the research to identify how sneaker subculture functions not simply as a consumer community, but as a site of alternative material practice, skill exchange, and cultural preservation. Through sustained engagement, the study was able to trace how restoration, customisation, and conversion operate as both creative acts and forms of resistance to disposable fashion systems, establishing the ethnographic strand as foundational to the development of a *wearer-as-designer* framework.

## **2. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS (APPENDICES 2 and 3)**

### **Craft Practitioners and Theoretical Contextual Interview**

The participant observation undertaken throughout the fieldwork phase naturally led to a series of semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> with three key craftspeople (Appendix 2) and one academic expert (Appendix 3). Semi-structured interviewing combines pre-determined open-ended questions with the flexibility to pursue emergent themes and enabled participants to articulate experiences, values, and tacit forms of knowledge in their own terms while ensuring alignment with the broader research aims. As Musante (2010) suggests, participant observation allows researchers to form relationships with individuals who 'teach us to see the world through their eyes,' positioning interviews

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<sup>1</sup> Liverpool John Moores University University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) ethical approval gained in 2016

as an extension of ethnographic engagement rather than a detached data collection exercise.

The interviews served two interconnected purposes. Firstly, they captured lived experience and tacit craft knowledge relating to restoration, customisation, and conversion practices within sneaker subculture. Secondly, they provided theoretical and contextual insight through dialogue with a specialist academic voice within fashion and subculture scholarship. The flexible structure of the interviews allowed themes to emerge organically while maintaining sufficient consistency across discussions to support comparative analysis. This facilitated detailed first-hand accounts of material practice, creative decision-making, emotional attachment, and perceptions of value within contemporary leathercraft culture.

The extended duration of the fieldwork contributed significantly to the quality and depth of the interviews. Sustained engagement within the community enabled relationships of trust and familiarity to develop over time, creating conditions in which participants felt comfortable discussing personal experiences, professional practices, and subcultural perspectives openly. While semi-structured interviewing can introduce variability in responses and reduce standardisation, the embedded ethnographic approach strengthened authenticity and depth, supporting the generation of rich qualitative data.

Importantly, the interview process also shaped the direction of the research itself. Through ongoing dialogue with participants, the significance of archival absence within sneaker culture became increasingly apparent, leading to the development of *Sole-Zine*: a research output dedicated to documenting and preserving British sneaker culture and craft practice (Appendices 5.1-5.9). The emergence of this platform reflected a growing recognition that much subcultural craft knowledge operates informally and lacks formal mechanisms of preservation or transmission.

To situate the empirical findings within a broader academic framework, an in-depth interview was conducted with Yuniya Kawamura (Owen, 2020) (Appendix 3). Distinct from the practitioner interviews (Appendix 2), which foregrounded lived experience and material practice, this dialogue provided a theoretical perspective on fashion systems, subculture, and cultural production. Kawamura's insights functioned

as a critical lens through which the ethnographic and practice-led findings could be interpreted, strengthening the study's contribution to fashion theory and pedagogy.

As a sociologist, author, and educator whose work has significantly shaped scholarship surrounding sneaker subculture and fashion studies, Kawamura's contribution provided both methodological guidance and theoretical contextualisation. More broadly, the interviews conducted throughout the study reinforced the importance of narrative, memory, nostalgia, and emotional attachment within material culture. Together with ethnographic observation and practice-led action research, they revealed how leather objects function not simply as commodities, but as repositories of identity, experience, and personal history. The resulting data underscored the significance of time, place, and memory within the development of the *wearer-as-designer* framework.

### **3. PRACTICE-LED ACTION RESEARCH (APPENDIX 4)**

#### **Making, Material Experimentation, Skill Transfer, Reflective Cycles**

Practice within this thesis functions not as illustration, but as a mode of knowledge production. The research adopts a practice-led action research approach in which making, material experimentation, and reflective engagement operate as central methods of enquiry. To investigate the relationship between subscribers and artisanal creators within sneaker subculture, it was necessary to engage directly with processes of making and modification, positioning the researcher simultaneously as learner, observer, participant, and reflective practitioner.

Action research cycles were undertaken through participation in leather workshops, sneaker-making sessions, customisation and embossing experimentation, and the development of leather garment prototypes (Appendices 4.1-4.4: Figs. A1-A4). These iterative cycles enabled the testing, refinement, and material exploration of concepts emerging from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. Practice therefore functioned as both analytical process and material investigation, allowing theoretical concerns surrounding durability, authorship, repair, and emotional attachment to be explored through direct engagement with objects and craft processes.

Field engagement included attendance at global sneaker-focused events such as Sneakerness, Steel City, Sneaker Con, Crepe City, SOLE BLOC, and LacesOut! These sites functioned as cultural laboratories in which craft, commerce, nostalgia, identity, and community converged. Participation within these environments enabled observation of both local and global perspectives on sneaker culture while facilitating direct engagement with the techniques, materials, and practices employed by contemporary craftspeople working in restoration, customisation, and conversion.

Workshop participation formed a particularly significant aspect of the practice-led methodology. By undertaking sneaker-making and customisation workshops directly alongside practitioners and enthusiasts, the research gained access to tacit forms of knowledge that would not have been fully accessible through observation alone. This included insight into material behaviours, decision-making processes, embodied skill acquisition, and the social dynamics surrounding collaborative making practices. Participation also enabled the identification and development of relationships with key artisans operating within the field.

Within this process, the researcher occupied a position between insider participation and critical observation. While sustained engagement enabled immersion within the subcultural environment, reflexive awareness remained essential throughout. As Thornton (1995) notes, subcultural participation is shaped by forms of specialised knowledge, values, and cultural codes that may not be fully shared by outside observers. Rather than claiming complete objectivity, the research adopted a reflexive position that continually evaluated how proximity, participation, and personal engagement influenced interpretation and analysis (Appendix 4.5: Fig. A5).

Reflective practice formed a central component of the action research methodology. Building on Schön's (1991) theory of reflective practice and further developed through Scrivener's (2004) framework for creative-production research, the study engaged in both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurred during processes of making and experimentation, where techniques and approaches were continually adjusted in response to material interaction. Reflection-on-action involved the subsequent analysis of outcomes, field notes, and conceptual developments following practice activities. Together, these reflective cycles enabled

the identification of recurring themes, methodological adjustments, and conceptual insights across the research process.

The craft of customisation was explored directly through participation in workshops at LacesOut! (Liverpool, 2018), including embossing techniques used to transform and elevate worn footwear. Workshops were facilitated by practitioners including Benji Blunt Shank and Jason Stocks-Young of Diamond Awl. Additional workshops focused on traditional leathercraft practices including sneaker-making, bag-making, and leather engraving (Appendices 4.1-4.4). These experiences enabled the embedding of practical skills while simultaneously generating observational, material, and reflective data central to the study.

As Sampson (2020) argues, making enables researchers to alter and deepen their understanding of a subject in ways not possible through observation alone. Within this study, direct engagement with restoration, customisation and conversion practices revealed the material, emotional, and creative durability embedded within sneaker culture. The integration of ethnography, material research, and practice-led experimentation demonstrated how craft knowledge operating within footwear contexts might be transferred into garment design, opening new possibilities for understanding leather fashion through frameworks of care, adaptation, and long-term use.

This practice-led approach also responds to a broader gap within fashion and material culture scholarship concerning emotional durability and everyday wear. While emotional attachment to objects has received increasing attention within design discourse, studies frequently prioritise historical dress, museum artefacts, or symbolic interpretation over contemporary objects in active use. Chapman (2015) notes that meanings formed through use, attachment, and care remain comparatively underexplored within design research, while Steele (2011) similarly argues that fashion scholarship has often privileged textual and visual sources over worn garments as sites of knowledge production. This research addresses that imbalance by positioning worn leather garments and sneakers as active repositories of memory, identity, and material value.

Through the integration of interviews, participant observation, and practice-led action research, the study developed a framework through which footwear-based craft processes could be translated into broader garment contexts. This transfer of techniques and philosophies established the basis of the *wearer-as-designer* framework, proposing new relationships between consumer, material, and garment. Rather than positioning sustainability solely through technological innovation or material substitution, the research suggests that transformation may also emerge through repair, adaptation, emotional durability, and participatory engagement with fashion objects.

Field notes documented material resistance, conceptual shifts, technical decision-making, and skill acquisition throughout the practice process (Appendix 1.2). These records demonstrated how sneaker craft practices could move beyond footwear into wider fashion applications, materially evidencing the thesis's central argument. In relation to other practice-led Ph.D. methodologies, this study aligns with material-led design research while distinguishing itself through sustained ethnographic immersion and grounded theory analysis. Practice therefore operates simultaneously as generative method, analytical framework, and material form of enquiry.

#### **4. ARCHIVAL PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION (APPENDIX 5)**

##### ***Sole-Zine*, Exhibitions, Conference Presentations, Published Papers**

*Sole-Zine* (Appendix 5.1-5.9: Figs. A6-A14) operates as a central methodological site within this research, functioning simultaneously as research output, research method, archival mechanism, and knowledge dissemination platform. Rather than existing as a supplementary artefact, it is embedded within the practice-led methodology of the thesis, enabling the collection, interpretation, and circulation of knowledge generated through engagement with sneaker subculture and leather craft practices. Through its production, the research extends beyond written analysis, situating knowledge within material, visual, and participatory forms.

As an archival mechanism, *Sole-Zine* preserves craft narratives, tacit processes, and visual documentation of sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion. It

captures forms of knowledge that are often absent from traditional academic texts; embodied skills, informal learning structures, and community-based practices, thereby addressing a critical gap identified within both material culture and fashion design research. In doing so, it aligns with the thesis's broader concern with protection, not as static preservation, but as the active safeguarding and transmission of endangered craft knowledge and subcultural heritage.

Methodologically, the zine functions as a form of practice-led ethnography, translating fieldwork into a tangible, iterative format. The processes of editing, sequencing, and visual storytelling operate as analytical tools, shaping how narratives are interpreted and communicated. This approach reflects the dialogic relationship between theory and practice established throughout the research, where making is not illustrative of knowledge but constitutive of it. The development of *Sole-Zine* therefore informed the research trajectory itself, revealing which stories, images, and processes resonated most strongly within community networks and highlighting areas of cultural significance that required further investigation.

In addition to its archival role, *Sole-Zine* acts as a dissemination platform that extends the reach of the research beyond academic audiences. Distributed through exhibitions, workshops, and community engagement, it facilitates reciprocal knowledge exchange between researcher and participants, positioning contributors not merely as subjects but as collaborators within the research process itself. This participatory approach challenges traditional hierarchies of authorship and aligns with the thesis's emphasis on distributed design agency and the *wearer-as-designer* framework.

This methodological approach is further reinforced through exhibitions, conference presentations, and published papers, which collectively function as sites of dissemination, feedback, and iterative development (Appendices 5.10-5.14). Exhibitions provide spatial and material contexts in which artefacts, processes, and

narratives can be experienced directly, enabling audiences to engage with the tactile and visual dimensions of the research. Conference presentations situate the work within broader academic discourse, allowing for critical dialogue and the testing of theoretical frameworks across interdisciplinary contexts. Published papers extend this engagement, formalising the research within scholarly networks while ensuring its accessibility and longevity.

Together, these modes of archival production and dissemination constitute an expanded methodological framework, in which knowledge is generated, validated, and circulated through multiple interconnected platforms. This approach reflects the plural, networked nature of the subcultural practices under investigation, and ensures that the research remains responsive to both academic and community contexts.

Importantly, this methodology acknowledges that the preservation of craft and subcultural knowledge cannot rely solely on textual documentation but requires multimodal and practice-based forms of recording capable of capturing the complexity of making, wearing, and cultural exchange. By integrating *Sole-Zine*, exhibitions, and scholarly dissemination into the research process, this thesis establishes a model for how practice-led enquiry can function as both an archival intervention and a pedagogical tool. In this way, archival production is not positioned as the final stage of research, but as an ongoing, generative process- one that sustains the visibility, relevance, and future potential of the knowledge it seeks to protect.

Alongside these modes of production and dissemination, analysis was conducted across several interconnected interpretive stages.

- Thematic Coding - interview transcripts and field notes were coded using grounded theory techniques.
- Comparative Analysis - findings from interviews were cross-referenced with observational data and workshop participation.

- Reflective Analysis - field notes were analysed for recurring themes related to authorship, durability, and material transformation.
- Material Analysis - garment prototypes and sneaker modifications were examined as data objects.
- Contextual Theoretical Framing - findings were interpreted through material culture theory and sustainability discourse. Triangulation across these modes strengthened analytical rigour and validity.

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Policy. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring that all procedures involving human participants met institutional standards.

The study utilised semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2 and 3) as its primary method of data collection, conducted via Zoom, email correspondence, telephone, or in person where appropriate. Each participant took part in one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes, with the possibility of a follow-up interview where mutually agreed. Prior to participation, individuals were provided with a participant information sheet outlining the aims of the research, the format of the interview, and how the data would be used. Informed consent was obtained in writing before any engagement took place.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and care was taken to ensure that no coercion or undue influence was present. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, without providing a reason and without consequence. They were also made aware that they could decline to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with. Although the research does not address highly sensitive topics, discussions around personal creative practice, identity, or professional experience may carry the potential for mild emotional or cognitive fatigue. To mitigate this, interviews were conducted in a respectful and flexible manner, allowing participants to pause, skip questions, or end the session if needed.

Audio or video recordings were used only where consent was explicitly granted and were securely stored on password-protected, LJMU-approved systems. All recordings were deleted following transcription and transfer to secure university storage. Data

will be retained only for the duration necessary to complete the research and will then be permanently destroyed in accordance with institutional data management policies.

In relation to the practice-led elements of the study, specifically sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion, any visual documentation (e.g. photographs of artefacts or processes) does not include identifiable individuals unless explicit consent has been obtained. The focus remains on the material and process rather than the individual.

This research complies with the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ensuring that all personal data is processed lawfully, stored securely, and used solely for the purposes of this academic study. Data has not been shared with third parties, and access is restricted to the researcher.

Overall, this study prioritises the ethical responsibility of safeguarding participant wellbeing, ensuring transparency, and maintaining integrity across both its theoretical and practice-led components. Given the embedded nature of the fieldwork, reflexive awareness of positionality was essential. Care was taken to avoid exploitation of subcultural knowledge or commercial appropriation of techniques.

Reciprocity was built into the research through skill exchange, dissemination via *Sole-Zine*, and acknowledgment of contributors. The integration of ethnography, grounded theory, action research, and practice-led making enabled the research to; generate theory from lived craft practice, materially test conceptual claims, preserve tacit knowledge and develop a transferable *wearer-as-designer* framework.

This research is shaped by my position as both a fashion practitioner and an active participant within the leather and sneaker customisation community. My engagement with practices of restoration, customisation, and conversion provides valuable insider knowledge, enabling informed dialogue with participants and a nuanced understanding of craft processes, material behaviours, and subcultural values. However, this proximity also introduces the potential for bias, particularly in relation to an assumed advocacy for leathercraft as a sustainable and socially transformative practice.

To address this, a reflexive approach is maintained throughout the research process. This includes critically evaluating my own assumptions, documenting decision-

making processes, and remaining attentive to how my perspectives may influence data collection, interpretation, and representation. Interview questions are designed to be open-ended and non-leading, allowing participants to articulate their own experiences and viewpoints without undue influence. Additionally, contrasting perspectives, particularly those that challenge the sustainability or accessibility of leather practices, are actively sought and incorporated.

By acknowledging this dual role as both practitioner and researcher, the study aims to balance experiential insight with critical distance. This reflexive positioning strengthens the validity of the research, ensuring that conclusions are not solely shaped by personal investment, but are grounded in a diverse range of participant voices and evidence. Having established the methodological and theoretical framework through which the research was conducted, the following chapter traces the historical and cultural evolution of leather, situating the material within wider debates surrounding utility, identity, subculture, and contemporary fashion practice.

## **CHAPTER 1: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF LEATHER – PAST + PRESENT**

### **1.1 FROM UTILITY TO CULTURAL MATERIAL (9,500 BCE – c.1989)**

Leather is one of the earliest human-made materials, emerging from necessity rather than design, shaped through practices of preservation, protection, and survival. From its origins in prehistoric societies around 9,500 BCE, leather functioned primarily as a utilitarian resource, valued for its durability, flexibility, and availability as an extension of human interaction with animal economies. Over millennia, however, its role has shifted significantly. What began as a material of necessity gradually accumulated cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic meaning, becoming embedded within systems of craft, trade, identity, and status.

This chapter traces that long arc of transformation, examining how leather moved from a functional skin-to-skin technology into a culturally charged material embedded within fashion, industry, and social expression. Across ancient civilisations, medieval craft guilds, and early industrialisation, leather was repeatedly redefined through technological innovation and shifting social values. By the late twentieth century, particularly by the end of the 1980s, it had become deeply enmeshed in fashion subcultures, luxury production, and political symbolism, carrying associations that extended far beyond its material origins.

Rather than treating leather as a static material, this chapter positions it as an evolving cultural medium, one that records changing relationships between humans, animals, labour, and design. In doing so, it establishes the foundation for understanding leather not only as a material of use, but as a site of meaning-making, negotiation, and cultural metamorphosis across time.

Leather occupies a foundational position in the history of human material culture, emerging initially as a pragmatic response to environmental exposure. Archaeological evidence suggests that early humans used animal hides for protection, shelter, and mobility, marking one of the earliest distinctions between human adaptation and the natural world (Leroi-Gourhan, 2002). While Quilleriet (2004) emphasises the symbolic and almost mystical qualities attributed to animal skins, such as the transference of power from animal to wearer, this perspective risks over-romanticising

early material practices. Instead, it is more productive to understand leather as both functional and culturally constructed, its meaning evolving alongside social structures rather than originating purely in myth.

By the Neolithic period, advancements in tanning and preservation transformed hides into durable materials, enabling their integration into everyday life (Reed, 1972). This transition signals what can be understood as an early form of material agency, whereby leather becomes not just a passive resource but an active participant in shaping human practices and social structures (Ingold, 2013). Tanning, therefore, is not merely technical, it is cultural. Across ancient civilisations, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Rome, leather was embedded in systems of labour, ritual, and hierarchy (Harris and Veldmeijer, 2014). However, as Jenkins (1984) notes, leather garments often operated as markers of social distinction, signalling divisions between ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian’ identities. This early use of leather as a communicative material establishes a precedent for its later role within subcultural dress.

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, leather evolved from purely utilitarian use, into a medium of craftsmanship and aesthetic expression. Techniques such as Spanish *guadamecí* demonstrated the material’s capacity for ornamentation and luxury (Newman, 1973). However, rather than viewing this progression as a simple elevation from ‘primitive’ to ‘refined’ it is more accurate to interpret leather as a continuously adaptive material, shaped by shifting socio-economic conditions and technological innovation.

By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leather had become firmly embedded within industrial modernity, particularly through travel, transport, and emerging consumer culture. Brands such as Hermès and Dunhill capitalised on leather’s durability and association with mobility, aligning it with modern lifestyles (Sterlacci, 2010).

Yet, even within these luxury contexts, leather retained an ambivalent cultural position. As Entwistle (2000) argues, dress operates as a situated bodily practice, mediating identity through social codes. Leather became increasingly associated with masculinity, mobility, and control, especially in relation to aviation,

motorcycling, and military dress. This laid the groundwork for its later appropriation within subcultural movements.

By the mid-twentieth century, leather had shifted from a symbol of function and status to one of rebellion and identity formation. This becomes particularly significant when considering the emergence of subcultural practices, which rework and reassign meaning to materials outside dominant fashion systems. The emergence of youth cultures in the post-war period, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, reframed leather garments such as the biker jacket as signifiers of resistance (Hebdige, 1979). While Quilleriet (2004) frames this transition through iconic moments such as the 1947 Hollister incident, this thesis argues that such accounts oversimplify a more complex socio-cultural shift. Rather than isolated events, the adoption of leather within youth subcultures reflects broader processes of class negotiation, media influence, and identity construction.

Subcultures including the British rockers and American biker groups utilised leather not only as protective clothing but as a visual language of defiance, positioning themselves in opposition to dominant cultural norms (Brake, 1985). As Hebdige (1979) suggests, subcultural style functions as a form of resistance through symbolic appropriation. Leather, in this context, becomes a coded material, communicating belonging, rebellion, and alternative values.

However, by the late twentieth century, these subcultural meanings were increasingly absorbed into mainstream fashion systems. Designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier recontextualised leather within high fashion, transforming it from a marker of marginality into a commodified aesthetic (Evans, 2003). This transition highlights a critical tension: leather simultaneously operates as a tool of resistance and a product of consumption.

This historical trajectory demonstrates that leather is not a static material but a mutable cultural signifier, continually redefined through its relationship with the body, identity, and society. Importantly, this sets the foundation for understanding how contemporary sneaker culture reactivates leather's subcultural potential, not as nostalgia, but as a site of ongoing transformation.

## **1.2 LEATHER, SUBCULTURE AND POST-WAR IDENTITY (c.1990 – 2010)**

Between 1990 and 2010, leather underwent a pronounced cultural reconfiguration, shaped by shifting post-war identities, globalisation, and the fragmentation of traditional subcultural boundaries. No longer positioned solely as a material of utility or durability, leather became increasingly associated with aesthetic signalling, ideological positioning, and stylistic resistance. Within this period, its meanings were not fixed but actively produced through subcultural practices, media representation, and the expanding reach of global fashion systems.

Emerging from the legacy of post-war subcultures, punk, biker, fetish, and queer communities, leather continued to function as a visual language of dissent and affiliation. However, as these subcultures became increasingly visible and commercially appropriated, leather's role shifted from a marker of outsider identity to a more complex and sometimes contradictory signifier. It simultaneously operated within spaces of resistance and incorporation, where meanings were negotiated between authenticity, commodification, and self-styling.

This chapter explores how leather became a contested cultural material during this period, reflecting broader changes in identity politics, gender expression, and consumer culture. As fashion industries absorbed subcultural aesthetics into mainstream production, leather's symbolic charge was both diluted and expanded, allowing it to circulate between subversive contexts and luxury fashion markets. At the same time, its continued presence within music scenes, nightlife cultures, and queer spaces demonstrates its persistence as a material of embodied identity and collective memory.

By examining leather's shifting role between subculture and mainstream culture from 1990 to 2010, this section positions the material as a site where post-war identities were not only expressed but actively redefined in response to changing social, political, and economic conditions.

As Ingold (2013) suggests, materials are not static substances but processes, constantly evolving through use, wear, and interaction. Leather exemplifies this condition through its ability to age, mark, and transform alongside the body. In the contemporary

fashion landscape, leather continues to occupy a paradoxical position between luxury, sustainability, and subcultural expression. While technological advancements have enhanced its aesthetic and functional properties, they have also intensified scrutiny of environmental and ethical concerns (Allyne, 2016).

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed significant innovation in both leather production and alternatives, including bio-fabrication and plant-based materials (Scapp and Seitz, 2011). Companies such as Modern Meadow and developments such as lab-grown leather and mycelium-based textiles are reshaping material futures. Challenging traditional notions of materiality, value, and prompting a reconsideration of what constitutes 'authentic' leather (Britten, 2019). These innovations shift the discourse from preservation of tradition to speculation about future material ecologies.

At the same time, theoretical perspectives on dress and material culture emphasise the intimate relationship between garments and the body. Drawing on Winnicott's (1971) concept of the transitional object, clothing can be understood as a 'second skin', mediating the boundary between self and world. Leather intensifies this relationship due to its tactile and responsive qualities, recording wear over time and embedding personal narratives within its surface (Fletcher, 2014).

This perspective aligns with contemporary fashion theory, which positions garments as sites of embodied experience rather than mere commodities (Entwistle, 2000). As Murphy (2019) argues, fashion operates through desire, transforming functional clothing into emotionally charged objects. Leather's sensory richness, its smell, texture, and ageing process, enhances this desirability, embedding it within personal and cultural narratives.

This embodied relationship is particularly significant within sneaker culture. As Sampson (2020) argues, footwear carries dense symbolic meaning, often exceeding its functional role. Sneakers, in particular, operate as cultural artefacts, shaped by intersections of sport, music, and street culture. Their rise from utilitarian objects to high-fashion commodities reflects broader shifts in consumer behaviour and identity formation.

Unlike earlier subcultures, contemporary sneaker culture is not defined solely by opposition but by participation, creativity, and transformation. Practices such as restoration, customisation, and conversion reposition the wearer as an active agent in the design process. This aligns with Fletcher's (2014) concept of 'craft of use', where value is generated through interaction rather than acquisition.

This shift is particularly important in the context of sustainability. Rather than relying solely on technological solutions, sneaker subculture demonstrates how cultural practices can extend the lifecycle of materials through repair and creative reuse. As Chapman (2005) suggests, emotional durability is key to sustainable design, fostering longer relationships between users and objects.

Furthermore, the integration of leather within high-fashion sneaker collaborations, by brands such as Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga, and Nike, illustrates the ongoing dialogue between subculture and industry. However, this thesis argues that the true innovation lies not within luxury production, but within grassroots craft practices, where individuals reshape materials according to personal and collective identities.

There remains a relative gap in understanding user-led material transformation, and this is where this research begins to reposition leather, not as a static luxury material, but as a dynamic surface for interaction, modification, and meaning-making. In sneaker subculture, leather is no longer simply worn, it is reworked, reimagined, and revalued.

In this sense, sneaker subculture represents a socially transformative space, where traditional distinctions between designer and consumer are blurred. The wearer becomes a co-creator, engaging directly with material processes and challenging dominant systems of fashion consumption.

### **1.3 SNEAKER SUBCULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION (2010–PRESENT)**

From 2010 to the present, sneaker culture has evolved from a subcultural practice rooted in sport, music, and urban identity into a global system of cultural production, exchange, and consumption. Once associated primarily with basketball, skateboarding, and hip-hop communities, sneakers now occupy a complex position at

the intersection of fashion, technology, and digital economies. This transformation reflects broader shifts in how subcultural meaning is produced, circulated, and commodified within contemporary culture.

In this period, sneakers have become both objects and infrastructures of identity. Their significance extends beyond functionality or style, operating instead as markers of belonging, status, and cultural literacy. The rise of limited releases, collaborations between designers and athletes, and the emergence of resale markets has intensified their symbolic and economic value. At the same time, digital platforms and social media have reshaped how sneaker culture is experienced, accelerating trends and expanding participation beyond geographically rooted communities.

This chapter explores how sneaker culture has transitioned from localised subcultural expression to a globalised, networked phenomenon. While commercialisation has broadened access and visibility, it has also introduced new tensions around authenticity, exclusivity, and cultural ownership. Within this landscape, sneakers continue to function as a site of creative expression and identity formation, but increasingly within systems shaped by branding, algorithmic visibility, and speculative value.

By examining sneaker subculture in the contemporary moment, this section positions the sneaker as a cultural artefact that reflects wider transformations in fashion, labour, and digital capitalism. It highlights how what was once a subcultural symbol has become a central mechanism through which contemporary identity, aspiration, and cultural participation are negotiated.

From 2010 onwards, sneaker culture has shifted from a recognisable subcultural practice into a global cultural and economic system shaped by fashion, sport, music, and digital media. A key transformation in this period is the acceleration of sneaker commodification through scarcity and collaboration. Limited ‘drops,’ artist and designer partnerships, and brand-led storytelling have redefined sneakers as collectible objects with fluctuating cultural and financial value. The rise of Nike collaborations with figures across sport, music, and fashion has been particularly influential in establishing the sneaker as both a design object and a cultural currency. Similarly, the continued expansion of adidas into high-fashion collaborations has reinforced the

blurred boundaries between performance wear, luxury fashion, and street culture. In this context, sneakers operate within an ecosystem where desirability is carefully engineered and scarcity is strategically produced.

At the same time, digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped sneaker culture. Social media, influencer economies, and resale marketplaces have intensified visibility while also altering how value is assigned and circulated. Platforms such as StockX and GOAT have formalised sneaker resale into a data-driven marketplace, where cultural value is translated into real-time pricing structures. This shift has created a feedback loop in which hype, visibility, and financial speculation are deeply entangled. As a result, sneaker culture today is not only about wearing or collecting shoes but also about participating in a constantly updating digital economy of attention.

Despite this commercial saturation, sneaker culture still retains traces of its subcultural origins. Within skateboarding, music scenes, and localised communities, sneakers continue to function as markers of identity, taste, and belonging. However, these meanings now coexist with broader systems of branding and global consumption. The sneaker, therefore, exists in a dual state- simultaneously a personal, expressive object and a commodity embedded within large-scale corporate and algorithmic infrastructures.

This tension raises important questions about authorship, authenticity, and cultural ownership. As sneakers move further into the realm of luxury fashion and financial speculation, their role as subcultural artefacts becomes increasingly complex. This research cites subcultural practices as offering a perspective rooted in agency, creativity, and transformation. Drawing on Hebdige (1979), subculture can be understood as a form of resistance, where materials and objects are re-signified to challenge mainstream meanings. Rather than disappearing, subcultural meaning is continually reabsorbed, repackaged, and redistributed within commercial frameworks, suggesting a cyclical rather than linear transformation of cultural value.

In this context, sneaker culture emerges as a particularly significant site of transformation. Unlike traditional fashion hierarchies, sneaker subculture operates through participation, modification, and community exchange. Here, leather is not simply consumed but actively reworked through restoration, customisation, and

conversion. This shift positions the *wearer-as-designer* framework- an idea that will be expanded in later chapters. Through practices such as repainting, deconstruction, and reconstruction, leather sneakers become archives of use and identity, embodying personal narratives and collective cultural values (Sampson, 2020).

Crucially, this challenges the dominant model of fashion consumption, which prioritises newness and disposability. Instead, sneaker subculture promotes a philosophy of longevity, care, and creative reuse, aligning with broader movements towards sustainability and circular design. In contrast to Quilleriet's (2004) historical framing, which often situates leather within fixed symbolic categories, this research argues that leather's true significance lies in its capacity for transformation. Its durability, flexibility, and responsiveness make it uniquely suited to subcultural practices that prioritise adaptation over replacement.

Therefore, sneaker subculture should not be viewed as peripheral to fashion, but as a socially transformative force. It redefines value, shifts power from producer to user, and establishes new relationships between material, maker, and wearer.

This chapter has traced the transformation of leather from a material of survival to a complex cultural and symbolic medium, highlighting its evolving relationship with identity, and subculture. By critically engaging with existing literature, this chapter has repositioned leather not as a static historical artefact, but as a dynamic site of meaning-making, foregrounding leather's role within contemporary material culture.

Importantly, this reframing establishes the foundation for the following chapters, which shift focus from historical narrative to contemporary practice. The next chapter will examine the peoples central to this landscape, both the 'unique seekers' and artisan craftspeople, who are actively redefining fashion consumption through sneaker culture. Exploring how subcultural practices, specifically within sneaker communities, activate leather's transformative potential through processes of restoration, customisation, and conversion. Reframing leather as an evolving medium of cultural expression and raising a critical point of reflection: How can leather, as a materially and culturally loaded medium, be reactivated through sneaker subculture as a site of social transformation, where artisan practices reposition the wearer as an active designer and agent of sustainable change?

## **CHAPTER 2: RE-DEFINING CURRENT CUSTOMARY FASHION CONSUMPTION**

This chapter explores current customary fashion consumption and examines the people, providers, and networks central to sneaker subculture, investigating how leather operates as a site of social transformation that repositions the wearer as an active designer and agent of sustainable change. It considers shifts in consumer behaviour shaped by environmental awareness and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), which accelerated interest in vintage, second-hand, repair, and restoration practices.

Building on this context, the chapter identifies sneaker culture as a subcultural space in which these values are already embedded within everyday practice. The research examines the value placed on deadstock materials and the flexibility of restoration, customisation, and conversion within sneaker communities. These practices are valued not only by consumers, but also by the artisans whose specialist skills restore and elevate sought-after ‘holy grail’ sneakers. In some cases, developments in materials, restoration techniques, and artisanal intervention mean customised or restored sneakers are perceived as more desirable than original releases.

The chapter further situates these developments within broader histories of fashion consumption, identity, and social change, demonstrating how sneakers have evolved from functional sportswear into culturally charged objects associated with individuality, authorship, and status. It argues that contemporary shifts towards repair, preservation, and creative participation reflect wider reconsiderations of ownership and value in fashion, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Through this lens, sneaker culture becomes a framework for understanding how material practice, craft knowledge, and wearer agency can contribute to more sustainable and emotionally durable relationships with dress.

Although the original role of sneakers was as functional sportswear, the sports shoe has never been a static or singular entity. It has evolved according to popular tastes, available materials, changing patterns of use, and the machinery of production. These forces, human and otherwise, transformed what began as a relatively mundane object designed for practical purposes into the symbolic, culturally charged, and highly

desirable product recognised today. What originated as specialist footwear for niche markets is now worn universally across social and cultural contexts (Turner, 2019).

As sneakers became increasingly embedded within everyday fashion culture, their significance extended beyond function and utility to encompass questions of identity, self-presentation, and social meaning.

Clothing the body denotes intentional behaviour. Kang, Johnson, and Kim (2013) found that clothing assists consumers in constructing an ideal appearance and can alter mood, enabling wearers either to camouflage or bolster self-confidence. This suggests a close relationship between body perception, clothing preference, and identity formation, reinforcing the notion that fashion functions as an extension of self.

Polhemus (1994; 1996) similarly associates fashion with ideologies of social change, arguing that fashion emerges within societies where transformation is both possible and desirable. As Kawamura states, ‘in some societies where the dominant ideology is antipathetic to social change and progress, fashion cannot exist’ (Kawamura, 2005: 5). The political and social transformations that occurred across Europe between 1860 and 1960, including liberalism, fascism, socialism, and democracy (Belfanto and Merlo, 2021), therefore demonstrate fashion’s capacity to signify individuality, progress, and cultural change.

The rise of sneaker culture further reflects the democratisation of fashion authorship, where consumers increasingly participate in styling, collecting, modifying, and curating fashion identities outside traditional luxury systems. Emerging from both sport and subculture, sneakers have transcended the boundary between practicality and adornment to become legitimate fashion objects. This shift aligns closely with postmodern ideas surrounding hybridity, fluidity, and the collapse of traditional cultural boundaries.

Bauman’s (2005) concept of ‘liquid modernity’ is particularly relevant here, proposing that contemporary identity exists in a constant state of flux in which permanence and fixed social categories are increasingly unstable. Within this framework, fashion becomes a visible expression of fluid identity formation. Similarities can be drawn between this condition and the instability experienced during the post-pandemic

period, where established social structures, behaviours, and value systems were collectively reassessed (Mower, 2020).

From a fashion perspective, these conditions cast new relevance onto John Galliano's Maison Margiela Spring/Summer Artisanal collection (2020), which referenced the public spirit and resilience associated with the Second World War. Uniform-inspired silhouettes, references to resistance movements, and militaristic detailing reflected themes of endurance, protection, and collective identity. Although conceived before the pandemic, Galliano later reflected that 'what we need to learn is a bit of backbone: reverence for the lessons of history, and what they taught us' (Mower, 2020).

Post-pandemic, a renewed sense of public spirit emerged through volunteering, activism, generosity, at-home creativity, and resourcefulness. Within fashion, this was reflected in a growing appreciation for repair, preservation, reuse, and 'making do', alongside increasing awareness of overconsumption and environmental responsibility. The pandemic intensified reflection on consumer behaviour and reinforced the relevance of practices associated with care, conservation, and sustainability.

Parallels were frequently drawn between the pandemic and the resourcefulness of the Second World War. In Sarah Mower's (2020) *Vogue* article, 'Fashion in Times of Crisis: 6 Wartime Lessons We Can Learn from our Great-Grandmothers', wartime strategies of adaptation and collective resilience were reconsidered in relation to contemporary fashion culture. The article connected the widespread adoption of face masks during the pandemic to Lee Miller's (1941) photographs of women volunteer firewatchers wearing protective visors during the London Blitz, while also highlighting how protective garments had already emerged within anti-surveillance protest groups, Drill music culture, and urban cycling communities. Simultaneously, face coverings began appearing on fashion runways, including those of Marine Serre, while individuals shared homemade mask patterns and sewing techniques online.

Fashion publications also revived narratives of wartime ingenuity and collective responsibility. During the Second World War, *British Vogue* documented women's contributions to wartime labour and promoted practical strategies for dressing during hardship through the work of photographers such as Lee Miller. At the same time, the British government introduced the Utility Clothing Scheme under the CC41 label to

reduce waste and conserve resources (Imperial War Museum, 1942). Designers including Hardy Amies and Edward Molyneux contributed to garments that prioritised durability, practicality, and restrained material use. In retrospect, these approaches anticipated contemporary discussions surrounding minimalism, sustainability, and responsible consumption, aligning closely with the *wearer-as-designer* framework proposed within this thesis.

Comparable shifts emerged during and after the pandemic, as designers increasingly reused deadstock fabrics, collaborated collectively, and adopted lower-waste production strategies. Examples included the appointment of Raf Simons as co-creative director alongside Miuccia Prada at Prada, and the collaborative deadstock initiatives developed by Phoebe English (Vogue, 2020). These developments demonstrated how periods of crisis can destabilise dominant patterns of consumption and reopen interest in repair, preservation, and ingenuity.

Resourcefulness similarly became central to domestic practices during both wartime Britain and pandemic isolation. During the Second World War, garments were repeatedly adapted and repaired, while the British Ministry of Information's *Make Do and Mend* handbook (1943) encouraged practices such as patchworking, darning, and remaking existing clothing. During the pandemic lockdowns, comparable behaviours re-emerged through online tutorials and social media communities focused on embroidery, knitting, sewing, and visible mending (Kouhia, 2023).

These developments reinforced appreciation for existing possessions, renewed respect for craft expertise, and highlighted how repair and creative participation can cultivate more sustainable and emotionally durable relationships with fashion, supporting the *wearer-as-designer* framework developed within this thesis.

## **2.1 THE PEOPLE – UNIQUE SEEKERS AS CULTURAL AGENTS**

Within contemporary fashion culture, a growing cohort of individuals can be identified not simply as consumers, but as active cultural agents, 'unique seekers' who challenge the passive dynamics of mass consumption. These individuals are driven by a desire for distinction, authorship, and meaning in what they wear, rejecting homogenised, fast-fashion systems in favour of practices that foreground individuality and narrative.

In the context of leather sneaker culture, this shift is particularly visible- the object is no longer a fixed, finished commodity, but a mutable surface through which identity can be constructed, negotiated, and displayed.

Rather than adhering to prescribed trends, unique seekers engage with fashion as an evolving, participatory process. They seek out one-of-a-kind items, commission bespoke work, or directly intervene through restoration, customisation, and conversion. In doing so, they reposition value away from newness and towards transformation, longevity, and personal attachment. This behaviour signals a broader cultural movement in which ownership becomes synonymous with authorship, and wearing becomes a form of making.

Crucially, these individuals do not operate in isolation; their practices circulate within and help to sustain subcultural networks, both physical and digital. Through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, acts of customisation and restoration are shared, replicated, and reinterpreted, allowing aesthetic languages to evolve collectively. In this sense, unique seekers function as catalysts within a distributed creative economy, shaping demand, influencing taste, and legitimising alternative modes of production and consumption.

Positioning these individuals as cultural agents reframes the narrative of fashion from one of top-down dissemination to one of collaborative, bottom-up innovation. Their engagement with leather as both material and medium underscores the potential for subcultural practice to enact wider social and environmental change. By privileging creativity, care, and continuity over disposability, unique seekers begin to articulate a new fashion ethos- one in which the boundaries between designer, maker, and wearer are increasingly blurred.

Fashion operates as both a material and symbolic system, shaping and reflecting cultural, social, and embodied ways of understanding dress. Clothing intersects with wellbeing, performance, identity, and function, while also influencing how individuals interpret time, place, and social belonging. In this context, fashion can be understood as a site of learning, practice, and knowledge production, where meaning is constructed through both making and wearing.

This study seeks to examine, redefine, and challenge established conventions within fashion education and material practice, engaging with technological and cultural shifts to explore alternative approaches to leather. Central to this inquiry is the sneaker subculture, where practices of restoration, customisation, and conversion operate as informal pedagogies through which craft knowledge is developed, shared, and transmitted.

Within this context, sneakers function not only as objects of display but also as educational artefacts through which ideas of value, authorship, and material transformation are tested. When garments and footwear are actively modified, repaired, or reimaged, they become tools for learning and critical engagement. In this way, processes of style elevation, ownership, and longevity extend the lifecycle of objects while also supporting more reflective and ethically engaged relationships with material culture.

As Hoette and Stevenson (2018) describe, ‘Modus’ networks provide frameworks through which knowledge circulates within creative practice communities. Within this research, such networks are understood as educational ecosystems that support peer-to-peer learning, tacit skill development, and collaborative experimentation. The sneaker subculture examined here operates as one such network, enabling the documentation, exchange, and archiving of craft-based knowledge.

This study engages with these networks as sites of informal education, using them to inform a broader pedagogical framework for leather-based practice. It proposes that such models of distributed learning offer alternative ways of understanding fashion education, where knowledge is generated through making, participation, and shared material experience. In doing so, the research suggests new spaces for learning that challenge dominant models of consumption and production, and instead foreground collaborative, practice-led approaches to dress.

Experimental networks and spaces which interrogate and expose tensions between theory and practice, between disciplines and individuals, are a necessary divergence within fashion. Fashion is in many ways a process rather than a thing, an activity whose outputs and products are frequently impermanent and transitory.

This thesis seeks to evidence that this does not have to remain the case, or the only way, by unearthing subcultural networks and mechanisms through which to adopt a skill, or new way of seeing fashion these creative communities develop and uncover spaces of overlap through forging individual connections, while highlighting the disconnects and tensions between, in this case, practices (restoration, customisation, conversion,) and product (sneakers/ garment) whilst maintaining the basic material contingency (leather).

Through this research, the aim is to make the collaborative and cumulative nature of subcultural knowledge explicit and accessible, particularly within sneaker culture. This involves translating forms of tacit craft knowledge from sneaker practices into broader garment-based contexts, positioning fashion as a bricolage of old and new, familiar and novel, and scarce and readily available. In doing so, the research seeks to demonstrate how knowledge circulates through practice, and how documenting and preserving artisan skills can support both cultural continuity and future innovation.

Subcultural groupings such as sneaker communities can be understood as shared-interest networks formed around common practices, values, and modes of engagement. These groups are often defined through collective markers of identity and belonging and are frequently characterised as tightly bound social formations with distinct codes of participation (Von Maltzahn, 2019). Within sneaker culture, however, these structures operate less as fixed ‘tribes’ and more as fluid educational and social systems, where knowledge, value, and identity are continually negotiated through participation, exchange, and display.

Sneakers therefore function as more than footwear; they operate as cultural and pedagogical objects through which ideas of identity, aspiration, and freedom are expressed. As represented in *Fresh Dressed* (2015), sneakers are closely associated with self-expression and perceived autonomy, where dress becomes a visible articulation of individuality and belonging. Within this context, subcultural participation often involves a deliberate distancing from dominant mainstream tastes, with value placed on rarity, distinction, and personal interpretation.

Hebdige’s (1979: 7) assertion that subcultures resist dominant culture through style remains relevant here; however, sneaker culture also demonstrates how such resistance

is complicated by visibility, circulation, and commercialisation. As information and imagery circulate through digital platforms, the boundaries of exclusivity become increasingly unstable. While subcultural capital is still constructed through rarity and knowledge, it is simultaneously shaped by rapid dissemination and market responsiveness.

Commercial actors also play a role in sustaining this ecosystem through continuous product release cycles, limited editions, and collaborations that generate ongoing demand and exchange. As Hill (2021: 156) notes, hype is shaped by design and visibility, as much as by cultural adoption. Within this system, status is often negotiated through access, timing, and participation, including practices such as camping for releases or competing for limited editions.

These dynamics highlight how sneaker subculture operates as a site of both learning and tension, where creativity, competition, and consumption intersect. Rather than viewing this solely as commercial behaviour, this research positions it as a form of distributed cultural knowledge production, where value is continuously constructed through social practice, exchange, and embodied engagement.

## **2.2 THE PROVIDERS – ARTISAN CRAFTSPEOPLE AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE**

Alongside the rise of the ‘unique seeker’ emerges an equally vital figure within this ecosystem- the artisan craftsperson. These providers operate at the intersection of skill, material knowledge, and cultural transmission, enabling the realisation of restored, customised, and converted leather goods. Far from functioning as anonymous producers, they act as custodians of specialised techniques and as interpreters of individual desire, translating abstract ideas into tangible form. In doing so, they sustain a mode of fashion practice that resists standardisation and reasserts the value of the handmade within a predominantly industrial system.

Central to their role is tacit knowledge- an embodied, experience-based understanding that is difficult to formalise or fully articulate. This includes an intuitive sensitivity to the behaviour of leather, the ability to interpret material traces, and the judgement required to balance structural integrity with aesthetic transformation. Such knowledge

is accumulated over time through practice, repetition, and direct engagement with materials, rather than through codified instruction alone. It is this depth of understanding that allows artisan craftspeople to work responsively, adapting processes to the specificities of each object and wearer.

In the context of leather sneaker culture, these practitioners occupy a critical position as both technicians and collaborators. They not only execute repairs or customisations, but also guide clients through possibilities, limitations, and material outcomes. This dialogue fosters a co-creative relationship in which authorship is shared, and the final artefact reflects both the vision of the wearer and the expertise of the maker. As such, the craftsperson becomes an active agent in shaping aesthetic direction and material longevity.

Importantly, the practices of these artisans contribute to a broader revaluation of labour, skill, and time within fashion. By foregrounding processes that are inherently slower, more deliberate, and materially attentive, they challenge the disposability embedded in fast-fashion systems. Their work underscores the potential for craft to operate not as a nostalgic return to the past, but as a progressive framework for sustainable and socially engaged production. In this way, artisan craftspeople and their tacit knowledge form a crucial foundation for the alternative fashion model this research seeks to articulate.

Within this subculture exist sneaker-loving visionary creatives for whom constructing one's own exclusive fashion items is their symbol of desire. The artisanal aspect required to be part of this sector provides new material contingencies for leather fashion. There is a desire for one which no-one else can own- the one-of-one object-setting aspiration at such a niche level that these items become even more covetable. This draws attention to the leather techniques and processes harnessed by this subcultural group, providing significant grounding for new ways of transforming the leather surface into an artistic canvas. This subgroup challenges the fashion industry in terms of ethical, environmental, and social aspects and presents a new slow, flexible, and creative way of using leather- one in which the user has an elevated sense of ownership, and in turn, belongings are nurtured and become investments due to their flexibility.

These processes challenge conventional ethical and commercial boundaries, and blur the relationship between consumer and attire, strengthening the *wearer-as-designer* framework, while generating forms of novelty and individuality. Collective identity within fashion has historically also been constructed through visual and material cohesion. As McClendon (cited in Pound, 2020: 39) notes in relation to the Suffragettes, coordinated dress such as white garments functioned as a unifying strategy, producing a shared visual identity that reinforced group belonging and purpose.

This relationship between collective identity and material expression is also evident within contemporary craft and industry contexts, where knowledge is transmitted through shared practice, demonstration, and engagement with specialist networks.

Having visited Lineapelle, Italy, an annual international exhibition of leather, leather goods and accessories, I gained access to industry-standard knowledge surrounding leather production and innovation. This included participation in the ‘Let’s Customise’ webinar (2020) which focused on emerging approaches to craft, repair, and modification. Within this context, Los Angeles-based streetwear artists theheyman collective, shared repair and customisation information, describing sneakers as ‘an emotional thing, as precious as valuable piece of art’ (Sneaker Custom, 2020).

Sneaker production and modification remain highly specialised practices, requiring an understanding of shoemaking fundamentals, including foot mechanics, movement, and structural support. These skills are typically developed through sustained craft training, reinforcing the importance of tacit knowledge and embodied expertise within sneaker and leather-based practices.

It is evident from the technical language used in David Charlesworth’s interview (Owen 2020) (Appendix 2.2), as well as observations from an embossing workshop with Blunt Shank at the LacesOut! Trainer Festival, Liverpool (2018) (Appendix 4.2: Fig. A2), that advanced shoe modification relies heavily on embodied expertise. As Charlesworth notes, only those with a background in shoemaking are able to fully deconstruct and reconstruct footwear from the sole upwards, translating conceptual

ideas into materially functional outcomes (Owen, 2020). This reinforces the importance of tacit knowledge within craft-based practice.

Historical and contemporary commentary further highlights the cultural value of shoe repair. In *British Vogue*'s 'Art and Sole' (Henderson, 2016), it is noted that maintaining footwear requires a significant level of artisanal skill, from structural adjustments to detailed surface care. However, while consumption of footwear remains high- estimated at £10.2 billion in 2015 (Henderson, 2016), repair culture has declined significantly since the 1960s, as fast consumption cycles have replaced traditions of maintenance and longevity.

Despite this decline, the cobbling trade persists as a site of specialist knowledge. Practitioners such as Tony Stylianou, featured in Henderson (2016), emphasise cobbling as a skilled vocation requiring both technical ability and material sensitivity. Similarly, institutions such as Les Compagnons du Devoir, in France, continue to uphold rigorous training systems for repair-based craft, demonstrating that these practices remain highly structured in some contexts. However, in the UK, repair is often culturally undervalued in comparison to production, contributing to a shortage of new practitioners entering the field.

At the same time, repair infrastructures are increasingly being reconfigured within luxury systems. For example, in-house repair services such as Minuit Moins 7 in Paris, demonstrate how brands such as Christian Louboutin integrate restoration into their wider brand ecology. These systems position repair not only as maintenance, but also as an extension of authorship, quality control, and brand continuity.

Alongside these institutional frameworks, independent practitioners continue to expand the possibilities of footwear transformation. Charlesworth's work in spike conversion illustrates how discarded or worn sneakers can be reconfigured into hybrid forms that extend material life cycles while generating new aesthetic value (Appendix 5.3: Fig. A8). Although such processes may be described by practitioners as 'cannibalisation' they also demonstrate how authenticity, reuse, and reinvention operate in tension within contemporary craft practice.

Similarly, practitioners such as Lee Brannigan (Appendix 5.2: Fig. A7) engage in processes of modification and personalisation that reposition sneakers as adaptable cultural objects. Through interventions such as material replacement, colour alteration, and symbolic reworking, existing footwear is transformed into bespoke items that reflect individual identity and preference.

Across these examples, identity emerges as a dynamic and constructed process rather than a fixed condition. Personalisation and modification practices demonstrate how individuals actively shape meaning through material engagement, yet the distinction between production-led customisation and user-led adaptation remains fluid. This highlights the evolving relationship between maker, object, and wearer, and reinforces the central argument of this thesis- that fashion operates as an active site of knowledge production, where value is continuously redefined through use, adaptation, and embodied practice.

### **2.3 THE NETWORKS – CO-CREATION AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

Extending beyond the individual roles of the unique seeker and the artisan craftsman, the dynamics of leather sneaker culture are sustained through interconnected networks of co-creation and shared learning. These networks operate as fluid ‘communities of practice,’ in which knowledge, skills, and aesthetic values circulate between participants rather than being held by any single authority. Within this structure, making becomes a collective act- distributed across makers, wearers, and observers, each contributing to the evolution of the object and the culture surrounding it.

Co-creation within these networks challenges traditional hierarchies of authorship in fashion. Instead of a linear model in which designers dictate and consumers receive, there is an ongoing exchange of ideas, feedback, and experimentation. Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube play a significant role in facilitating this exchange, enabling processes to be documented, disseminated, and reinterpreted in real time. Tutorials, before-and-after transformations, and collaborative projects contribute to a shared visual and technical language that both informs and inspires further practice.

These communities are not solely digital; they are also grounded in physical spaces such as workshops, studios, and pop-up events, where embodied learning and direct collaboration occur. Within these environments, tacit knowledge is transferred through demonstration, observation, and participation, reinforcing the social dimension of craft. The network thus becomes both an archive and a site of innovation, preserving traditional techniques while simultaneously adapting them to contemporary needs and contexts.

Importantly, communities of practice foster a sense of collective responsibility towards materials, processes, and outcomes. By engaging multiple actors in the lifecycle of a fashion object, they encourage a shift from individual ownership to shared stewardship. This has broader implications for sustainability, as the emphasis moves towards maintenance, repair, and ongoing transformation rather than disposal. In this way, networks of co-creation not only support the practical realisation of customised leather goods but also underpin a cultural shift towards more participatory, ethical, and resilient modes of fashion production and consumption.

The emergence of co-created design communities, such as those observed at sneaker festivals, workshops, online platforms, and independent retailers (Appendix 1.1), challenges the fashion industry's ability to control and manage personalisation. These creative networks of enthusiasts, collectors, and craftspeople gain momentum through subcultural participation, enabling self-expression and stylistic innovation. As identity is fundamentally rooted in distinctiveness, such networks facilitate more complex, alternative forms of personalisation and identity formation. In this context, personalisation assumes an ethical dimension, foregrounding boundaries of consumption, flexible and extended ownership, and value-led approaches to fashion practice (Kent, 2019: 120).

There is a diverse team of minds in and out of the design industry that help to bring a vision to life. Like bees, we all cross-pollinate with each other to create magic.  
(Harper, 2021: 98).

This dynamic was supported via interactions and conversations with craftspeople and subscribers within the sneaker industry (Appendices 2-4). The love and passion for—and obsession with sneakers that they share establishes camaraderie, there is an

undeniable emotional attachment and involvement that they feel by being part of the community. The desire to seek distinction, elevate, restore, customise, convert their footwear is embedded in the society to which they belong.

Age does not discriminate; the first wave of 'sneakerheads' born from the football terraces, mingle, converse, and teach the new wave, for whom sneaker hunting is a game. Although the sneaker enthusiasts compete in the sneaker hunting process, they have high regard for one another. They exchange and share information about sneakers that they bought, post them online, and nonverbally acknowledge those who are part of the same community. Individuals forge their own path, whilst maintaining a sense of identity aligned to the subculture.

This camaraderie was clear when speaking to Brannigan (Appendix 2.1) and Charlesworth (Appendix 2.2), who both warmly highlight other craftspeople in the subculture who have inspired them, from shoemakers such as 'Blunt Shank', to deadstock specialist retailer 'Transalpino' in Liverpool, to Kris Boyle aka @dundeesole a sneaker restorer/ customiser/ retailer based in Dundee, Scotland (Appendix 2.3). Boyle had been on workshops with Blunt Shank, knew Brannigan, and had been inspired by 'Transalpino' to open his own deadstock store wherein he not only sells sneakers, but he also offers restoration and bespoke custom services and workshops in which he passes on his knowledge and skills to upcoming sneakerheads.

Many from this subgroup often frequent fashion forums, such as NikeTalk, Hybebeast, StyleForum, and Superfuture, in which they discuss different styles, looks, and designer labels over various threads. Technology allows the community to spread knowledge and information widely, but at the same time, has made it difficult to guard information as confidential. Technology has accelerated democratisation and at the same time diminished a sense of exclusivity. Because exclusivity is difficult to maintain, it becomes even more desired within the subcultural groups. Those who subscribe to a sneaker subculture 'are unique in that they are bounded by one object, that is sneakers. They worship and celebrate sneakers as an object of desire, which contain a great deal of social information' (Kawamura, 2016: 37).

Identity within culture, style, and popularity cannot be reduced to a fixed definition. Instead, this research positions identity as something produced through practice, participation, and material engagement, particularly within under-represented subcultures often excluded from academic attention. This supports the *wearer-as-designer* framework, where the wearer actively contributes to the meaning and transformation of fashion objects, offering more sustainable and ethically engaged approaches to fashion research.

Building on this understanding of identity as formed through practice and material engagement, the methodological framework of this research prioritises direct involvement with those who enact these processes. Rather than treating knowledge as abstract or external, the study approaches it as something situated, embodied, and developed through interaction, requiring sustained engagement with practitioners operating within sneaker and leather-based subcultures.

The sample of craftspeople engaged in this research was intentionally small, enabling sustained relationships characterised by trust, depth, and authenticity, an approach widely recognised within ethnographic and practice-led research (Pink, 2015). Despite their scale, these encounters generated rich insights into practitioners' perspectives, behaviours, and lived experiences of restoration, customisation, and conversion. Crucially, it was through the continuity of these relationships that the significance of artisan knowledge, skill, and process within sneaker subcultures became fully visible.

The research highlights the importance of recognising, documenting, and supporting these specialist practices, many of which are held by highly skilled individuals whose expertise has been developed through years of embodied making. While pathways for formal transmission are not always established, this presents a clear opportunity for fashion research and education to play an active role in sustaining and amplifying such knowledge. By foregrounding these practices through workshops, interviews, and collaborative engagement, the study positions craft skills not as at risk, but as valuable cultural assets with the potential to inform future generations of designers, makers, and wearers. In this way, the research reframes artisan expertise as a living resource- one that can be preserved, shared, and evolved through intentional platforms of exchange and learning.

This notable finding led the focus of the research practice to become archival, rather than about physical fashion. The empirical data gathered through fieldwork and participant engagement required preservation. To maintain this heritage and subculture it was essential to not only collect the data, but also to present it in a format that would aid conservation and be desirable enough for future generations to want to access it and eventually use it. Ultimately the goal of the research became to validate and safeguard the materials, techniques and processes aligned to leather restoration, customisation, and conversion for future generations to access. Data gleaned from the literature review and from the work, process, and qualitative collection methods, constructed appropriate theories and set concepts in context.

Consequently, the study shifted towards archival and dissemination practices, requiring a format capable of documenting and communicating the narratives of the subculture. Through this realisation, my practice took shape as *Sole-Zine*, a poster zine dedicated to documenting British trainer culture (Appendix 5.1-5.9: Figs. A6-A14). The evolution of *Sole-Zine* began during the pandemic (2020) when the desire for physical and nostalgia was heightened, therefore a printed paper research output made sense. The design of a zine, in which the middle double page folded out to a poster, felt right for the subject matter and audience. *Sole-Zine* is discussed further in Chapter 3 of the thesis.

Drawing together the historical, material, and cultural trajectories outlined in this chapter, leather emerges not simply as a material of durability and symbolism, but as a dynamic site through which relationships between wearer, object, and system are continually renegotiated. From its origins as protection to its contemporary positioning within sneaker subculture, leather carries the potential to move beyond passive consumption and into active participation.

The practices of restoration, customisation, and conversion, alongside the rise of wearer-led design and collaborative networks, suggest an alternative fashion paradigm grounded in care, longevity, and creative agency. Within this shifting landscape, an overarching question emerges: how might leather sneaker subculture, through practices of making, wearing, and co-creation, reposition fashion from a system of

accelerated consumption towards one grounded in participation, care, material longevity, and cultural agency?

### **CHAPTER 3: FRAMING LEATHERCRAFT – PRACTICE + PROCESS**

The previous chapter evidenced the current customary fashion consumption which has given rise to a renewed perspective on wardrobes and created space for practitioners who nurture and preserve existing garments through restoration and customisation. In this chapter, I identify specific craftspeople and artisans working within leather footwear culture- particularly sneakers, to examine the techniques, materials, and processes employed within this subcultural field. I consider how these practices might be translated into wider fashion contexts, supporting a more sustainable and ethical approach to leather garment design through an emergent, practice-led methodology. This chapter also begins to form a blueprint for archiving and preserving these skills for future generations.

To fully understand the contemporary landscape of leathercraft in the twenty-first century, I situate this research within broader shifts in fashion consumption, environmental awareness, and consumer behaviour. The COVID19 pandemic (2020-2021) has accelerated a cultural shift towards pre-loved and existing garments. As Drapersonline (2019) notes, this moment has reinforced a more meaningful approach to clothing, where value is increasingly located in longevity and care. Vintage, in this sense, operates as a sustainable signifier, where garments carry narrative, emotional attachment, and lived history (McAlpine, 2021).

Within sneaker culture, I observe a strong alignment with this ethos. Collectors and practitioners often prioritise deadstock, vintage, and rare pairs over new releases, engaging in systems of sourcing, restoring, and preserving footwear. This practice contributes to circularity within the industry, where value is generated through care and continuation rather than disposal. According to Farfetch (2021), purchasing pre-owned items significantly reduces environmental impact, reinforcing the importance of extending garment lifecycles through reuse.

I engage directly with this culture through fieldwork (Appendix 1), attending sneaker festivals and participating in community-led events. These encounters have been central to my understanding of how knowledge is produced and shared within subcultural networks. Rather than existing as passive observation, these spaces

function as active sites of learning, where I can engage with practitioners, collectors, and craftspeople who operate within restoration and customisation practices.

### **3.1 RESTORE - REPAIR AS CULTURAL PRACTICE**

Restoration, within sneaker culture, extends beyond technical repair and operates as a cultural practice that challenges dominant systems of consumption. I understand repair as an act that resists disposability and repositions value through care, attention, and material engagement. In my observations, restoration is not simply about returning an object to a former state, but about negotiating its history, material condition, and ongoing use.

Within this framework, I identify restoration as a collective language shared across both physical and digital communities. Knowledge is exchanged through workshops, online platforms, and informal networks, where practitioners develop and refine techniques collaboratively. In this context, I see repair as both a practical intervention and a cultural act that extends the life and meaning of an object.

Through my engagement with sneaker communities, including LacesOut! Liverpool (LacesOut!, 2018) and online networks such as adidas-only forums, I have observed how restoration practices build relationships between individuals and objects. These practices reinforce a shift in consumer behaviour, where care becomes a form of value production.

Sampson's (2020) concept of the 'worn' object is particularly relevant here. I draw on her understanding of footwear as an indexical object- one that carries traces of lived experience. In my analysis, restored sneakers become repositories of memory and use, where wear is not erased but integrated into ongoing material narratives.

Caring and maintenance practices are becoming increasingly visible within contemporary fashion discourse. As highlighted in Fleur Britten's *The Sunday Times Style* (2019) article 'Fashion Forces for Good', garments are worn on average only seven times, according to data cited from Barnardo's charity shop initiatives (Britten, 2019). However, alongside growing awareness of sustainability, there is evidence of a shift towards greater care and longevity in clothing use. As Esther Maughan

McLachlan, Sustainability Director at The Communication Store, notes: ‘Once you have got something lovely, you take care of it’ (Britten, 2019: 16).

New garment care products, such as dry shampoo for clothing, alongside practices such as visible mending and the growth of repair services (e.g. online platforms such as clothes-doctor.com), reflect a shifting ethos among consumers and a broader response to fast fashion. These developments signal increasing interest in extending garment life and engaging more actively with maintenance and repair practices. As Joss Whipple of The Right Project, a sustainability consultancy, notes, the secondary clothing market represents ‘one of fashion’s biggest positive news stories’ (The Right Project, 2017; Britten, 2019).

In 2019, Vestiaire Collective, an online platform for second-hand and pre-owned designer clothing and accessories, launched at Selfridges in London. Similarly, Farfetch developed a ‘Second Life’ service and partnered with Thrift+ (Thrift+, 2017.), enabling users to exchange unwanted garments for store credit, while Burberry collaborated with resale platform The RealReal (The RealReal, 2017) to extend the lifecycle of luxury goods. These initiatives reflect the growing integration of resale and circular economy models within mainstream fashion systems. As Britten (2019: 16) states, ‘the message is: look after your clothes and your clothes will look after you,’ reinforcing the increasing emphasis on care and longevity. This shift is further supported by consumer narratives that frame participation in circular fashion as both economically and ethically rewarding (Pithers, 2022).

In 2022, Gucci launched *Vault*, an online platform dedicated to curated vintage and restored garments acquired from Italian grandmothers and auction houses, reconditioned by in-house artisans and, in some cases, reinterpreted by creative director Alessandro Michele. As Michele notes, in an interview marking the platform’s launch, ‘Gucci turns one hundred this year, and it’s time to show everybody how beautiful it would be to give a second, a third life and more to old things that are the most beautiful’ (Michele, cited in Pithers, 2022: 166).

A similar emphasis on longevity and timelessness is articulated by Louis Vuitton’s Nicolas Ghesquière, who frames his design approach around endurance rather than

seasonal novelty: ‘as an artistic director my mission is to do ‘new’... but of course, like every artistic director, my real dream is to have timeless pieces that last more than a season and that people will wear forever’ (Ghesquière, cited in Pithers, 2022: 166).

Designers increasingly aim to create garments that endure, while growing consumer demand for pre-owned fashion fosters the preservation of garment histories and narratives, adding value that extends beyond material construction.

This philosophy extends into footwear. Practices of shoe care- cleaning, polishing, repairing, have long been framed as expressions of discipline and attention to detail. From the late 1970s onwards, the pre-loved and deadstock sneaker market expanded alongside the emergence of the Terrace Casuals: football supporters who opted for designer ‘casual’ clothing rather than team colours (FashionBeans, n.d.). This marked a moment when style-conscious menswear moved from niche subcultures into wider everyday use, particularly on the terraces of Anfield, Liverpool.

In this setting, fashion operated as a mode of connection and self-expression, signalling taste, affiliation, and shared cultural values. As Scapp and Seitz (2011) suggest, such aesthetics speak to the broader dimensions of identity and personal meaning. Sneakers, in this context, became culturally significant objects- moving from underground scenes into mainstream visibility and becoming accepted across a wide range of social groups.

Across the twentieth century, everyday footwear underwent a significant cultural shift as informal shoe styles; sandals, moccasins, blue suede shoes, brothel creepers, and later, sneakers began to displace the dominance of the traditional ‘proper’ leather shoe. As Wilson (1985) and Craik (1994) note, these emerging styles carried new meanings connected to leisure, youth culture, and individuality, challenging earlier associations between formal leather footwear and propriety, respectability, and social convention. By the late century, sneakers had become emblematic of a broader move towards informality in dress, comfort-led design, and lifestyle expression (Riello & McNeil, 2006). This shift transformed footwear from a largely formal requirement into a diverse category of cultural objects signalling identity, taste, subcultural alignment, and personal narrative.

Therefore, fully immersing this study in the sneaker subculture and building relationships with key participants was imperative. Through attending sneaker festivals and gaining the trust and insight of experts and artisans, it became clear that the ethos of nurturing and preserving sneakers and the value bestowed upon pairs, could offer substantial ethical possibilities if translated into garment care and longevity. This dialogue with specialists, collectors, deadstock traders, and craftspeople provided an enriched perspective on material stewardship, one which warranted recording and archiving as part of this research.

As discussed in Chapter Two, it was through this sustained engagement that *Sole-Zine* (Appendix 5.1-5.9: Figs. A6-A14) emerged as both a research output and a participatory platform. Combining photographic documentation with narratives of individual obsession, style, and place, it has had a significant impact within the community. Demand for the zine has continued to grow, with key figures from within the subculture actively requesting to be featured. Its central foldout poster format evokes a sense of nostalgia for ‘old school’ practices of filling bedroom walls with sneaker imagery, alongside cultural habits such as Subbuteo and football card collecting.

Through this dissemination, Professor Yuniya Kawamura, academic at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York and author of *Fashion, Gender and Subculture* (2016), agreed to meet and be interviewed for this thesis after receiving *Sole-Zine*. She noted both the differences and parallels between sneaker cultures in the UK and the United States, which led to further academic exchange (Appendix 3). This dialogue subsequently extended into practice, with *Sole-Zine* founders (Owen and Owen) being invited to teach within her classes at FIT New York. Now in its ninth volume, *Sole-Zine* has developed into an internationally recognised publication, contributing to academic conferences, community workshops, and exhibitions, while continuing to evolve in format and reach.

Within *Sole-Zine* Volume 02, the interview with Brannigan (Owen, 2020) (Appendix 2.1) traces his development from an initial brand affiliation with adidas to a deeper investment in the preservation, restoration, and customisation of sneakers. His practice reflects a broader shift within the subculture, where care and modification replace passive consumption. This is further supported by the collaborative infrastructures

surrounding sneaker culture, including festivals such as LacesOut! Liverpool (LacesOut!, 2019), and digital communities such as the Facebook group *adidas Only Addiction* (@AOA), alongside Instagram-based networks that circulate and validate practice.

Across these spaces, sharing operates as a core cultural mechanism, facilitating peer evaluation, recognition, and connection. This participatory exchange is central to how value is produced and sustained within the subculture. It also offers an alternative model for fashion engagement, one that prioritises repair, restoration, and longevity over disposal and overconsumption. In this sense, the findings underscore the timeliness of the research, positioning sneaker subculture as a critical site for rethinking contemporary relationships with clothing and material value.

### **3.2 CUSTOMISE – MAKING AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

Customisation, within leather sneaker culture, reframes making as a form of knowledge production. I approach customisation not as surface decoration, but as a process of experimentation through which tacit knowledge is generated. Each intervention; painting, reconstructing, stitching, produces material understanding that is developed through practice.

In my fieldwork, I observed how customisation destabilises traditional hierarchies between designer and wearer. Knowledge is produced through peer networks, workshops, and online communities, where I see learning as iterative and collective. Platforms such as Instagram and community forums operate as informal archives of process, failure, and experimentation.

Practitioners such as Boyle; an expert customiser and independent vintage sportswear retailer, demonstrate how customisation functions as both craft and cultural production. Through my interview with Boyle (Owen, 2020) (Appendix 2.3), I learned how restoration often evolves into customisation as skills, confidence, and networks develop. I understand this transition as a shift from repair to authorship, where objects become sites of creative intervention.

I also identify customisation as a response to desire within sneaker culture. Limited editions and exclusivity drive practitioners to produce one-off designs, which

reinforces individuality and creative identity. In this context, I see customisation as both resistance to mass production and participation in a parallel creative economy.

This process destabilises traditional hierarchies between designer, maker, and wearer. Knowledge is no longer held exclusively within formal institutions or industry structures but is produced and circulated through practice-led communities, digital platforms, and peer-to-peer exchange. Tutorials, process videos, and shared failures contribute to a distributed learning environment in which innovation is iterative and collective. Customisation therefore operates as a site where craft knowledge is continually tested, adapted, and redefined.

Importantly, making through customisation also repositions the object as open-ended rather than fixed. The sneaker is no longer a finished product but a mutable form, subject to reinterpretation over time. This shift foregrounds agency, allowing the wearer or maker to inscribe personal, cultural, and aesthetic narratives onto the material. In doing so, customisation challenges passive consumption and instead asserts making as a critical, knowledge-generating practice that underpins new models of value, authorship, and engagement within contemporary fashion.

As makers and wearers of clothes, people, and the garments they wear are entangled. The intimate nature of this relationship is highlighted in the way it is expressed through language: ‘it’s just not me,’ somebody will say, or ‘it fits like a second skin’ present an interesting discussion of the way clothes are understood and articulated as correct or appropriate (Clarke and Miller, 2002). We think ourselves into the garments we wear and through this projection garments become integral parts of ourselves, as Winnicott’s ‘transitional objects’ proposes (Winnicott, 1979).

Decathexis, a process of disinvestment of emotional energy in an object, is the fate of many things we wear, and in many ways, this is a central function of the fashion object, the sought after, desired, and loved. The fashion object must- to remain an important part of the wardrobe, withstand being worn much in the way that the transitional object must withstand being ‘affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated,’ ‘never change’ and ‘survive instinctual loving, and hating’ (Winnicott, 1979: 7), only later to lose its power, or agency in the relationship and slowly fall out of favour. In

this context, leather fashion, the most durable flexible and luxurious material, should be foremost.

This process of garments ‘falling out of favour’ has contributed significantly to the contemporary fashion landfill crisis (Barber, 2022). Buying cheap items has meant not worrying if it is only worn once, or if it is not good quality, to simply shop again. The environment can no longer sustain this cycle or mindset; consequently, the way consumers perceive existing fashion items must become flexible to resist this continual ‘falling out of favour’.

Customising items could provide this flexibility and garner a new fashion philosophy and attitude. Looking to the artisan craftspeople within the sneaker industry who successfully use this technique to add value and uniqueness to items, could offer the solution. As with Brannigan (Appendix 5.2: Fig. A7), customisers are often craftspeople who began by restoring items, but as their interest, knowledge, skills and network develop, this inspires the progression to customisation, and other more unique techniques, such as conversion occurs.

The *Sole-Zine* interview with Boyle, supports this notion (Owen, 2020) (Appendix 2.3). Boyle can create, by hand, sneakers that customers may no longer be able to access commercially yet have long desired to own. He does this by utilising vintage, worn, second-hand shoes as the base to build a new shoe, thereby filling a gap in the industry and fulfilling obsession and desire, which fuels innovation. His unique retail space in Dundee sells vintage sportswear, and sneakers, but in addition, he uses the space to offer workshops in which he shares his skills and knowledge, takes commissions, and openly reveals expert insight into the materials, techniques, and processes central to the art of sneaker customisation. This endorses discussion with sneaker restorer, Brannigan in terms of the power of sharing and community to this subculture.

As sneaker subculture expanded, customisation emerged as a key strategy for producing social distinction among sneaker enthusiasts- a means of asserting status and gaining peer recognition.

In recent years, however, the rise of so-called ‘customisers’ has led to an increasingly saturated field in which quality and intent vary significantly. Many generic, formulaic approaches such as; basic airbrushing, stencil work, or colour-flip techniques, circulate widely across sneaker blogs and social media, yet often lack longevity or cultural depth. By contrast, practitioners who engage critically with the history of custom culture tend to sustain its development and refinement. These are the names who not only participate in but actively extend sneaker customisation as a practice (Maki, 2008).

While its status is sometimes trivialised, well-executed custom footwear is widely regarded as a form of applied art, often exceeding commercially available designs. Significant labour is invested in preparing, painting, sewing, and reworking materials such as leather, suede, and rubber to produce unique pairs intended for wear or collection. Even highly limited runs offer a level of exclusivity that mass production cannot replicate, and for many consumers, bespoke production carries an additional affective value beyond scarcity alone.

2018 marked a pivotal moment for sneaker culture more broadly, with the custom sneaker community experiencing heightened visibility and creative output. In the U.S., Virgil Abloh’s *The Ten* collaboration with Nike (Sotheby’s, 2023) helped normalise deconstruction and encouraged a more DIY-oriented approach to sneaker design. Within this context, figures such as Dominic Chambrone (The Shoe Surgeon), Mache Custom Kicks, and Joshua Vides are widely recognised as leading practitioners (The Shoe Surgeon, 2019; Mache Customs, 2022; Joshua Vides, 2022). Their work often extends beyond footwear into the realm of art, reflecting the significant time, technical skill, and conceptual development involved in transforming an idea into a realised object. Chambrone, in particular, has become a central figure in the field, also facilitating bespoke workshops in which participants co-create reworked sneakers under expert guidance (Maki, 2008).

As supported by interviews with Brannigan and Boyle (Owen, 2020) (Appendices 2.1 and 2.3), precision is fundamental to custom practice. Attention to detail such as pattern matching and accurate logo reproduction, is treated as essential, with many practitioners refusing to release work unless it meets their own exacting standards. In

this context, reputation functions as a form of cultural capital; building trust takes time, and consistency is crucial in a saturated field where many claim expertise.

Many custom works draw on external cultural references including film, art, and music. These practices often occupy a space between painted modification and full reconstruction, incorporating texture, material intervention, and conceptual layering. Boyle (Appendix 5.4: Fig. A9), for example, produces works that translate references from fine art and music into highly detailed bespoke sneakers. While client requests are often open-ended, execution is always conditional on feasibility and quality.

Today, customised footwear is highly visible across cultural platforms, appearing in music videos, circulating on digital forums, and featuring in global fashion weeks. Customisation has become central to the pursuit of a distinctive fashion identity, with sneakers operating as one of the earliest and most influential sites of individualised footwear design within urban culture.

This logic of embedded individuality has also been absorbed by major brands. Individualised products now command premium value, with companies offering both artist-led limited editions and mass customisation systems. Platforms such as NIKEiD (Nike, 2019), RbkCustom (Reebok, 2019), and adidas 'myadidas' (adidas, n.d.) utilise computer-aided manufacturing to enable scalable personalisation. Similarly, Tagur (Tagur, 2019) introduced a deliberately blank sneaker designed to function as a customisable canvas, positioning the consumer as co-producer.

Shoes have long served as subjects within artistic practice, but increasingly they function as the canvas itself. The white sneaker operates as an open surface for 3D artistic intervention. This extends earlier subcultural practices, such as; those of punk and mod movements in the 1970s, which foregrounded DIY modification as a form of resistance and identity formation. Such subcultures emphasised individuality, creativity, and self-expression, operating through a Do-It-Yourself ethos that encouraged production outside of commercial systems (Griffin, 2015). Reconsidering these histories highlights how customisation can foster emotional durability and more meaningful relationships with fashion objects. In this sense, personalisation and customisation may also contribute to a more materially sustainable fashion culture.

### 3.3 CONVERT – TRANSFORMATION AND RE-AUTHORSHIP

Conversion represents the most radical form of intervention within sneaker culture, where objects are dismantled and reconstructed into new forms. I understand conversion as a process that destabilises original function and authorship, allowing new identities to emerge through material transformation.

Through my engagement with practitioners such as Charlesworth (Appendix 5.3: Fig. A8), I observed how conversion operates as both technical process and conceptual rethinking of footwear. In this practice, I identify a shift in authorship from brand or designer to maker and wearer, where the object becomes layered with multiple histories.

Charlesworth a shoemaker by trade, whose early interest in adidas evolved into a practice spanning restoration and customisation before developing into the specialised process of sneaker conversion. Conversion is specifically, transplanting soles to reconfigure one shoe type into another. Operating as the only known practitioner of this approach in the North-West of the UK, Charlesworth privileges invention over reproduction, deliberately avoiding replication in favour of original forms that transform existing footwear archetypes. His work repositions objects such as football boots or hiking shoes into everyday sneakers, retaining traces of their original contexts while shifting their functional and aesthetic identity.

Conversion, in this sense, is not simply modification but re-authorship. Each intervention carries residual cultural memory, the performative associations of sport, terrain, or use-value, while simultaneously producing a new object with altered purpose and narrative. A football boot may retain its connection to competitive play, while a hiking boot may still evoke endurance and landscape, yet both are reconfigured into wearable urban forms. The result is footwear that operates across multiple temporal and material registers; simultaneously archival, functional, and speculative.

Charlesworth's practice emerged through engagement with international online communities, where 'sole swapping' terminology circulated as a form of experimental knowledge exchange. This highlights the importance of informal digital networks as sites where technical skills, conceptual approaches, and material experimentation

converge outside institutional design spaces. As Sampson (2020) suggests, fashion is less a fixed object than an ongoing process, an activity defined by continual transformation rather than stable production.

Comparable conversion practices can be found internationally. Flaneurz (Flaneurz, 2022) produce modular ‘On Wheelz’ systems that transform sneakers into detachable roller skates, while Ancuta Sarca (Ancuta Sarca, 2022) hybridises vintage footwear forms with Nike deadstock to create elevated heel-sneaker composites. In the UK, Helen Kirkham (Helen Kirkham, 2022) reworks discarded trainers sourced from charity networks such as Traid into entirely reconstructed footwear, foregrounding reuse as both aesthetic and material strategy. Across these practices, conversion operates less as repair and more as systematic recompositing, in which value is generated through reconfiguration rather than preservation alone.

What distinguishes these approaches is the repositioning of waste as design resource. Material is not concealed but made visible, producing footwear that exposes its own construction history. This shifts authorship from manufacturer to maker, and increasingly to systems of collection, disassembly, and recombination. In doing so, conversion challenges linear production models by introducing cyclical and iterative logics of design.

Within these practices, ideation is inseparable from material engagement. Touch, handling, and proximity to the object remain central to decision-making, with form emerging through direct negotiation with material constraints. Contemporary practitioners work with discarded or obsolete components not only to reduce waste, but to reframe obsolescence as creative potential. This positions conversion at the intersection of affect, memory, and material intelligence.

These methods align with broader developments in sustainable design and material innovation, including Mylo (Mylo, n.d.), adidas FUTURECRAFT.STRUNG (Dezeen, 2020), and circular production strategies developed by brands such as Veja (Veja, 2022) and Satoshi Studio (Satoshi Studio, 2022). However, while industry-led innovation often focuses on scalability, conversion practices are defined by small-scale, labour-intensive interventions that prioritise uniqueness, narrative, and material continuity over mass replication.

The *Design Museum* Exhibition *Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street* (2021) further contextualised this shift, tracing how sneaker culture is shaped by both technological innovation and localised subcultural practices. From UK football casuals<sup>2</sup> to South African ‘bubble heads,’<sup>3</sup> Mexican Cholombianos<sup>4</sup>, and global skate communities, what emerges is a shared use of footwear as a vehicle for identity formation. These groups have not only shaped aesthetic codes but also indirectly influenced systems of value, including deadstock economies and the fetishisation of the ‘original’ (OG) sneaker.

Importantly, these subcultures also sustain an ethos of preservation and re-use, particularly within UK football casual culture, where authenticity is tied to material originality and historical continuity. This has contributed to both the circulation and conservation of specific sneaker models, reinforcing the cultural and economic value of longevity and repair.

The exhibition foregrounded collaborative design and co-creation as emerging paradigms within footwear production. This research extends that position by examining how subcultural techniques- restoration, customisation, and conversion, can be translated into broader design methodologies. By forming creative networks between practitioners, collectors, and communities, sneaker culture becomes a distributed system of knowledge production rather than a singular design authorship.

This supports Kawamura’s (2018) argument that fashion is collectively produced through networks of actors rather than individual designers. Within this framework, difference is not a by-product but a generative condition of value. Innovation emerges through variation, reinterpretation, and circulation, rather than standardisation.

The chapter has identified how craftspeople working within sneaker subcultures mobilise restoration, customisation, and conversion to extend the lifespan of deadstock, vintage, and pre-loved footwear. These practices were consolidated

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Football Casual’ refers to a British football subculture that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, (Sole Supplier, n.d.; see also Giulianotti, 1999; Redhead, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Bubble Koppe’ (sometimes informally referred to as ‘bubbleheads’) describes a sneaker community based primarily in Cape Town, associated with collectors of Nike Air Max and other visible Air ‘bubble’ silhouettes (Highsnobiety, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Mexican Cholombianos’ is a term used to describe the very distinctive youth subculture existing predominantly in northern Mexico, Monterrey (Dance Policy, n.d.).

through *Sole-Zine* (Appendices 5.1-5.9). This archival approach highlights how documentation and making are intertwined, producing both cultural record and design methodology.

Ultimately, this analysis positions conversion as a model for rethinking material ethics within fashion. Informed by shifts accelerated by the pandemic towards pre-loved consumption, repair, and longevity, it underscores the relevance of indexical garments-objects that carry visible histories of use and transformation. By transferring these principles from footwear to broader categories such as leather garments, this research proposes a *wearer-as-designer* framework in which authorship is distributed, materials are extended in life, and value is redefined through adaptation rather than replacement.

Across this Chapter, I have demonstrated how restoration, customisation, and conversion operate as interconnected practices through which value, knowledge, and authorship are reconfigured within sneaker culture. Through my engagement with practitioners, communities, and material processes, I understand these practices as forms of cultural production that extend beyond footwear into broader questions of fashion, sustainability, and design ethics.

Rather than positioning the wearer as a passive consumer, I identify the emergence of the *wearer-as-designer* as an active participant in material culture. This shift is not theoretical alone but grounded in lived practice, where garments and footwear become evolving artefacts shaped through use, care, and intervention.

This chapter therefore establishes sneaker subculture as a site of embodied knowledge production, where making, wearing, and learning are inseparable. It provides the foundation for the following chapter, which considers how these practices might be extended into broader fashion systems through participatory and educational frameworks.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE WEARER-AS-DESIGNER – PROGRESS + PROTECT**

The preceding chapter established restoration, customisation, and conversion as culturally situated practices through which value, authorship, and material knowledge are continuously negotiated. Rather than positioning sneaker craftspeople solely as subjects of study, the research identified their workshops, events, and informal learning networks as active sites of knowledge production, where tacit skill, material literacy, and collective exchange shape alternative approaches to fashion practice. Within these spaces, leather functions not only as a durable material but as a medium through which care, longevity, and attachment are materially enacted.

Building upon this framework, the thesis argues that the ethos embedded within sneaker subculture, particularly its emphasis on preservation, adaptability, and peer-led learning, offers a transferable model for contemporary leather fashion more broadly. The workshops, interviews, exhibitions, and field encounters undertaken throughout the research form a central methodological structure through which this argument is developed. These participatory environments demonstrate how garments may be repositioned as evolving objects that accumulate cultural and personal significance through continued use, modification, and repair, rather than becoming obsolete through cycles of consumption.

This final chapter synthesises the practice-led and ethnographic findings of the research to examine how participatory models of restoration, customisation, and material stewardship may inform future approaches to fashion education, sustainability, and wearer engagement. In doing so, it positions the *wearer-as-designer* not as an abstract theoretical concept, but as a lived and transferable practice emerging through shared skill, community exchange, and sustained relationships between wearer, maker, and material.

### **4.1 ELEVATE – EMOTIONAL AND MATERIAL VALUE**

Elevation within sneaker culture refers to the process through which objects acquire increased cultural, emotional, and material significance through continued interaction and intervention. Rather than being determined exclusively through branding or market scarcity, value is generated through use, restoration, adaptation, and personal

investment over time. Within this framework, marks of wear, repair, and modification function not as evidence of decline but as indicators of attachment, continuity, and lived experience.

This research extends existing material culture discourse by demonstrating how restoration and wearer intervention intensify emotional durability through repeated acts of engagement. Sneakers become sites through which memory, identity, and authorship are negotiated, enabling garments and footwear to function as active participants within everyday life rather than passive commodities. Through repeated cycles of wearing, repairing, and reworking, the object accumulates relational value that exceeds its original commercial intent.

At the same time, elevation operates materially. Leather, as a responsive and adaptive medium, records traces of use and care, producing a visible dialogue between body, object, and time. Creasing, patination, restoration marks, and material adaptation contribute to a layered material history through which value is continually renegotiated. The research therefore positions elevation not as an aesthetic refinement associated with conventional luxury systems, but as a process of deepened engagement between wearer and object.

This study demonstrates how sneaker subculture provides a framework through which alternative approaches to fashion value can be understood. Through restoration, customisation, and conversion, practitioners cultivate models of ownership grounded in participation, stewardship, and material continuity. These practices challenge dominant systems of disposability by foregrounding care, maintenance, and adaptability as culturally meaningful forms of engagement.

The theoretical framework of material culture underpins this analysis by positioning clothing and footwear as active cultural agents shaped through embodied interaction. Drawing upon post-qualitative perspectives and theories of dress and identity, the research identifies garments not as fixed objects but as evolving assemblages whose meanings shift through use, circulation, and reinterpretation. Vintage, restored, and customised garments therefore operate simultaneously as material artefacts and narrative surfaces through which identity is continuously performed and reconstructed.

Importantly, the findings suggest that sustainability cannot be understood solely as a technological or industrial problem. Instead, the research demonstrates how grassroots repair cultures generate alternative systems of value centred upon longevity, participation, and material stewardship. Within sneaker subculture, restoration and customisation operate not simply as aesthetic interventions but as forms of critical practice that resist the accelerated cycles of obsolescence embedded within contemporary fashion systems.

The study further situates these developments within broader cultural shifts toward care, longevity, and participatory engagement with dress. Increased interest in repair, sewing, restoration, and craft-based practices reflects a growing desire for deeper material connection and greater agency over consumption habits. While these changes intensified following the pandemic period, the research identifies them as part of a longer trajectory linked to DIY culture, maker communities, and renewed interest in tangible forms of creative production.

Engagement with leather suppliers and manufacturers throughout the research also highlighted significant developments in responsible material production, particularly within the Italian tanning industry. The findings identified growing integration between artisanal expertise, technological innovation, traceability systems, and environmental governance. These developments support the research argument that leather, when situated within responsible systems of production and long-term use, possesses significant potential as a durable and adaptable material.

This research therefore challenges simplified assumptions surrounding leather as inherently unsustainable by repositioning it within a broader lifecycle perspective. As a material capable of repair, restoration, and prolonged use, leather enables alternative relationships between wearer and garment that privilege continuity over replacement. The findings suggest that durability alone is insufficient; rather, garments acquire long-term value through the cultivation of attachment, skill, and care practices that encourage continued engagement.

The resurgence of participatory craft practices further reinforces this shift. Existing research into sewing, repair, and maker communities demonstrates growing interest in forms of making that prioritise control, fulfilment, and material awareness. Collective

practices such as sewing groups, workshops, and community craft networks reveal how knowledge exchange functions socially as well as technically, enabling participants to share skills, experiences, and forms of support through collaborative engagement.

The sneaker community operates in a comparable manner, functioning as a distributed pedagogic network through which material knowledge, creative agency, and cultural value are collectively negotiated. Workshops, social media platforms, zines, exhibitions, and peer-led demonstrations all contribute to an informal educational ecosystem in which tacit knowledge is continuously circulated and refined. Within this system, restoration and customisation become both technical practices and modes of cultural participation.

This chapter therefore argues that the *wearer-as-designer* framework offers broader implications for contemporary fashion education and design practice. By repositioning wearers as active participants within the lifecycle of garments, the framework disrupts linear models of production and consumption and instead foregrounds adaptation, repair literacy, and participatory authorship. In doing so, it establishes a more relational understanding of fashion, grounded not in disposability or novelty, but in continuity, stewardship, and material engagement.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that subcultural craft practices generate forms of knowledge that are highly relevant to contemporary debates surrounding sustainability, pedagogy, and material culture. The research positions sneaker restoration and customisation not as peripheral activities, but as legitimate sites of innovation capable of informing future models of fashion education, community engagement, and regenerative design practice.

#### **4.2 PRESERVE – PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE AND LEGACY**

Preservation, within the context of this research, is concerned with the continuation and endurance of knowledge, practice, and cultural memory embedded within sneaker communities. Rather than focusing solely on the physical survival of objects, preservation is understood as a process through which tacit skills, material understanding, and subcultural histories are retained, recorded, and carried forward through active engagement. Throughout the research, it became increasingly evident

that many of the specialist practices associated with sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion exist largely through informal networks of exchange, making them vulnerable to loss in the absence of sustained documentation or intergenerational transmission.

The study therefore positions preservation as an ongoing and participatory act of cultural continuity. Preservation is framed not as static conservation, but as a dynamic process through which knowledge is continually reactivated, adapted, and shared across communities of practice. Workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions, publications, and peer-led learning environments operate as important sites through which these forms of expertise may be maintained, reinterpreted, and sustained for future generations.

Importantly, the research demonstrates that these forms of knowledge are rarely learned through conventional educational models alone. Instead, they emerge through observation, repetition, experimentation, failure, and collective participation. Tacit knowledge operates through embodied engagement with tools, materials, and processes, requiring forms of learning that prioritise interaction and experience rather than solely theoretical instruction.

This has significant implications for fashion education. The findings suggest that contemporary fashion curricula must move beyond product-centred models of design education toward frameworks that foreground material stewardship, repair literacy, adaptability, and wearer participation. Within this context, restoration and customisation should not be treated as supplementary or nostalgic activities, but as critical methodologies capable of reshaping how designers understand value, authorship, and sustainability.

The *wearer-as-designer* framework developed throughout this research therefore operates simultaneously as both a conceptual model and a pedagogic strategy. By repositioning individuals as active participants within garment lifecycles, the framework encourages a more participatory and relational understanding of fashion practice. This shift has the potential to cultivate forms of design thinking centred upon long-term engagement, emotional durability, and collaborative authorship.

Practice-led methodologies were central to the development of these findings. Interviews, workshops, exhibitions, field observation, and the production of *Sole-Zine* (Appendices 1-11), enabled knowledge to emerge through direct engagement with subcultural communities and material processes. Rather than functioning solely as dissemination outputs, these activities became methodological tools through which relationships between material, wearer, and maker could be tested and critically examined.

The production of *Sole-Zine* (Appendices 5.1-5.9) was particularly significant within this process. Operating simultaneously as archive, publication, and research method, the zine documented narratives, practices, and forms of tacit knowledge that are often excluded from institutional archives or academic discourse. In doing so, it established an alternative model of documentation grounded in participation, accessibility, and community exchange.

The findings further suggest that archiving itself must be reconsidered within fashion research. Traditional forms of preservation frequently prioritise finished objects over process, overlooking the embodied skills and cultural interactions through which meaning is produced. This research instead argues for forms of living archive that preserve process alongside object, enabling future practitioners to access not only outcomes, but the techniques, conversations, and systems of knowledge that generated them.

This has led directly to the proposed future development and testing of a 3D digital social heritage archive (Appendix 6: Figs. 46 and 47) as an extension of the research. Such a platform would enable restoration, customisation, and conversion processes to be systematically documented through staged scanning, animation, and tutorial-based reconstruction. Positioned as both an educational and archival tool, the archive would preserve endangered craft knowledge while simultaneously extending access to wider audiences.

The research also contributes to wider discussions surrounding sustainability by challenging dominant assumptions regarding value and consumption within fashion systems. Rather than locating sustainability solely within technological innovation or industrial reform, the study demonstrates how regenerative approaches may emerge

through small-scale, community-led practices grounded in care, maintenance, and adaptation. Within sneaker subculture, sustainability operates less as a market category and more as a lived material practice.

Crucially, the study identifies sneaker culture as a pedagogic ecosystem in which knowledge is collectively produced and transmitted through distributed networks of participation. Social media platforms, workshops, retail spaces, exhibitions, festivals, and publications all contribute to an informal but highly effective system of learning and exchange. These environments facilitate forms of collaborative authorship through which participants continuously test, refine, and circulate material knowledge.

The implications of this extend beyond sneaker culture itself. The findings suggest that subcultural communities offer valuable frameworks for understanding how future models of fashion education and practice may operate. By integrating collaborative learning, repair practices, and wearer participation into educational structures, institutions may begin to cultivate more critically engaged and materially aware forms of design practice.

The research therefore positions experimental and community-led environments as essential sites of future fashion innovation. Rather than separating theory from practice, these spaces demonstrate how knowledge emerges through their convergence. Material experimentation, restoration, and collaborative making become forms of critical enquiry through which broader social, ethical, and environmental questions may be explored.

#### **4.3 PROTECT – FUTURE FRAMEWORKS FOR FASHION EDUCATION**

Protection, within the context of this research, concerns the safeguarding of both material and cultural futures. It extends beyond the preservation of individual garments to encompass the protection of craft knowledge, participatory learning systems, and the social networks through which restoration, customisation, and conversion practices continue to evolve. The research therefore positions protection not as resistance to change, but as an active strategy for sustaining alternative forms of fashion practice rooted in care, stewardship, and collective participation.

Importantly, this protective framework carries significant implications for fashion and textile education. The findings suggest that future curricula must move beyond conventional product-focused design models and instead embed restoration, adaptation, repair literacy, and material stewardship within teaching and learning environments. In this context, workshops, collaborative making spaces, exhibitions, archives, and community partnerships become pedagogic sites through which students engage directly with material processes, tacit knowledge, and alternative systems of value.

The *wearer-as-designer* framework therefore operates not only as a conceptual model for understanding contemporary fashion practice, but also as an educational strategy capable of reshaping how fashion is taught. By encouraging students to participate actively in the lifecycle of garments through repair, customisation, and material experimentation, the framework supports more reflexive, participatory, and ethically engaged forms of design education. Such approaches foreground long-term thinking, emotional durability, and collaborative authorship, equipping emerging designers with the critical and practical tools required to navigate increasingly complex social and environmental challenges.

The research further identifies subcultural communities as valuable educational resources whose knowledge systems remain underrepresented within formal institutions. Sneaker restoration and customisation communities demonstrate how peer-to-peer exchange, embodied learning, and practice-led experimentation generate highly specialised forms of material intelligence. Integrating these approaches into educational structures offers opportunities to bridge the gap between academic learning and lived creative practice while validating forms of knowledge traditionally excluded from institutional frameworks.

In this way, protection also becomes a pedagogic act. Safeguarding endangered craft skills, documenting processes, and establishing accessible forms of archive and knowledge exchange ensure that future generations of designers, makers, and researchers are able not only to preserve these practices, but to adapt and extend them within new cultural and technological contexts.

Across the thesis, a productive tension emerges between preservation and transformation, and between protection and openness. These tensions are not resolved but sustained as an active framework through which fashion may be understood as a situated and evolving cultural practice. Authorship becomes distributed across acts of repair, adaptation, teaching, and reuse, rather than confined to moments of original creation.

In addressing the research questions, the study demonstrates that future-oriented fashion practice cannot rely solely upon inherited models of production, consumption, or education. Instead, it must remain responsive to shifting relationships between bodies, materials, and systems of making. Preservation therefore becomes not an act of resisting change, but a method of engaging critically with what is continuously remade through use, wear, and reinterpretation.

Through its sustained focus on sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion, the research establishes that subcultural craft practices constitute significant forms of design knowledge with direct relevance to contemporary fashion education, sustainability discourse, and material culture studies. The study demonstrates that repair, adaptation, and wearer participation are not peripheral to fashion systems, but central to the development of more responsible and regenerative approaches to design.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the *wearer-as-designer* framework offers a transferable model through which future fashion practices may be reimagined. By foregrounding care, participation, material literacy, and collaborative knowledge exchange, the research proposes an alternative understanding of fashion value rooted not in disposability or constant replacement, but in continuity, stewardship, and ongoing material engagement. In doing so, it positions sneaker subculture as both a cultural archive and a site of future-facing innovation capable of informing new approaches to fashion education, design practice, and sustainable material culture.

## CONCLUSION

Across this thesis, a consistent and productive tension emerges between preservation and transformation, and between protection and openness. These tensions are not resolved but sustained as a critical active framework through which fashion can be understood as a situated, evolving practice. By positioning the *wearer-as-designer*, authorship becomes distributed across acts of repair, adaptation, teaching, and reuse, rather than confined to moments of original creation. This reframing challenges established hierarchies within fashion and relocates knowledge within material engagement, lived experience, and collective practice.

In addressing the emerging questions, it becomes clear that future-oriented fashion practice cannot rely solely on inherited models of education, production, or value. Instead, it must remain responsive to the shifting relationships between bodies, materials, and systems of making. The role of education is therefore not to stabilise these dynamics, but to support practitioners in navigating them with critical awareness and creative agency. Likewise, preservation and protection are no longer passive acts of holding onto the past, but active engagements with what is being continuously remade through use, wear, and interpretation.

Through a sustained focus on leather as a material case study, this research addressed broader questions within practice-led fashion and material culture concerning embodied authorship and the *wearer-as-designer* framework. It demonstrated that tactile engagement with leather, tested through restoration, customisation, and conversion practices, facilitates a deeper integration of garment and self, reshaping clothing from passive commodity to active site of identity formation, ethical decision-making, and creative agency. By critically evaluating contemporary leather tanning methods alongside experimental craft techniques adopted within sneaker restoration and customisation communities, the study establishes a dialogue between material theory and situated practice. Through this integration of analysis and making, the durability, flexibility, and long-term potential of leather garments were not only theoretically assessed but materially tested through practice-led experimentation.

Central to the thesis is the argument that the sustainable knowledge embedded within sneaker subculture, particularly its practices of restoration, customisation, conversion,

and peer-led exchange, offers a viable framework for rethinking contemporary fashion systems. Rather than positioning sustainability as solely an industrial or technological concern, the research evidences how grassroots, community-driven practices actively extend product lifecycles, cultivate emotional durability, and reconfigure notions of ownership and authorship. Circularity therefore emerges not simply as a production strategy, but as a relational practice grounded in care, adaptation, skill, and continued use.

The integration of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, action research, and practice-led experimentation enabled the identification of tacit craft knowledge as a transferable form of design intelligence. Workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions, community engagement, and the production of Sole-Zine (Appendices 1-5) functioned not merely as dissemination methods, but as methodological tools through which knowledge was generated, tested, and preserved. Together, the written thesis and practice-led outputs establish an integrated body of research in which text, object, archive, and participation operate dialogically.

Importantly, this thesis positions sneaker subculture as a pedagogic ecosystem where knowledge is transmitted informally through embodied practice, peer networks, and shared cultural values. In doing so, the research contributes significantly to debates within fashion education, material culture, sustainability, and craft theory by validating subcultural craft as a legitimate site of knowledge production. The study argues that restoration, adaptation, and wearer participation should be embedded within fashion curricula as core competencies capable of cultivating durability, repair literacy, ethical material stewardship, and critical engagement with systems of consumption.

The research therefore contributes a transferable pedagogical framework that moves beyond traditional studio-based models towards participatory, community-engaged, and materially grounded approaches to fashion education. By positioning the wearer as an active participant in design, rather than a passive consumer, the thesis establishes wearer-as-designer as both a conceptual framework and an educational strategy capable of reshaping how fashion is taught, learned, and understood.

At the same time, the study contributes to contemporary material discourse by challenging reductive assumptions surrounding leather and its environmental

implications. Through critical analysis and material experimentation, leather is repositioned as a durable, adaptable, and restorable by-product capable of supporting slow fashion principles and long-term garment stewardship. This research therefore establishes a reconfigured understanding of vintage, second-hand, and pre-worn attire not as diminished commodities, but as sites of regenerative design potential.

Crucially, the thesis captures and preserves a significant moment within British sneaker subculture, identifying both its cultural importance and its vulnerability. The research highlights the risk of losing specialised artisan knowledge due to insufficient intergenerational transmission and responds through an archival and practice-led methodology designed to document processes, narratives, and communities. In this context, preservation becomes not only an act of conservation, but a form of intervention and future-making.

The legacy of the project is established through the creation of archives, workshops, exhibitions, conference papers, publications, and the Sole-Zine compendium (Appendix 5: Figs. A6-A14), all of which function as mechanisms of knowledge exchange and cultural preservation. These outputs document endangered material practices while simultaneously advancing a regenerative design ethos grounded in durability, participation, and collective creativity.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that sustainability is not solely an industrial challenge, but a cultural, pedagogical, and material one. Meaningful change depends upon how designers are taught to think about materials, ownership, care, and value. By embedding subcultural practices within educational and design frameworks, the study moves beyond critique to offer a practice-led model for responsible fashion futures; one rooted in restoration, adaptation, collaboration, and long-term material engagement.

As fashion continues to evolve within increasingly complex global and digital systems, its future depends not on resolving these tensions, but on learning to work productively within them. This research affirms that fashion remains in a continual state of becoming, shaped by histories, sustained through practice, and repeatedly reimagined through the relationships between maker, material, and wearer.

Building upon these findings, the post-thesis phase will expand the framework developed throughout the study into a fully realised 3D digital social heritage archive. This future development will systematise the documentation of restoration, customisation, and conversion processes through staged scanning and animated reconstruction, creating accessible pedagogical resources for future generations. Positioned as an extension of the thesis's contribution, the archive will safeguard endangered material knowledge while reinforcing the study's central conclusion: that preserving process is as important as preserving object in the development of regenerative fashion systems.

## **CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE**

This research makes an original contribution to fashion design education and material culture by repositioning sneaker subcultural practices- specifically restoration, customisation, and conversion, as legitimate and transferable forms of design knowledge. Through sustained engagement with British sneaker communities, craftspeople, and workshop environments, the study demonstrates that tacit, practice-led expertise generated outside formal institutions constitute a pedagogical model for rethinking how fashion is taught, learned, and valued.

## **PEDAGOGICAL CONTRIBUTION**

The primary contribution of this research is the development of a *wearer-as-designer* framework that redefines fashion education as a participatory, practice-led system rather than a linear designer-to-consumer model. It demonstrates that learning grounded in repair, adaptation, and material experimentation can cultivate technical skill, ethical awareness, and critical engagement with consumption practices.

This framework proposes that fashion curricula should embed:

- Restoration and repair literacy
- Material-led studio learning
- Collaborative, community-based making
- Reflective and slow design methodologies

In doing so, it offers a transferable model for undergraduate, postgraduate, and research-level teaching that aligns creative practice with sustainability and cultural awareness.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION**

The study advances a practice-led and ethnographic research methodology that integrates interviews, participant observation, action research, and embedded engagement within sneaker subculture. This approach repositions workshops, festivals, and informal maker networks from supplementary contexts to primary sites of knowledge production.

The development of *Sole-Zine* as both research artefact and archival device further extends methodology by demonstrating how material documentation, visual culture, and narrative collection can function as an integrated form of research dissemination. This establishes a model for combining written, visual, and practice-based outputs within design research.

## **MATERIAL AND CRAFT CONTRIBUTION**

Focusing on leather as a central material case study, the research reconceptualises it as a dynamic, responsive, and restorable material system rather than a static commodity. Through analysis of sneaker restoration, customisation, and conversion practices, the study demonstrates how material transformation generates layered forms of value—emotional, cultural, and functional.

The research shows that:

- restoration extends material lifespan through care-based intervention
- customisation generates embedded knowledge through making
- conversion redefines authorship through reconstruction

Together, these practices establish a model of regenerative material engagement, where value is accumulated through use rather than diminished by it.

## **CULTURAL AND SUBCULTURAL CONTRIBUTION**

This research positions sneaker subculture as a site of distributed cultural knowledge production, where identity, creativity, and authorship are formed through collective practice rather than institutional authority. It evidences that subcultural craft systems operate as informal economies of skill exchange, emotional attachment, and material intelligence.

By documenting these practices, the study reframes subculture not as peripheral to fashion systems, but as central to understanding contemporary shifts in value, ownership, and design authorship. It further identifies sneaker culture as a living archive of material innovation and social meaning.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND SYSTEMIC CONTRIBUTION

Rather than treating sustainability as a top-down industrial solution, this research demonstrates that regenerative fashion practices already exist within grassroots maker communities. Restoration, customisation, and conversion collectively offer an alternative circular system grounded in care, longevity, and relational value.

The findings show that sustainable fashion futures depend not only on material innovation, but on re-education around use, ownership, and creative participation. This shifts sustainability from a technical challenge to a cultural and pedagogical one.

## OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE

Collectively, this research contributes a new interdisciplinary framework that integrates fashion design, material culture, craft studies, and education. It evidences that:

- knowledge is produced through making, not only designing
- subcultural craft systems are legitimate pedagogical resources
- materials such as leather and sneakers function as active archives of use and identity
- authorship in fashion is increasingly distributed, participatory, and relational

By bridging academic theory with embodied practice, the study establishes a transferable model for rethinking fashion education and design culture through the lens of lived material engagement.

This thesis ultimately demonstrates that sneaker subculture provides a viable and generative model for reconfiguring fashion education and practice. It establishes the *wearer-as-designer* not only as a conceptual position, but as a pedagogical and cultural intervention capable of reshaping how fashion is made, taught, and understood.

Through its integration of practice-led research, ethnography, and material analysis, the study positions fashion as a continuously evolving system of knowledge exchange, sustained through repair, adaptation, and collective making.

## **AFTERWORD**

Building upon the findings of this research, six interrelated directions for future investigation emerge, each extending the theoretical and practice-led framework developed through sneaker subculture, leather materiality, and *wearer-as-designer* methodologies.

### **1. PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOPS AND CREATIVE NETWORKS**

Future research will further develop and test workshop-based models for knowledge exchange across universities, schools, museums, and community groups. These participatory spaces offer a means of extending subcultural craft knowledge into broader educational and public contexts, strengthening the role of collaborative making, repair literacy, and material engagement as transferable pedagogical tools.

### **2. DIGITAL ARCHIVING AND 3D HERITAGE SYSTEMS**

A key area for development is the expansion of a 3D digital social heritage archive to preserve tacit craft knowledge embedded within restoration, customisation, and conversion practices. This would formalise processes of documentation, enabling access to embodied techniques while safeguarding subcultural knowledge that is otherwise at risk of disappearance. This strand extends the research into questions of preservation, access, and digital materiality.

### **3. EXPANSION OF SOLE-ZINE AS RESEARCH METHOD**

*Sole-Zine* will continue as an evolving research output and archival mechanism, documenting narratives, practices, and cultural shifts within British sneaker subculture. Future volumes will further develop its role as a hybrid form of ethnography, visual culture, and material archive, strengthening its position as both dissemination tool and method of inquiry.

### **4. PRACTICE-LED DISSEMINATION AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE**

Ongoing dissemination through conferences, exhibitions, publications, and collaborative academic outputs will continue to test and refine the theoretical model developed in this research. These activities extend the reach of the work across fashion

design, material culture, and craft studies, while reinforcing the value of practice-led research as a form of knowledge production.

## **5. INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPANSION AND CULTURAL APPLICATION**

There is significant potential to extend the framework beyond footwear into wider areas of fashion and material culture, particularly leather garment design, sustainable fashion systems, and creative education. Further research may explore how subcultural craft logics can be translated across disciplines, contributing to debates in sustainability, design pedagogy, and cultural production.

## **6. MEDIA, NARRATIVE, AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Future work may also explore filmic and broadcast formats, such as documentary or short-form media, to communicate the research to wider audiences. This would expand engagement with sneaker culture beyond academic contexts and support broader cultural understanding of repair, customisation, and regenerative design practices.

Taken together, these future directions extend the research beyond its current scope, reinforcing its contribution to material culture, fashion design, and educational practice. They highlight the ongoing need to document, preserve, and activate subcultural craft knowledge within both academic and public domains, ensuring that these practices continue to inform more sustainable, participatory, and materially engaged futures for fashion.

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## **WEBINAR**

*From Stilettos to Sneakers*, Virtual Show Museum, Fashion Institute of Technology (3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2021).

*Wearable Electronic Textiles*, E-Textiles Network, The Textiles Institute (12<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

*Healing through Nature*, Unique Style Platform (18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

*Sneaker Custom*, Lineappelle, New York (11<sup>th</sup> June 2020). *The New Normal*, Lineappelle, New York (1<sup>st</sup> May 2020).

## TELEVISION + FILM

*Fresh Dressed*, (2015), [Film] directed by Sacha Jenkins, U.S.A.: Rotten Tomatoes.

*Sole Seeking in South America*, (2014), [Film] directed by Greg Bond, Argentina: SHOWstudio.

*Ways of Seeing*, (1972), [TV Programme], directed by Dibb, M., Berger, J. and BBC BBC 2, London: Penguin.

## EXHIBITION + CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE

Exhibition: *Salvatore Ferragamo*, Ferragamo Museo, Florence.  
(Visited: 15 February 2025).

Exhibition: *Lee Miller – Friends at Farleys*, Victoria Gallery, Liverpool.  
(23 March – 30 November 2024).

Exhibition: *Rebel: 30 Years of London Fashion*, The Design Museum, London.  
(16 Sept 2023 – 11 Feb 2024).

Exhibition: *Lucy McKenzie Retrospective*, Tate Liverpool, UK.  
(20 October 2021-13 March 2022).

Exhibition: *Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street*, The Design Museum, London.  
(18 May – 24 Oct 2021).

Exhibition: *C.P. Company Cinquanta*, The British Textile Biennial, Darwen, UK.  
(1-10 Oct 2021).

Conference and Archive Visit: *Invisible Men*, Westminster Menswear archive, London (29 Oct 2019).

Conference: *Space for Fashion Thinking and Practice: Review, Reflect, Revise – An Interdisciplinary Symposium & Exhibition*, Fashion Research Network, Coventry University, London (8 Sept 2017).

Conference: *The Space Between: Psyche, Body, Skin, Environment*, Fashion Research Network, Royal College of Art, London (3 Feb 2017). Exhibition: *Dressing the Body: Silhouettes and Fashion (1550-2015)*. Permanent Exhibition. Museu del Disseny, Barcelona, Spain (Visited 7<sup>th</sup> Nov 2016).

Exhibition: *Vogue 100: A Century of Style*, Manchester Art Gallery, UK.  
(24 June – 30 Oct 2016).

Conference and Exhibition: *Mode in Flux: White Lines Project*, Fashion Research Network, Roca London Gallery, UK. (1 July – 27 August 2016).

## **APPENDICES: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

### **APPENDIX 1: Ethnographic Fieldwork + Subcultural Engagement**

Appendix 1 documents the ethnographic fieldwork undertaken throughout the research, including participant observation, workshops, sneaker festivals, and engagement with craftspeople and artisans. These experiences provided first-hand insight into the social, material, and cultural practices surrounding repair, collecting, making, and subcultural exchange.

This fieldwork contributes to the wider project and conclusions by grounding the research within lived experience and community interaction, supporting a deeper understanding of how material culture, identity, and knowledge are shaped through participation, observation, and collective practice.

#### **APPENDIX 1.1 Kayla Owen – Workshop + Sneaker Festival Attendance**

Locating Menswear Forum Network Visit to C.P. Company, Stone Island and Slam Jam Headquarters, Bologna, Italy, 17-20/05/2023.

Steel City Trainer Fest, Sheffield, UK, 03/07/2022.

Laces Out! Trainer Fest, Liverpool, UK, 11/06/2022.

Steel City Trainer Fest, Sheffield, UK, 26/02/2022.

Laces Out! Trainer Fest, Liverpool, UK, 04/12/2021.

Steel City Trainer Fest, Sheffield, UK, 03/07/2021.

Stitchless Leather Bag Workshop, Bristol, UK, 13/02/2020.

Lineappelle Leather Trade and Trend Event, New York, U.S.A., 29-31/01/2020.

Laces Out! Trainer Festival, Liverpool, UK, 16/11/2019.

Invisible Men Archive Visit and Workshop, Westminster Menswear Archive, London, UK, 29/10/2019.

Laces Out! Trainer Fest, Liverpool, UK, 22/06/2019.

SOLEBLOC Sneaker Festival, Glasgow, UK, 16/06/2019.

Crepe City Sneaker Festival, London, UK, 03/03/2019.

Fashion SVP Trade Event, London Olympia, UK, 15/01/2019.

Sneaker Embossing Workshop with Blunt Shank, at LacesOut! Trainer Festival, Liverpool, UK, 24/11/2018.

Sew Your Own Sneakers Workshop, Diamond Awl, Delph, Oldham, UK, 27/10/2018.

Sneaker Con, Sneaker Festival, London, UK, 22-23/09/2018.

Sneakerness, Sneaker Festival, London, UK, 07-08/07/2018.

Crepe City Sneaker Festival, London, UK, 12/05/2018.

Laces Out! Trainer Fest, Liverpool, UK, 24/03/2018.

One-day Leather Carving Workshop, Diamond Awl, Delph, Oldham, UK, 19/10/2017.

Two-day Leather Bag Making Workshop, Diamond Awl, Delph, Oldham, UK, 16-17/08/2017.

## **APPENDIX 1.2 Kayla Owen – Sample Fieldnotes**

The following sample field notes document observations, reflections, workshop interactions, and material processes undertaken throughout the research project. These notes formed part of an ongoing reflective methodology and were used to record participant engagement, material experimentation, and emergent themes relating to repair, transformation, emotional attachment, and garment use.

### **Practice-Led Reflective Journal Entries:**

Sneaker Embossing Workshop with Blunt Shank

LacesOut! Trainer Festival, Liverpool, UK

Date: 24 November 2018

Location: Liverpool Exhibition Centre, Liverpool, UK

Research Method: Participant Observation and Practice-Led Reflective Documentation

Research Context: Investigation into sneaker customisation, material intervention, tacit knowledge exchange, and creative subcultural learning environments.

Workshop Context: The Sneaker Embossing Workshop delivered by Blunt Shank at the LacesOut! Trainer Festival formed part of the wider practice-led investigation into sneaker culture, customisation, and informal design pedagogies operating outside institutional fashion education. The workshop provided participants with opportunities to experiment directly with leather embossing techniques applied to sneaker surfaces and accessories.

The session combined demonstration, hands-on making, peer discussion, and informal technical exchange. Observations focused on material interaction, participant engagement, creative experimentation, and the circulation of tacit knowledge within the workshop environment.

Reflective Journal Entry: Entering the workshop space, the atmosphere contrasted with the commercially driven areas of the wider festival. While surrounding vendor spaces focused primarily on product exchange and sneaker resale, the embossing workshop centred on participation, process, and making. Worktables were arranged collectively, encouraging conversation and shared observation between participants.

Blunt Shank introduced embossing techniques through informal demonstration, explaining methods of pressure application, leather preparation, and mark-making. Rather than presenting the process as fixed or prescriptive, the workshop encouraged experimentation and personal interpretation. Participants were invited to test tools directly onto leather surfaces, producing varied textures, impressions, and graphic interventions.

The physical interaction between tool and material became central to the workshop experience. Embossing required careful pressure, repetition, and attention to surface response. Mistakes and irregularities were not corrected or concealed but instead incorporated into the developing outcomes. This created an environment where process remained visible within the finished work.

Throughout the session, participants exchanged technical advice and discussed broader themes surrounding sneaker ownership, individuality, and modification. Several participants described dissatisfaction with mass-produced products and framed customisation as a means of reclaiming creative agency. The workshop therefore operated not only as technical instruction but also as a space for identity expression and collaborative learning.

A noticeable aspect of the session was the accessibility of knowledge exchange. Skills were demonstrated openly, with participants learning through observation, imitation, conversation, and material testing rather than formal instruction alone. The workshop environment blurred distinctions between expert and beginner, reinforcing collective participation over hierarchy.

As a practitioner-researcher, participation within the embossing process highlighted the significance of touch, resistance, and material responsiveness within acts of customisation. The leather surface retained visible evidence of intervention, transforming the object into a record of physical engagement and authorship.

The workshop reinforced the idea that sneaker customisation functions as a form of practice-led knowledge production situated outside traditional fashion education structures. Creative learning emerged through experimentation, peer interaction, and embodied making practices rather than through formalised teaching models.

### Observational Notes:

- Participants frequently photographed both process and outcomes for social media documentation and peer sharing.
- Visible imperfections within embossed surfaces were often valued as indicators of authenticity and handcraft.
- Conversation repeatedly returned to themes of individuality, exclusivity, and creative ownership.
- Learning occurred collaboratively through discussion and observation rather than instructor-led correction.
- The workshop environment encouraged experimentation without fear of failure.
- Material interaction appeared central to participant engagement and emotional investment within the process.

Researcher Reflection: The Sneaker Embossing Workshop demonstrated how festival-based creative spaces can operate as informal pedagogical environments facilitating the exchange of tacit design knowledge, material experimentation, and collaborative learning. The workshop challenged passive models of fashion consumption by positioning participants as active makers and contributors within sneaker culture.

The session further reinforced the importance of embodied practice within customisation processes. Knowledge was generated through physical engagement with tools and materials, highlighting the role of touch, repetition, and experimentation within creative learning. These observations contributed directly to the wider thesis investigation surrounding repair, customisation, transformation, and subcultural knowledge production within contemporary sneaker communities.

## **Fieldnotes: ‘Sew Your Own Sneakers’ Workshop Observation**

Date: 27 October 2018

Location: Diamond Awl Workshop, Delph, Oldham, UK

Activity: Observation and participation within ‘Sew Your Own Sneakers’ Workshop

Participant engagement within the workshop centred around direct interaction with materials, construction techniques, and the physical process of sneaker making. Attendees frequently examined stitching methods, leather components, pattern pieces, and sole construction in close detail. The workshop environment encouraged hands-on experimentation, with participants openly discussing challenges surrounding accuracy, hand-stitching, and material handling.

Unlike commercial retail environments where sneakers are presented as finished products, the workshop exposed the labour and technical complexity embedded within footwear production. Participants appeared particularly engaged by the visibility of process. Hand-sewn seams, uneven tension within stitching, and visible construction marks were often discussed positively as indicators of authenticity and individual craftsmanship rather than imperfections requiring concealment.

One participant described the experience as ‘understanding what actually goes into making a pair properly,’ while another reflected that constructing sneakers by hand created ‘more respect for the product.’ Conversations regularly moved beyond aesthetics toward broader discussions surrounding labour, value, sustainability, and mass production within sneaker culture.

Participants spent significant periods comparing material choices, sole attachments, and stitching approaches, often sharing personal modifications and discussing possibilities for future customisation. The workshop encouraged collaborative learning, with individuals observing each other’s techniques and offering informal support throughout the making process.

The atmosphere remained highly process driven. Attention focused less on achieving commercially refined outcomes and more on understanding construction, experimentation, and embodied engagement with materials. Visible traces of making,

including pencil markings, stitched corrections, and surface handling, became integrated into the finished sneakers as records of participation and learning.

Researcher Reflection: Participant responses suggested that involvement within the making process challenged conventional perceptions of sneakers as mass-produced consumer products. Direct engagement with materials and construction techniques appeared to generate greater appreciation for craftsmanship, labour, and material value. The workshop reinforced the significance of embodied, practice-led learning within sneaker culture, where knowledge is developed collectively through experimentation, observation, and making.

## **Practice-Led Reflective Journal Entries:**

Crepe City Sneaker Festival, London, UK

Date: 12 May 2018

Location: The Old Truman Brewery, London, UK

Research Context: Participant observation and practice-led investigation into sneaker culture, customisation, restoration, resale, and community exchange.

Reflective Journal Entry 1 – Arrival and First Impressions: Entering the venue, the scale of the event immediately communicated the cultural significance of sneakers beyond fashion consumption alone. Long rows of vendor tables displayed carefully preserved, restored, customised, and deadstock sneakers presented almost archivally. The atmosphere resembled a hybrid space situated between marketplace, exhibition, and social gathering.

The visual density of the event was striking. Sneakers were elevated on transparent stands, accompanied by original boxes, accessories, authentication tags, and branded display materials. Attention appeared to be placed on preservation and storytelling. Vendors frequently explained the history, rarity, or cultural relevance of individual pairs to visitors. Transactions often began through conversation rather than direct sale.

What became immediately noticeable was the role of condition and restoration. Many attendees closely inspected sole colour, stitching integrity, leather creasing, and evidence of wear. Restoration practices appeared highly valued within the community, particularly when repairs maintained the original character of the sneaker rather than erasing signs of age entirely.

As both researcher and practitioner, I became aware of how the event functioned as an informal educational environment. Knowledge circulated continuously between collectors, restorers, traders, and enthusiasts through discussion, observation, and demonstration.

Reflective Observation: The event challenged traditional distinctions between consumer and maker. Participants demonstrated forms of material expertise, preservation knowledge, and aesthetic judgement typically associated with

professional design practice, despite often existing outside formal educational structures.

Reflective Journal Entry 2 – Conversations Around Restoration: Throughout the day, several informal conversations focused on sneaker restoration techniques. One independent restorer discussed methods of sole repainting, regluing, leather conditioning, and colour matching. Their language reflected both technical precision and emotional attachment to the objects being restored.

A recurring theme within conversations was authenticity. Restorers frequently distinguished between ‘bringing a pair back to life’ and ‘making them look factory new.’ Visible ageing, yellowing, creasing, and wear were often framed positively as evidence of history, originality, and use. Restoration therefore appeared less concerned with perfection and more concerned with preservation.

I observed individuals photographing repaired areas in close detail and sharing techniques through mobile phones and social media platforms. Knowledge exchange occurred rapidly and collaboratively. Technical skills were often openly demonstrated rather than concealed.

The material labour involved in restoration appeared deeply connected to care practices. Time investment, patience, and precision were consistently discussed as markers of respect toward the object and the culture surrounding it.

Reflective Observation: The restoration practices observed at Crepe City suggest forms of tacit design knowledge generated through community learning and self-directed experimentation. Repair operated not simply as maintenance, but as cultural preservation and identity work.

Reflective Journal Entry 3 – Customisation and Individual Expression: Customised sneakers occupied a distinct position within the festival environment. Hand-painted surfaces, stitched interventions, material swaps, and reconstructed uppers demonstrated highly individual approaches to authorship and creativity.

Unlike commercially manufactured sneakers, customised pairs carried visible traces of the maker’s hand. Brush marks, uneven textures, and layered materials created

surfaces that communicated process and experimentation rather than industrial perfection.

Several attendees discussed customisation as a means of resisting mass production and creating uniqueness within an increasingly commercialised sneaker market. One individual described customisation as ‘making something personal again.’

Observing these interactions raised questions surrounding authorship within fashion and sneaker culture. Many customisers worked from existing branded products yet transformed them into singular objects carrying new narratives and identities.

As a practitioner, I became increasingly interested in how modification practices blur distinctions between consumption, design, and craft. The customised sneaker functioned simultaneously as product, artwork, and personal statement.

Reflective Observation: Customisation practices reposition the wearer as active participant within the design process. The interventions observed demonstrate how making can function as both creative expression and cultural critique.

Reflective Journal Entry 4 – Community, Exchange, and Cultural Identity: Beyond commerce, the event functioned as a significant social and cultural gathering space. Groups formed around shared interests, discussing releases, restoration techniques, collaborations, and memories associated with particular sneakers.

Interactions frequently relied upon shared visual recognition and specialist language. Certain sneakers operated as cultural references capable of signalling belonging, knowledge, and subcultural identity. Ownership alone appeared less important than understanding the histories attached to specific silhouettes, collaborations, and eras.

Younger attendees often sought advice from older collectors and restorers, creating visible moments of intergenerational knowledge exchange. The event environment encouraged informal mentoring and collective learning.

The circulation of objects, stories, and technical knowledge suggested that sneaker culture functions through networks of participation rather than passive consumption alone.

Reflective Observation: Crepe City operated as both marketplace and community archive, where material objects facilitated storytelling, identity formation, and the transmission of subcultural knowledge. The event reinforced the importance of participatory spaces within contemporary fashion culture and practice-led learning.

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEWS WITH CRAFTSPEOPLE

The craftspeople interviews provide an essential contextual framework for the project, contributing diverse perspectives on repair, material practice, authorship, and the transmission of tacit knowledge. Each interview expands the research through situated experiences of making, offering insight into how contemporary craft practices negotiate identity, creative communities, preservation, and transformation.

Together, these accounts support the wider conclusions of the thesis by illustrating the continued cultural and social significance of craft as an evolving, participatory practice embedded within both individual experience and collective material heritage.

Appendix 2.1 Owen, K. (2020) Interview for *Sole-Zine* Vol.04 CUSTOM, Kayla Owen Interviewed Kris Boyle (@dundeesole), 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2020.

Appendix 2.2 Owen, K. (2020) Interview for *Sole-Zine* Vol.03 CONVERT, Kayla Owen Interviewed David Charlesworth (@vintage\_trainer\_repairs68), 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020.

Appendix 2.3 Owen, K. (2020) Interview for *Sole-Zine* Vol.02 RESTORE, Kayla Owen Interviewed Lee Brannigan (@refreshed.kicks), 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020.

## **APPENDIX 2.1**

### **Transcript: Kayla Owen, Interview with Lee Brannigan ‘Refreshed Kicks’ (2020) (Sole-Zine 02: RESTORE)**

#### **Biography:**

Liverpool based Brannigan is an avid adidas collector, the founder of @die\_adi\_kollektion where he presents his personal collection online. A trainer enthusiast first and foremost, who’s passion led him to a role in trainer restoration, specialising in adidas trainers from the 1970s, and 1980s. Brannigan is self-taught who originally gained his first insight and knowledge through Ben Clements (Blunt Shank). He is also celebrated as a producer of ‘one off’ customs and an innovator of reproduction insoles for the vintage trainer market.

**Interviewee:** Lee Brannigan (@refreshed.kicks)

**Interviewer:** Kayla Owen

**Date of Interview:** 23/06/2020

**Location of Interview:** Telephone

**List of Acronyms:** LB=Lee Brannigan, KO= Kayla Owen (Main Interviewer)  
[Begin Transcript 00:00:01]

KO: As you know I've sent you the questions prior but obviously feel free to talk around the subject, pad it out and add in any great stories, which I know you have lots of. Can we start with a bit about you Lee, your background and what your current trainer life consists of, as a collector, restorer, customiser?

LB: All three. In a chaotic manner lol!

So, I’m a trainer collector, fanatic - adidas. It's not always been adidas. I would say growing up it was always one or two pairs of trainers, wear one to death, throw them in the bin, get a new second pair. That was always the case, so the number of pairs that have been chucked out along the way mirrors a lot of people’s stories. The number of pairs that I wished I’d kept, that have been worn, battered, and chucked away is unbelievable. During my teenage years, late 1980s early 1990s I think I was mainly influenced by the U.S. hip hop scene, so I was wearing a lot of Nike, Patrick Ewing,

things like that there was a lot of hip-hop based items. I can only recall a couple of adidas pairs along the way. There was also a local thing, where we are wearing things like Arrow Astro Turf at one point, and I remember when I was about twelve which would have been 1986, we all wanted this Astro Turf trainer that had been released by a company called Arrow. Goodness knows what happened to them.

I can completely recall how I got into this properly. I had a pair of Marathon 80 blue and yellow, absolutely loved them they would have been a 2009 pair released. Loved them and I didn't want to chuck them away. I remember they were kept under the stairs, and I'd wear them in the garden to do the gardening and I used to clean them, but it was just a case of a wet rag under the hot tap, give them a wipe over, didn't know anything about cleaning products or anything like that at that stage and I was still a one or two pair person. I can recall buying K-Swiss and things like that in that period. I then bought two pairs of (adidas) End-to-End. There was a collaboration release with two graffiti artists. I was heavily into my graffiti and was part of a graffiti crew growing up. I got a pair of this release from Footlocker (trainer store) in London and then a pair up North, can't remember where from. They were basically adidas low like a Stan Smith or Superstar classic. The collaborative pairs had graffiti on the side of the trainer, the artists tag on the sole, things like that. So, I bought two pairs of them, I boxed them, looked after them, kept them, still got them. So, they're the oldest piece I've got and then Marathon 80s.

So, I don't know how I stumbled on this Facebook group, but I joined AOA (adidas only addiction). It's deemed as one of the grail Facebook groups for adidas fans, so I saw it as a bit of an honour to be on there with all these collectors. There was a guy who'd just bought a pair of New York (trainers) for silly money and asked this guy to re-dye them, and I was fascinated by this job he'd done. I wanted to do the same with my own Marathon 80s, make them look new again, so I asked his advice, where had he got the dye from, and he pointed me in the right direction. I done the job on them, and the transformation was unreal. I posted them on the Facebook group, and everyone was like, they're amazing.

There was another pair, one of the collectors was selling a pair of adidas Milan in black and gold. The shoe was in perfect condition the suede was just faded. So, I thought I'll

get a black dye, re-dyed them and people started to say I've got a bit of a knack for this. I started doing re-dyes and then got into the painting.

I started researching, reading up on how to use these dyes properly. It's all about the prep. If you don't prepare the leather properly, the paint won't stick it'll just crack off. Angelus paints have a lot of how-to videos on there about deep cleaning, which isn't something I'd done on the other two pairs. So, I started buying the products from them and I was thinking if I'm going to start doing lads trainers and charging them money, I'm going to do it properly, and that's how I promoted it, and it just snowballed. It wasn't and still isn't my full-time job, it was more of a hobby, doing a couple of pairs every couple of weeks, it was manageable and was a little bit of pocket money on the side.

So, one day one of the administrators, on the AOA Facebook group contacted me with a basic adidas Samoa which is a maroon colour, and they've got white stripes and I basically done the stripes blue. He posted them on the AOA Instagram account, and he said are you on Instagram and I said no why? I didn't even know what Instagram was, and he was like I've posted it on Instagram, and he said it's just gone nuts, loads of people liking and commenting on it - how can I get mine done, so I set my own Instagram account up. I already had a Facebook page, but I could see the difference between the clientele. I was getting questions on Facebook and there's lots of negativity that comes with Facebook which I wasn't finding on Instagram and didn't have time for, so after a year of running them both I decided to pull the Facebook page even though I had 15,000 followers.

I carried on promoting my product, re-dye that comes with a deep clean, a bit of custom work if you want it and then Jay (Montessori) from Transalpino (a dead stock trainer specialist retailer based in Bold St. Liverpool) stumbled across me and said would you be able to help-out my business partner? And I thought gosh I can't believe this guy wants to work with me; this could change my life. So, I met Jockey (Brendan Wyatt) the owner of Transalpino and he wanted me to prep and restore the trainers for sale at Laces Out! (Liverpool trainer festival). The Transalpino story is, Jockey travels the world sourcing used original (OG) trainers for resale to the Terrace Casuals and adidas style obsessives online and from his Bold St. store.

I prepped the trainers for Transalpino's (second) Laces Out! stall. I actually bought a pair of Marathon TR off Jockey (which I've still got). I remember saying to him, have you got the box with them, and he looked at me as if I was stupid, because none of them will have a box.

I was doing a lot of work for Jockey, and he was good at promoting my page, posting my product and my followers just grew and grew.

I've also obviously got the custom side of things which my heart is probably more in, but the restoration is a different ball game. It's good that I've got people like Jockey and some of the collectors that send me their trainers again and again and they know that they can send me a pair of trainers and I might have them for six months, but they know that up front and they know they are going to get a good pair back. Its good I've built that relationship with them all. I've still got some of Jockey's pairs here from three years ago which haven't even been touched yet. There's a pair of (adidas) Athen I've changed the stripe on them, I've hand stitched them, and I got stuck on the lace stay and he keeps asking and asking.

KO: So, you mention that your heart is more in the custom, and you mentioned also the early days when you were into your hip hop and graffiti. Do you think that's where the custom love has come from?

LB: Definitely, it's my artistic streak. In school I was a brilliant artist. I always remember my GCSE I went to a Christian Brothers All Catholic Boys School; all the teachers wore robes. It was a bit behind the times, and I submitted a project based on graffiti - they weren't happy about it at all, but that was me. Very artistic in school and went to college and done A level Art as well, but I dropped out after a year because my head wasn't there. I was getting on with other things, which is another story, but I kind of left art then and didn't do anything for years. So, I feel that getting into the custom it's my artistic streak coming back out.

KO: How many years ago did you start your relationship with Transalpino?

LB: I think it was three or four years ago. I could tell you the date off the first post on my Instagram.

And another thing which spiralled as well because I was doing restorations and one of the big things that no-one else could do was the lettering. You used to use gold paint and a cocktail stick, and you'd literally dot them to paint over where the old lettering was. It was just like one of the methods that was used and at the time I'd spoke to Benji (aka Blunt Shank trainer maker) over Facebook. What highlighted Benji to me was the adidas Superstars that he used to do, there's a hip hop feel to what he does as well, his earlier YouTube videos would be like him doing a pair of Superstars and he'd have like jazz hip hop playing in the background, so there was always that similarity. I was into what he was doing at the time, and I was fascinated. Obviously, he's a different breed because he's a shoemaker but he done a pair and he renamed them and I was like... at this point I'd been trialling different methods to do this lettering, so I'd bought gold foil, gold leaf and applied glue over the lettering and then dabbed over and brushed it off, to leave the lettering. It still wasn't the ideal finish. I tried stamping as well but the best method was the cocktail stick, but it wasn't how it should be, and I knew that and that's the thing with me if I want to do something and I think it can be done I will persist until it's done.

So Benji had just done that pair I think it was a Run DMC pair, and he put the gold lettering on the side, and I messaged him to ask him how did he do it? And he basically said, I've crafted that method, I'm not prepared to give it up. In all honesty I was like fair enough. I completely get it Benji, but I just thought I'd ask the question. I also asked if I could send him my pairs to do the lettering, just trying to get the job done for my client base but he said that would be costly and for me to add that on to my cost to the customer. It's not financially viable, so it wasn't an option at that point. But I knew it could be done then and I eventually cracked it with the cutter and the gold foil. I was probably three weeks, four weeks behind Benji in cracking it. So, at one point there was only me and Benji doing it.

So, I was straight to Jockey, look at this and he was like well if you can do that, could you do the adidas sign on the back of the trainers? And I was like yeah! And now Jockey's like do this to this pair, do that to that pair and then the football customs

come. We had a Derby Day coming up and Jockey said do you reckon you could put Liverpool on the red (adidas) Gazelle and Everton on the blue? And I was like yes, let's go for it. So, once they were done, we took them round the city, to photograph them and people just went nuts for it. People started contacting me asking for their team pair (Wolverhampton, Newcastle etc.). That kept me busy for months, that was all I was doing, at one point Jockey was taking that many orders for them we were just churning these football (adidas) Gazelles out. As times gone on, every Tom, Dick and Harry's doing them. So, I don't do many of them now.

It made me realise that I had to diversify, I don't just do football customs. So I went into personalisation, and was doing things like... this guy who owns a security firm in London asked if I could put his company name and logo on the tongue label of a trainer? And I did that and then you get all sorts of people contacting you and it's just gone from there. Again, I spend a lot of time researching, YouTube is such a good place to learn how people are doing things. The football customising element that I've got, I just find boring now because me and Jockey started it, I was the first person doing them three years ago, now everyone's doing them. If someone asks me now to do a Liverpool pair, I'll do them because I'm a Liverpool fan but if anyone asks for a different team, I'll tell them I haven't got time.

Customising in America is a whole other scene. I like customising events and custom competitions where they've got six customisers and they've all got the same shoe, but they must put their own stamp on it. There's a massive scene in America, but they do more than just change the lettering and put a logo on it. They'll make a trainer look like a can of Sprite as an example and that's where I'm at, now. I'm working on trainers which aren't just a basic custom. I want to do it on next level where people are saying whose done that? That's amazing, rather than a boring football custom. Don't get me wrong I've got a lot to thank Jockey for, for getting me into that but he knows it's a dead part of the game because everybody's doing it.

KO: That's interesting, because like with anything that's to do with hand craft and bespoke in its nature, which is exactly what you're doing. I think everything does evolve and should evolve, just as the crafts person also must evolve, otherwise you

just get lost in a sea of other people adopting it and it becomes mainstream. It's about keeping ahead of the game, I'm guessing.

LB: Yeah, definitely.

KO: So, in terms of sneaker culture and sneaker sub-culture, it's interesting that you've mentioned the USA and custom events etc. that are available for people to tap into, whether that's online or in person. How would you define sneaker sub-culture in relation to your early (informative) years?

LB: We need to forget about restoration and what not. For me growing up it was a case of I want that pair first or I want that pair, they look good. I want them before anyone else gets them and that was always the case, I think. For My Mersey Paradise (*Sole Zine* Vol.1) the pair I picked was because my friend had the Marathon TR that I wanted and he got them first and there's that unwritten rule that two lads in the same gang can't have the same pair of trainers, because it's just weird. Which is daft but that is what it was like when we were growing up.

So, I ended up with the (adidas) Questar and that has become a grail (the one pair that means the most) for me. Again, growing up wishing I hadn't thrown them away. So, for me it was always about wanting a pair that stood out, looked good or I was the first to get them. A pair that people would comment on or ask where I got them. It is a fashion statement and looking at it now because obviously I'm a collector now and I've got so many pairs sometimes it can take me twenty minutes to get the right pair on and I'll have tried three, or four, five pair on to make sure they go with what I've got on.

KO: So, when you dress, do you dress with the feet first?

LB: No, feet last.

KO: OK, that's good because like you say it means that you're always tapping into your collection. Whereas, if you've always got a pair in mind then you don't tend to waiver from the favourites. So, do you think there is much more than just one sub-

culture within the sneaker culture? You have mentioned a few separate genres - the restorer, the customiser who could be said to be more of an artist and the collector/archiver.

LB: Definitely, so I think from a service point of view for me to do a custom for someone or a restore they are two different client bases. The same person may want a custom and a restoration along the way if they are a collector, but I know I do restorations for some collectors, and they've got no interest whatsoever in customisation. They hate them, they think they're silly, they say why would you do that to a trainer?

KO: Do you think that custom will become mainstream at some point, just as certain types of restoration have and where do you see it going next?

LB: Ideally where I'd like to be, is doing what Benji does, making trainers. But the time and cost that goes into it, it's a whole different ball game. Benji was offering courses last year which I showed an interest in but because of time I didn't end up going. There's a guy in Scotland called Dundee Sole, he has a stall at Laces Out! and in the early days he was coming to me for advice on how to do things. He did a course with Benji, and he's learnt some basic stitching, how to use a machine, re-soleing, which is something I don't do, I've tried it, done a couple, but I find it tricky because I've not had the training, and I've not got the time to master it. It's a lot of work and a lot of equipment is needed. So ideally, I'd like to be doing customs where I change more things on a trainer. So, I can tell you now a bit of a secret, I've done a pair of (adidas) Superstars, but I've merged them with a (adidas) ZX 8000.

Lance from sneaker annex was fifty this year (2020) and it's fifty years of (adidas) Superstar as well. One of his favourite trainers. He didn't know any of this was going on, it was all like hush hush by his partner (the other guy from sneaker annex). So, we'd come to the idea that we'd do a Superstar in the colourway of the ZX 8000. So rather than just colouring the shoe, I put a ZX cage on the back of the shoe. Sourced a pair of ZX, cut the cage off them and fitted it to the Superstars, and I thought well what else can I do? So, I've fitted the torsion bar into the sole as well. The point that I'm making is, I want to be doing customs differently. Doing things that other people can't

do, and I want to be doing things a bit more out there, next level. I want to be setting the bar.

KO: Obviously you've mentioned Benji, but is there anyone else that you would cite as an expert in the field, in the UK or elsewhere?

LB: David Charlesworth without a shadow of a doubt. Dave's given me quite a few tips along the way as well. He used to be a cobbler up in Runcorn. So, he's given me tips on things to apply to suede, so I don't do re-dyes now, re-dye is completely out of my range for restorations. We help each other out. He asked me the other day how to treat a flaking suede stripe, so we exchange information like that. He's been helpful over the years, and I would put him up there with other restorers, in my opinion. He does mainly resole but he does tidy the entire trainer up as part of the resole process.

The other guy is Dundee Sole. I've given him a lot of advice, I know Benji has as well and he's the same as me, he does the restoration and the customs. But he's set up on his own, he's got a shop in Dundee and it's his primary business, so he's doing it on a different level to me. We share tips, I was showing him the Superstar/ZX custom along the way and he's in agreement that the football customs hold no interest for us because everyone's doing them. It just doesn't give us that buzz anymore. Like me, he's very good at his restorations.

KO: Do you think he'd be up for a chat?

LB: I don't see why not.

KO: It's nice to hear how you help each other out and the sense of community inbuilt into your relationships with other experts. How important do you see that in terms of your progression because it must be tricky, with a fine line between sharing and copying.

LB: There used to be a handful of customisers and restorers and I could probably say if you go back three years ago there was probably only me, Benji and Dave and maybe two or three others that have dipped out of it. So, there was re-dyers that were doing it

before me who aren't around anymore, so there was only a few of us around and we kind of had full market share. So, the more people who saw what we were doing and asking for advice to try it for themselves, I began to say no to sharing advice. It took me a lot of time and money to get expert at it. I can't just give it away. But now Benji has seen a different angle, a business angle to what he does, and he sells the kits, and he trains people. So, he's sharing the trade so to speak. Which as much as I probably dislike it, I also appreciate what he's done. i.e., he's seen an angle for him, another business model and why shouldn't he. Probably if I'd have thought of it first, I'd have done it. I'll always have a lot of respect for Benji, but at the time I didn't like him doing it, but looking back at it, he's got a craft to share, if he wants to share it then he can. It's his sole income, why shouldn't he. So instead of having three people doing it, now you've got thirty, forty people doing it and you've also got people copying what I do. And I mean direct copying. I did an Only Fools and Horses Stan Smith pair, someone's done a copy of them this week. He's been in my inbox moaning about other people copying his stuff. He does Stone Roses custom pairs for years. An artist based in Manchester. He paints some wonderful paintings and applies that to trainers. People have asked me to do them, but I said no, it's not my thing, if you want a Stone Roses custom go to him. I've always been quite true to that. I'm not going to copy someone else's niche. I've got my own things I do and don't want to be copying off other people. But then he's copied my Only Fools, so rather than get into a big online spat with him I've just left. People know he's copied off me. But I feel that unwritten rule has gone now, you just don't care.

KO: The boundaries have changed more people consider themselves to be an expert and it is difficult to keep it true to the community camaraderie and respect which any sub-culture has.

LB: but then why should they respect me? I don't command respect, but I know what you're saying it should be there but...

KO: They have respect for what you do and that's why they follow you on Instagram and ask for your advice. Therefore, there is an undisclosed moral and ethic, by that very fact which should be maintained (in my opinion) - if you admire someone for what they do.

What do you think the big brands think of what you do and what do you think about the custom services big brands offer?

LB: adidas used to have 'myadidas' where you could go online and design your shoe, but it was quite limited in what you could do. You could change the colour, but there was a small set of colours, three finishes, like a stipple. If you wanted a green heel tab with black stippled leather, you couldn't have that because you couldn't physically put it into the create site. Some people have come up with some brilliant pairs off it, but they quashed the site last year and they must have been making so much money off it, but I kind of feel that they're just not in touch with it.

KO: I agree with you. I feel it became very watered down, with custom garments as well as shoes so much so, that it was nothing special in the end. But I was surprised that it went.

LB: Have you seen the personalisation you can still get, where you can personalise a shoe? Have you seen where they put it (text)? They leave the trainer; name and they add the personalisation text on the sock line above, so it runs in a raised curve rather than straight and it looks ridiculous. They don't use gold lettering; they always do it in a white plastic, and it looks terrible. You'd think someone from adidas would look at this and say why are we letting them even go out of the door? They've been doing it for years and I think they're so out of touch with it all.

KO: Absolutely, it's a real lost opportunity in terms of a big brand, it would be so easy for them to send a researcher out and have a look at how it's done properly and bring it back to the table. But they don't seem to be investing in that, which is good for you guys and will keep it off mainstream, which is a good thing.

So, you share your practice via photographs of your products as before and after shots on Instagram and your work is showcased via Transalpino at Laces Out! and you currently visit Laces Out! as a customer rather than have a stall or offer workshops etc. Do you think this would ever change for you in the future, at Laces Out! or any other sneaker event?

LB: Now with Laces Out! I am developing and producing reproduction insoles and am the only person doing them. I did one hundred pairs six weeks ago and they sold in an hour. Jockey's been involved from the outset with it as well and I'll be giving him pairs to go in his trainers for the Transalpino Laces Out! stall. He asked if I would sell them there but now, I like going to Laces as a social, to meet up with other restorers, customisers and other people I know from the industry and having a drink with them.

KO: I think it's nice that you've been able to keep it separate, as a social because it's your opportunity to chill out with like-minded people and just have a chat without the pressure of 'work'.

LB: Definitely, these are people that you interact with online daily, so it is good to meet up and have face-to-face interaction.

Although I do know now that there is an opportunity for me to sell X number of insoles off a table at Laces Out! but I do feel that I would be trapped at that table and forced to stand still instead of mingling and looking around at other trainers at other stalls, which is the reason why I go. I'm toying with the idea now, I've got another batch on its way over from China so depending on how sales go it might be something I'd look at doing in the future, but in all honesty, I'd like to avoid it for the reasons I've just said.

KO: You've mentioned that you have a particular trainer where you have recorded each stage of the restoration which you are going to share with us for the poster zine. Do you make a habit of recording the process on a regular basis or is it just with specific trainers, projects, or collectors?

LB: There is no uniform to what I do because of the life I lead, and I do this around my job, I find that the time I must spend on trainers is very minimal. I'm not always that thorough. There's a pair of (adidas) Napoli that I've sent back to a collector, I've had them for a year, and I thought I'd better get them back to him. I sent them back, but I only took one photo, side to side where you can see one shoe where I'd treated the suede and one where I hadn't and that's the only photo I have of the whole process. I used to update the customer on a regular basis and send them photos of what they

look like at regular intervals – I’ve treated the suede this is what they look like now – I’ve applied new tongue labels; this is what they look like now – so I do have a staged process record for some pairs.

KO: That builds up a good rapport with your client, passing on the detail of the shoe.

LB: That would happen on my Facebook page, keep me updated along the way and building the rapport.

KO: Especially for the fanatic collector, the work is so intense and is done to the absolute best standard and that’s what the collector wants. They don’t want half measures.

Any crafts person has real affinity with what they create, and they almost become like your babies, if you know what I mean, and so there is a lot of feeling and emotion in what you produce. Likewise with the customer who is entrusting you to restore or customise their treasured possessions. So, providing the insight and sneak peeks at various key stages (drip feeding the update) of the process feels almost like Christmas is coming, the excitement builds and so does the emotional journey that you take them on.

Working on the archive project with you where we are archiving the process, ties into this. Do you prefer your work to be viewed online or more so in reality? Do you like there to be dimensionality, does it matter if it is a flat image?

LB: Either/or because I’ve done both. For The Fashion of Counterculture exhibition, (LSAD Atrium Gallery 2018) I showed an (adidas) Athen Custom and restored only one of the shoes but showed both side by side. I did a Candy Liverpool to exhibit at Laces Out! so I do like the live stuff, where they’re on show, especially if I’m there as well and I can talk to people about it. It is good, it’s just another angle cos not everyone’s on Instagram. So, you’re looking at a different audience.

KO: The way digitalisation has moved on and the quality of images people are able to capture now does mean that you can see actual texture of a leather or a specific fabric

for example much more clearly than you could have done some years ago. So perhaps there is more flexibility for crafts people to display and have their products viewed. However, it doesn't allow for the tactile interaction that can take place.

LB: There's no trickery involved either. There's no filter. There's loads you can do now, you make things look way better, there's people out there doing it. I know for a fact there's people out there doing it on Instagram. So, by having it on show somewhere you see it in the flesh, it is what it is.

KO: Is there any media or press coverage that you've had and would like to talk about?

LB: No, I don't think there is.

KO: There will be because you'll be in the poster zine lol.

LB: It's another way of getting my service out there. There's going to be people out there who read the zine and don't know about Lee@refreshedkicks.

KO: 100% Maybe this is an opportunity to promote your insoles as well?

LB: Yes.

KO: The insoles are filling the demand for the collector who can't find that piece anywhere, so you must go back to the archives to replicate it. What will be the next thing? Laces maybe?

LB: With the insoles, myself and another guy have been doing them for years as pressed prints, but they don't last, the ink will come off. So, it's been over a year now I've been testing and trialling and trying to get this sole thing off the ground and I remember I asked you about screen printing but I'm not using that method now, on a mass level it would have been too difficult. I'm getting constant messages about when the next batch will be available, so I've got no doubt that they will fly out again.

KO: Are there any techniques within your expertise that could be applied to garment? To elevate a piece, breathe new life or make it more of a flexible garment which could change over time to encourage the owners to keep it for longer; which obviously has ethical positives around it?

LB: I instantly think of everything I do in relation to a pair of trainers. There is customising out there. There's a guy I think his name is Mat Cole (@foesone) he's more into his Nike but he does (customise) coats, T-shirts, and things like that. There's another guy called @hardinthepaint a trainer guy; he started customising football shirts with a paint splatter design. I think they look alright. So, everything that I do I think it is already applied to garments. Probably when you touched on making them last, it's the protector that I use. So, I'm using this product called liquid kicks imported from the States. Probably the best protector for paint you can get.

People are using it on garments because its flexible, its durable. So, I think it is only a matter of time if you are someone who works on trainers you probably will try these things on garments too if you expand into custom clothes. Or if you see trainer customisers using certain products you might try it on garments too. The paint, the solutions, the cleaners.

KO: Do you see craftspeople offering a trainer and garment service?

LB: Like a combo? I have seen a couple of people doing it, but I don't think its mainstream and I think if someone had a pair of trainers with a matching T-shirt or coat it would look a bit chavvy, a bit American, like something Kanye (West) (American rapper) would wear. Do you know what I mean? I certainly wouldn't see a lad round ours wearing matching stuff.

Torker Tony (@torkertony) has had a coat made to match his trainers based on The Hacienda (Manchester 1990s nightclub). The girl who made that coat, is based in Scotland, I think her names Kerry-Ann (@kerriealdo) and that's what she does, she makes custom coats. But it's not an identical match it's just got elements of the theme. She does coats for Dundee Sole, so he promotes her quite a lot.

KO: You wanted to go back to re-dye Lee?

LB: Oh yeah, it was where I started with my dyes and one point there was only one company Alan and Rob called UK Leather Supplies, they then evolved into Sneakers.er. they used to have a website that didn't work that well. If you contacted them, they didn't answer their emails and what not, if you phoned them, you could never get hold of them. So, I used to be friends with Carl Dennis Jones who used to be the main customiser/ restorer back in the day. He was into re-dyes and re-painting, and he put me in touch with Alan and Sneakers.er were involved and they rebranded as Sneakers.er. I'd been up to Scotland a few times to see them, and they used to give me the dyes. I'd buy stuff off them, and they'd throw free stuff in. I've got like boxes of dyes from them unused because I don't do it no more, but I used to say to them for example, a good example would be the adidas Stockholm the blue and yellow pair and I done a lot of pairs for Jockey and I'd re-dye them and they had (Sneakers.er) actually developed a dye with Angelus which is based in America they'd developed a Stockholm blue. It was supposed to be the proper shade for that trainer, but when you dyed the trainer, it looked too deep, it was too dark, it didn't look right on the trainer for me. Because people were giving me these vintage trainers like the 1978 (adidas) Brussel, or the 1984 (adidas) Napoli I knew that if I applied that dye it wouldn't look right and it wasn't just me that were saying that. Collectors and people on the group (AOA). I was constantly telling Sneakers.er, there was a lot of feedback the colours aren't right. So, I moved away from the re-dye because I didn't want to give someone back their vintage pair for them to say what the \*\*\*\* have you done to these. They look stupid, the colour. It looks re-dyed, they don't want a re-dyed shoe, they want a shoe that's been restored to an original (or as original) as it was colour, not one that's just come out of a bottle. To be honest with you that's how a lot of re-dyes look. So I basically said I'm not going to re-dye any vintage stuff now and I started doing the hash tag say no to re-dyes on Instagram which didn't wash too well with Sneaker.er cos I used to promote their products and I wasn't using their dyes as much with not doing the re-dyes and I moved towards their (Sneakers.er) protector which is very good, it's a nano spray and for me it's the best protector in the business. So, I used to photograph the product and promote it on my (Instagram) page, but I wasn't getting likes from them and then when I looked, they weren't following me so I thought they must not be happy. So, it is what it is, but I did that for a reason. For the love of the

vintage stuff and I didn't want to be restoring it badly. That's quite important in my process of restoration.

KO: Would it be useful to talk to any of your clients or collectors who subscribe to this customisation process?

LB: I could ask a couple; it could be a closed book, but I can try.

KO: It would be interesting to see their perspective, why they subscribe to the sub-culture, how they found you, for example. The relationship between you and them is an important one, by having conversation and relationships. You are allowing them into your world and its only in doing this that they can understand what is possible, but also it may be their requests that drive your expertise forward too.

LB: It might be worth talking to Jockey as he's been key in my success and has been my main customer and probably Jay as he's current.

KO: That would work as soundbites on the poster zine, or we can take a sound bite off your Instagram feed. Thanks for chatting, it's been fascinating.

LB: Good to speak to you, speak soon.

## APPENDIX 2.2

### Transcript: Kayla Owen, Interview with David Charlesworth ‘Vintage Trainer Repairs’ (2020)

(*Sole-Zine* 03: CONVERT)

**Biography:** Liverpool based shoemaker, and specialist in deadstock and vintage trainer repair. Charlesworth has over thirty years of traditional shoe repairing experience, having completed his apprenticeship in his early twenties. He is passionate about vintage trainers and is regularly commissioned to restore archival pieces, notably for adidas for the renowned documentary *Sole Searching in South America* (2015) with Gary Aspden. Based in Runcorn, he is the founder of Vintage Trainer Repairs (2014), he is the innovator of the art of trainer conversion in the UK and specialises in *spike conversions* and *midsole building* using the latest industry machinery and presses.

**Interviewee:** David Charlesworth (@vintage\_trainer\_repairs68)

**Interviewer:** Kayla Owen

**Date of Interview:** 21/07/2020

**Location of Interview:** Telephone

**List of Acronyms:** DC = David Charlesworth, KO = Kayla Owen (Main Interviewer)

[Begin Transcript 00:00:53]

KO: Can we start with a bit about you, how you got into the trainer industry, your expertise and what you do.

DC: It was something that I’d always done for myself and my friends through being a shoe repairer for all these years, but I’d only ever done just bits and bobs, just basic minor bits of restoration to keep trainers going and things. And then with the advent of the internet and Facebook, once I started getting onto that and joining the various trainer groups and seeing that people were crying out for these types of jobs to be done, like sole transplants and things like that, then I was like well I could do that ‘cos I’d done similar work before. I did have to think about it a little bit because it was like

realising, I was going to be taking on people's pride and joys, very rare and expensive pairs of trainers, so I had to think well what the best way would be to do it, you can't just steam roller in. But once I'd got it figured out in my mind the best way to do it, putting it into practice and seeing that it could work, as soon as I started putting it out there then the requests for work started piling in.

Because I had the experience as a shoe repairer and the experience of the machinery and all that I was able to turn out a better-quality job compared to what most other people have been doing. Only because they'd been doing it in a DIY sense and I was doing it as a trained person with the right machinery, the right glue, the presses, and all that type of thing.

And that then led into transplants, sole swaps, and then someone approached me and asked if I fancied doing a spike conversion. And I was right, OK, so again I had to think about how I could do that and what would be the best approach. Years and years ago I worked at a company called Shoe Care, this was when I was only in my early 20s, and they were a specialist shoe repair business. They only had a few shops at the time but what he was trying to get into was repairing running shoes and hiking boots. So, I got a job with them and was sent away for a week's training in their factory where they did all the running shoes. So basically, what he wanted was the shop to put the work in and the shop sent them to the factory and the factory did the repairs. So, I went and spent a week in the factory, so this was the end of the 80s and that week's training stuck with me. Because I seen all the different ways, they were doing things and that was interesting 'cos I was bang into my trainees then. A lot of them were specialist running shoes but a lot of them were all kinds of adidas, Nike and Puma in there. But it was interesting for me to be taking them apart and seeing how they were putting these new mid-soles on. When I think back now to the stock that they had, they had all the official adidas soles, all the official Puma, they had everything, all supplied by the firms which they just don't do anymore.

KO: So where was that then?

DC: Do you know what Kayla, I've tried to find them, to see whether they've got any of the old stock left and I can't find a trace of the company. I don't think they lasted

long. Shoe Care they were called. They were based in Chorley, so as I say they were local you know, but that was where I was learning how to do all these things, putting the soles on, then building mid-soles, how to do the finishing work on them, how to attach the out-sole, all these things and it just stuck with me, I say and that was what I carried on kinda doing little bits of when I was doing my own. But then when it came back to doing the spikes that was what I remembered in my head. It was all about remembering, how the pitch of the mid-sole had to fit to the style of the shoe. But then also working with Benji (Blunt Shank shoemaker) more, becoming friendly with Benji, because he was doing a similar thing.

One of the difficult things about doing them (spike conversion) is that the pitch on a running shoe is a lot different to the pitch on a normal training shoe. You've only got to look at it and you can see the way it kicks right up at the back, it's all about the fore foot because you're running and pushing off from the ball of your foot so to speak, so the design of the shoe is completely different, and it also twists more inwards to the shape of your foot. So that must be corrected. It must be twisted back out and then it must be flattened down a bit more, you've got to bring the pitch right down to give it a more conventional running shoe style. If you see the way the mid-sole does rise towards the back and then thins out towards the front of the shoe, but if you were to just stick a mid-sole into a normal running spike without altering the pitch, it will end up looking like a platform at the back because it would be built up so much. It wouldn't work and I did do a pair like that at the start as an experiment and they looked like a pair of bananas 'cos I just didn't get the thing right at all and it was almost like a U-shape, but with trial and error that's how you learn these things. And as I say it was chatting with Benji and talking to him that he told me a way to do it, so then once I got my head around that it just became a lot easier, once I'd got the shoe into the correct shape the mid-soles were a lot easier to build and it just kinda went from there.

So that was the start of it, at first, I was just doing conventional white mid-sole, black out-sole or gum-out sole or whatever to match, but again the more I started getting into it the more I started seeing different materials that were available. You buy different types of out-sole sheeting for various styles of out-sole, different colour mid-sole PVA, different densities. So that was when all the ideas started coming in and I was like right well, you can start getting these different coloured PVA sheeting to match the colours

that are in the upper you are working with. So obviously you can do the contrasting sheeting that fits more in style with the trainer that were coming out, and that you'd see in the shop. And, when you wanna get thingy about it, you can start adding the different density into the heel part of the shoe so that it's softer. Which are all the things that adidas do in their own trainers. So, it was just a case of trying to incorporate that myself. But again, it was through the shoe repair training that I knew the ways to do that, you know what I mean, it must be angled, and it has to be put on within a wedge you can't just put two flat edges together, there's all little nuances like that if you don't do it that way it won't work.

KO: So that first spike conversion that you did, is that still a customer that you've got?

DC: I didn't do it for a customer I just done it as an experiment.

KO: Ah OK, do you know what year that would have been then?

DC: Well, it wasn't that long ago 'cos the spike conversion really is only something that came in in the last few years so probably about four years ago maybe.

KO: Interesting, and would you say that although through your training and earlier work you worked on lots of brands, but would you say now you are quite a purest and would only work on adidas?

DC: No, I would rather work on different shoes, I just don't get sent them. It's just always adidas and people ask me that when they approach me, do I only do adidas, and I say no, I'll do whatever brand. If I can do it, I'll do it. But it's just that people see adidas, adidas, adidas on my (Instagram) page and I think that's all they think I work on.

KO: Thinking about the different brands, would you as an expert say that either brand has a better build quality?

DC: It depends, with the 70s models and 80s models I'd say they were all quite even, but obviously the later models are not really something that I do. I mean with adidas I

can, probably up to 1989, early 1990s with some of the ZX ones, I can still do them, but once you start to bring in the plastic stabilisers and stuff like that, it's not what I do. Once Nike started bringing in the air bubbles and the air pockets, I get requests for them all the time, but I just won't touch them. I done a pair and the air pockets popped. Once they pop, they're like a packet of Pringles, you can't stop, you know what I mean. But that's because I use an industrial press machine and it was too much for them and they just burst, so unfortunately no I don't touch them. It's only with being asked about other brands, I would do them, but they would have to be pre-1985, or a reissue of that type of shoe.

KO: Do you have a favourite conversion that you recall?

DC: The thing is none of them are ever the same, I mean I've not done as many pairs of spikes as I would like to. I would be quite happy now to just set up and carry on just making spikes (conversions). Ideally, I would like to buy the spikes myself and just sell them, that's what I would really like to do because it's nice doing them for other people but once I'm making them for myself and selling them it takes off another side of the pressure, because I'm just making them for me, for my designs, 'cos obviously I've got my own designs that I want to make. One of the things about doing it for people is the client can get creative, I can get creative, discuss how we want it to go, talk about what is possible to use, what about this, what about that. That side of it's great but once the conversations over and the job starts, then the pressures on. They've got their preconceptions of how they want it to look, and you've got to try and match that. Although I've got the machinery and I've got the trainer I've not got everything that a factory has got, so obviously there is a limit, but I also think they can appreciate that it is hand made. It is just me in the workshop making it for them so it might not be a full shop finished item, but it's as good as you're gonna get.

KO: And like you say it will be unique; it will be a 'one off' there is no other like it and I think that's what you're buying into when you commission someone like yourself.

DC: Yeah, and that's the side of it that I try to promote. Everybody wants a pair of trainers that nobodies got and if you get spike conversions, then that's what you've

got. I won't make the same pair twice. If someone comes to me and says I like that pair that you did for him, will you make them for me, I'd say no. I'd say I'll do you something similar but there will have to be something different, because I don't make the same pair twice.

KO: In terms of recording the process, harnessing the expertise, and preserving it for future generations to tap into so that the craft doesn't die, when you're doing a project for somebody, do you record the stages, a before and after or does it depend on the project?

DC: No, I just get on with it to be honest. Benji (Benji Blunt) does more stuff like that, and he says to me you should record it, but I can't do that myself. Once I start doing a job, I just forget about everything else, I just get into the job and just want to see it through. So, stopping and starting and setting up cameras and stuff like that breaks my concentration. I would be more than happy for someone to come in and film me doing the work and for me to explain to them as I'm doing the job what it is I'm doing.

KO: That's it I'm coming in David lol.

DC: That'd be great, once I've got the shop set up and I'm doing your spikes, if you wanna come in the shop and see me stripping them and making the mid-soles, show you how I plate out the design and make the templates then that would be something.

KO: 100% Let's do it. The more I speak with you and look back at conversations we've had, the more I realise that this is such a unique thing, (conversion) and I feel quite passionate about recording the process, archiving it, and protecting it. All the expertise and craftsmanship that's in your head is amazing and I think if we can record and preserve it, I believe it would be valuable.

DC: Well, I'd love to do that. As I say, no job is ever the same with anything like this, and sometimes the job runs smoothly, and sometimes it's an absolute nightmare. I have built mid-soles for spikes, and then trashed them at the last minute, just thrown them in the bin because I've made a stupid little mistake somewhere and when it's come to putting them, onto the upper I've realised, and I've had to start all over again. That

doesn't happen all the time but that is more down to me. Some people may think I might just get away with that, but I just go no, forget it, they're going in the bin.

KO: That's a good point, and that's why people come back to you for work. They know it will be a quality job.

DC: Once I get into it, time just flies without me realising it, especially if I'm in the workshop. I can be in there until 8 or 9 O'clock at night after starting in the morning, but once you start seeing it coming together and you're nearly there, especially when you're putting on the different colours and all that, and getting it finished on the machine and you're getting a nice smooth finish and you start to see the shape – I can't help it I get excited. And I think I wanna get this done because I want to see what it looks like at the end. Sometimes I would benefit from stepping back and saying right you've done today's work, leave it now until tomorrow. Sometimes I can charge ahead. As I say, that never effects the quality of the job, but I think if I could step back, it would be better, not for the shoe, for me, to give myself a break. Go to bed, get some sleep, carry on tomorrow - get a life lol!

KO: But this is your life, though. I mean listening to you, you are obviously emotionally invested, you're excited by what you do and to talk to somebody who says that about their day-to-day job is amazing. I do not speak to many people who say that about what they do every day. You are living and breathing what you love to do and there's something to be said for that for sure.

DC: Well yeah, unfortunately it is only a small part of my day-to-day but if I could do it full time, I would be a happy man.

KO: How would you define trainer culture and the sub-cultural groups within it?

DC: When I first started getting into the Facebook groups, I thought I knew a bit. I thought I know trainers, I know my stuff, but once I got into these groups, I realised that I know, what I know. There are lads out there who are proper obsessive. As is the case in every sub-culture. But now that I've got into it further and I've realised all the different strands that there is out there it amazes me, it really does amaze me. I think

it's really interesting all the different elements that people are into. I love what these young kids are doing, I mean I've got a lad (bookofglobe) I think his Instagram page is, he's actually my mate's son and he is into customising Nike trainers and the work that he's doing is great. It's all painted, but his designs are brilliant. And I love what he does and he's only a young kid and he's coming at it from his angle and his age group doing what they want to do.

KO: Is it that liquid stuff that they are using on the Nike AF1's for custom?

DC: I think so, I'm not sure what he uses. He wants to come and work with me 'cos he does do some little bits of adding stuff on. He's down in Uni in London, doing something to do with Fashion but he's really getting into this now, 'cos they're starting to take off for him. But that's what I'm saying these young kids that I'm seeing, the designs that they're doing and they're managing to get commissions off their trainer work and that's brilliant. See obviously people like me and what we're in to, we've obviously still got our heads in the vintage stuff but these young kids who are coming in now they are what we were twenty, thirty years ago. So, if we had the opportunity to be doing stuff like trainers then we'd have been doing it, we'd have snapped any bodies hands off. So, the fact that they they've got these opportunities and the way that Uni's allow students to be hands on in all sorts of ways is brilliant and allows them to come up with these amazing designs and realise their ideas. So, I like that side of it, that excites me. Don't get me wrong I love our world and the vintage but there's only so far you can go with it. That's why I enjoy doing the conversions over anything else 'cos it gives me a chance to be creative and have a bit more of an outlet. I'll be totally honest I'm bored of doing ordinary re-soles, I really am. I will continue doing it whilst people pay me, but...

KO: Looking at that world of vintage, on the surface it seems that all the lads who are collectors of vintage are forty-five plus because they are all that 1980s era. With the younger wave of trainer community who are into their (adidas) Yeazy's etc. are any of them into the vintage?

DC: There are lads who are into it, younger lads who are in the groups, and obviously the football lads, because it's that continuation and there has been a bit of a revival

lately but what they tend to be doing is they're wearing the reissue versions instead of the original trainers and they'll be mixing and matching it with new stuff. When you see a lot of lads, they're still wearing the same gear they'd been wearing thirty odd years ago with the trainers. But these lads have been mixing and matching it with the modern gear which I think looks a lot better because that's them putting their stamp on it and some people rip 'em for that, but that's them, that's their generation, that's what they want to do. There's no point them dressing like we did, what's the point in that.

KO: So, they (younger gen.) are buying into the story and narrative then?

DC: Yeah, definitely, the culture, as I say the football lads because that's what it was always associated with, the football casuals and I suppose the mod revival at the end of the 70s. It's kinda that similar thing a specific moment in time that they want to try to associate themselves with.

KO: That brings us nicely on to your input to the film 'Sole Seeking in South America' (2014). Can you tell us about that?

DC: I did the repair work on some of the trainers that came out of the shop (Carlos Ruiz owner of an adidas dead stock store). Obviously, the shop has become legendary. The basic story is there was a shop in Argentina that had all this untold old stock that was still sitting in boxes. Gary Aspden, Ian Brown and a gang of other adidas super fans went over and found all these really rare trainers, but they had all disintegrated because of the conditions they'd been stored in. luckily, I was trusted to do quite a few pairs out of there, particularly one model called (adidas) Silver Wind which is one of the main models that they were after and they couldn't believe their luck when they found them. A stack of them! But that was more into the mid-sole build so slightly a different type of work but again that was really, really interesting because I'd seen the film myself and to get my own hands-on trainers that I'd seen in the film and in the shop and to think here's me getting a chance to work on them, it was a privilege. Although they did come with their problems, because especially with the (adidas) Silver Wind – I'd never seen a pair, all I had was photographs to go by and when you see the actual model the heel stabilisers that they've got on them, the way they flare

out around the mid-sole, so trying to build the mid-sole so that they fitted in to that flare was really, really difficult and obviously because they were such a rare pair of trainers the pressure was really on to try and get it right. But I think I ended up doing about 5 or 6 pairs of the (adidas) Silver Wind but all in all I think I've done about 15 pairs out of Carlos's shop now. Quite a lot of them are on the Charlesworth and Blunt Instagram page.

KO: As you've mentioned Benji (Blunt), who else would you cite as an expert in their field within the trainer community?

DC: Obviously Lee (@Refreshed.Kicks) has got a good name because he specialises in re-dyes which is a whole different skill set. People have asked me to do it and, I did try it in the beginning but one nudge of the brush and it's game over. So, it's (re-dying) not for me. But Lee's great at what he does, and he's got a good reputation in that field. I know loads of lads who tried the re-dying and it just looked like they'd dipped the trainers in a bucket of paint, so what Lee does is good. There are loads of lads who've popped up doing the re-glues and having a go at the transplants and things like that and some of the lad's work looks good, but I've not actually seen it in front of me, to be able to judge it fairly. I know there's a lot of lads over in America who do the Nike, 'cos Nike's much bigger over there than it is over here and the work that they're turning out is really, really good and it's not work that I would ever approach. And there's a couple of guys over in the Middle East who I follow on Instagram, one's called @linenrepair, and one's called @cusharygold they do loads of stitching work so like when you get a pair of Nike running shoes and maybe the toe panel has got a rip in it, or the suede toe bumpers are ruined they completely replace that and the work that they're doing is amazing. They're based all the way over in the Middle East, but lads are starting to send shoes to them because they've seen how good they are. They do velour stripes and velour heel tabs, they perish, and they can turn to dust, and they start cracking and I've tried different techniques of repairing them, but it's never been successful, but these guys are getting the right material, and it looks authentic.

KO: The world is a small place and with social media, the rise of Zoom (thanks to the pandemic), working from home and online industry, it doesn't really matter where you are in the world anymore.

DC: Well, I get people sending trainers to me from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America, Russia, so people are prepared to do that, so I don't see why it would be different for anyone else. Some lads did have an issue because of where they were (Middle East) because of some connotations with some of the lads and that was affecting the judgement but now they're seeing the quality of the work they're turning out; they realise these guys know what they're doing and that they're bang into the trainer culture just like we are.

KO: You must have clients who you would cite as deep into the culture who've got loads of pair of conversions that you've done for them?

DC: Yeah, lads who've got more pairs than anybody else. Who I know are big time collectors? I lost a lot of work like the re-glues to these lads who started popping up doing it themselves but the customers who I lost to them; it didn't really bother me because the lads who are big time collectors still send their work to me. I'm happy I've got their loyalty and I'd rather be doing their trainers because they're the real deal. Rather than something from a few years ago that just needs a re-glue, so that side of the work I was happy to lose, and I would be much happier just dealing with the serious collectors who come to me because they know I'll do the best job I can for them.

KO: That's the thing, it's about trust and the quality service which leads to the repeat customers. The higher you go up the chain in the community, to those types of collectors the more fastidious they are with their pride and joy, so they want the best job and so they come to the best person.

DC: That makes me feel good and I'm happy with that, but it does come with its own pressures as well, because you are getting the best trainers, you are getting the rarer trainers but it's just that added thing of, you've got to get this right.

KO: Whenever you promote your work, do you find that you get a lot of copying, or do you find that it becomes a sharing culture within the trainer community?

DC: Oh yeah, that's happened. To be honest when I first started and the difference that I could offer because of the training I'd had and the machinery I had, that's what made

me stand out from others, and I was inundated at times. I had almost a two-year waiting list at one point it was ridiculous because I just couldn't deal with the amount of people who were requesting me to do work for them. Because of that backlog that's when people started seeing there was something in it as a business, and people started having a go themselves. There are ways of doing it at home, but it's just different to the way I do it. Once they'd learnt how to do it and they'd knocked out a few pairs some customers did filter off to these others, they were happy to get their trainers done by them and so it did take away some of my customers, but it kinda done me a favour 'cos the pressure of having that two-year waiting list was crushing at times. People were constantly messaging me, when can I send them the finished pair, people forget I've got however many customers and think I'm only dealing with them. They message you at all times of the day, pecking your head constantly and it was a nightmare. So that side of it I'm quite happy about.

KO: Social-media and any promotion is a bit of a double edge sword because you must have it for promotion but can open a floodgate and can allow people in who may decide to copy your craft. But customers who appreciate the service and artisan quality of the product you produce will always stay with you.

DC: Yeah, well I've slowed down my posting and I have tried to limit it to the interesting, more unique jobs. It's rare now that I will post a double re-glue or a City Series re-glue because it's been done a hundred times, people know I can do that, so I don't need to show that anymore.

KO: That shows your diversification and creativity, so it's good that your social media is diversifying along with you. How did the football boot conversion come about?

DC: That was really good, I enjoyed that one, 'cos again it was something completely different. The pitch of a football boot is almost completely flat, well football boots from that era (1970s), there was no real shape to them. It was just a flat upper, so trying to work around that to still get the running style shape into it, created its own problems to solve. The lad who asked me to do that was very specific on how he wanted it to look. Which is a good thing in a way, because he's come straight at me with an idea, and he sent photos of how he envisioned it. Then I could work with that, and we

discussed around the idea with what I could do and then when it was done, he was absolutely made up with the results, so I'm happy that he's happy.

KO: So, you've got the spike conversion and now the football boot conversion, are there others in the pipeline?

DC: No. I can't think of anything else I've been asked to do. Although my cousin's girlfriend came up with an idea the other day, of trying to get lads football boots that they'd played a certain, memorable game or famous footballers and turning their football boots into trainers for them, so they've got a special pair of boots that they might have had a special game in but then you can turn them into trainers and they can carry on wearing them as casual every day trainers. I thought that was an interesting little idea.

KO: Yes, that is the key, starting with something that means something to the person/customer. As a layman I would suggest you could convert almost any type of footwear, taking something quite wacky and turning it into an everyday shoe that can be worn.

DC: There are certain limitations depending on the style of the upper, would determine how successful you may be with it. That would be something I'd have to point out to the client, like I was saying to yourselves, when you were looking at running spikes to convert. Don't get anything where the outsole comes up onto the upper, because once that's taken away the glue marks are still there and then you've got to try and figure out what you're going to do. That's what you've got to keep in mind with a conversion. It's like these modern football boots now, I wouldn't be able to do something like that, but a boot from the 70s or 80s then yeah, I could work around that. Nearly all the spikes I get are suede uppers, the pair I sent you (image for *Sole Zine* Vol:03) the (adidas) Rocket, I really like them. I thought they came out really well and I'd like to be doing more leather style one's 'cos I think they're a bit more robust so they can take a bit more stick during the process.

KO: There was a student from a London College who has taken the front of a Nike running shoe and combined them with a stiletto. She had kept the mid-section of the

trainer with the laces, tongue and (Nike) tick and made them into a pointy, kitten heel. Basically, turning a casual shoe into a dress shoe. It went viral; she has got numerous commissions from it.

DC: That's what I mean about these young kids with these crazy ideas, but they're working. They've got no preconception they just give things a go.

KO: I attended a webinar with two customisers from America and they were basically getting old Nike Air Jordan's, stripping them back and then building them back up with leather from a Louis Vuitton bag or a Chanel bag. They have also done a trainer which was a hybrid of a trainer and a brogue (men's dress shoe). This was his ultimate favourite custom / conversion because he appreciated the tradition and craftsmanship of the brogue but then he loves his trainers, so for him it was a perfect hybrid.

DC: Oh yeah, the possibilities are endless if you've got the time, and the skill set to do it. As well as designing and making my own trainers to sell, I'd also like to take different trainers and take things off and build a totally new trainer, a hybrid trainer. I've done a bit of that in the past and sometimes they can go drastically wrong, and they just look stupid, but if they go right, they really work. That's another thing I think you can do, go down to these outlet stores where they're selling them off cheap and buy a few different pairs, then bringing them home, breaking them down and start playing around and seeing what you come out with. I'm looking at getting into that sort of thing as well.

KO: Is there anything you'd like to add David?

DC: I can't remember what I've said to be honest, lol.

KO: Well, I think we've covered everything nicely. Thank you so much for your time, David.

DC: No problem, I enjoyed that, thank you. Speak soon.

## **APPENDIX 2.3**

### **Transcript: Kayla Owen, Interview with Kris Boyle ‘Dundee Sole’ (2020) (*Sole-Zine* 04: CUSTOM)**

**Biography:** Owner and founder of the sports footwear retail store Dundee Sole, located in the Wellgate Shopping Centre, Dundee. Established in 2016, Boyle is acclaimed to be Scotland’s first deadstock trainer retail store. Self-taught, Boyle quickly became an expert in trainer repair, restoration and customisation. He is the originator of ‘Sneaker laundry’, @dundeesole\_cleans, and purveyor of community in-store workshops where he avidly disseminates skills and knowledge of the artisan crafts of restoration and customisation to a variety of audiences and demographics. He works hard to nurture and preserve the legacy of the craftspeople and connected subcultural group.

**Interviewee:** Kris Boyle (@dundeesole)

**Interviewer:** Kayla Owen

**Date of Interview:** 23/07/2020

**Location of Interview:** Telephone

**List of Acronyms:** KDS = Kris, Dundee, KO = Kayla Owen (Main Interviewer)

[Begin Transcript 00:01:53]

KO: I’m into my trainers and I thought I had a lot of pairs, but then you meet someone who has one hundred pairs, then you meet someone who has one thousand pairs, and the knowledge is unwritten knowledge. They know everything down to the factory codes, they know the official name for the colour of the suede, they know every detail. So, we find it fascinating and feel it needs capturing.

KDS: It’s a mad world to be part of. I would say that. Definitely.

KO: There is a definite culture that needs to be documented in some way, and that's what this research project aims to do from a variety of perspectives: terrace, region, male/female, craftsmanship and process.

KDS: Yeah definitely. I would say it's more of a Northern culture, because whenever I go down to London it's just mad how it differs from when you see them hanging about the streets here or anywhere like Manchester, Liverpool, anywhere that I've been. I would call it a Northern thing. The Scottish have adopted it too. I think it all stems from the Stone Roses, that's where it stems from here.

KO: So, music, but slightly later than the Liverpool thing?

KDS: Football and music. Anybody I speak to, never says that anybody on the football terraces up here would wear adidas. No-one ever says that. You get people saying that, like the ones that were buying the runners in 1988/ 1987, but everybody I speak to say the dominant brand was Nike on the scene.

KO: What year was that then?

KDS: I would say, documenting from here, it was obviously bigger in England to start with, I think it really kicked off with the 1980s (adidas) Spezials, that was really big about 1985 here. But 1988 going into the 1990s because I have searched every casual photo and I can't tag a boy that's wearing adidas. It's hard, really, hard. You get the occasional (adidas) Trimm Trab or the occasional pair of (adidas) Samba, but that is it.

KO: That's interesting because adidas seem to be like the Holy Grail here in Liverpool and there seems to be two types of casual as well. There's that first and second wave casual who belonged or who have a very close connection to the late 1970s early 1980s scene and then....

KDS: I think it changed so quick, from like skin heads and boot boys in the 70s and then it was such a dramatic change to the casual culture. Because you had the older lads who were just there for a fight, do you know what I mean?

KO: I know what you're saying, but in the 1990s, there was one shoe, the (Nike Air Max) '95 and it's like a rite of passage here, everyone's had a pair even though adidas are a big player. With the lads now, it seems to be that there is a craze for high end, the Lanvin runner, Valentino runner for the Friday night out...

KDS: That's it, in my shop all I get now from the young generation is Valentino the (adidas) Crystal Vapours, the (adidas) Yeezy's, Alexander McQueen's is all I buy in for the young ones. Gucci's, anything that cost more than three hundred quid.

KO: And are these guys coming in for repair or custom on those shoes?

KDS: Those one's are usually cleans, the Gucci leather ones, I get a lot of repairs 'cos they've scratched the toes. Everybody's different about their shoes. I get people coming in because the stitching's a bit marked and they don't like it, so I go at it with a cotton bud until the stitching comes out alright. Everybody's different, but the young generation is. I see this really fizzling out, they all want the expensive stuff.

KO: Yes, so the young generation is brand led rather than part of a community.

KDS: I blame YouTube because it's taken it away from the streets. You used to be what the scene was, what the older boys were wearing, what was going on about the streets and that's what you thought was cool. But they're all just watching YouTube now and it's all the rappers with their gold chains and all that, so that's what they want. Because growing up with street culture it was what you seen, you'd see somebody wearing something and you'd be like where'd you get that and that's totally died out now.

KO: It's the birth of the internet like you say, and it's the 'drop' and it's the lottery, it's just crazy.

KDS: Yeah, the hype.

KO: So, was it the streets where your love of trainers began?

KDS: It's a crazy story; I've always loved trainers and my love of adidas I would say started with like headers you know with the football back in the day. In the 1990s everybody whipped out cool adidas trainers but from what I remember, you were only getting certain silhouettes in the 1990s you might see maybe a Campus and a Gazelle, Samba but I wouldn't say there were loads. So, my first memory of trainers must be Lacoste like loads of tennis shoes. Everybody was kicking about in Nike and Lacoste but with football boots it was adidas, because all the best players when I was a kid were wearing adidas, Zidane, even Beckham. I'm a Liverpool fan but yeah, everyone was wearing them for that and the bowl cuts that they had back in the day. But I would say that it started for me with football. I credit that boot alone that's what started it for me, yeah.

KO: As you know it was Lee (@Refreshed.Kicks) that put us in touch which I'm grateful for. We've been working together for a little while now and his work is interesting...

KDS: Yeah, he's cool man.

KO: He's great and like you he's got loads of great stories and it's that narrative and community vibe that I'm interested in capturing – what trainer life looks like for different individuals from the sub-culture. Through conversation with Lee (@Refreshed.Kicks), he cited you as an expert customiser. So how did you get into it?

KDS: I've always had this daft knowledge of adidas because it goes back to music. One thing I will say you know how I mentioned about the casual culture here, that it was dominantly Nike that was on the terraces, but the thing before that is Nike was nothing until the Jordan came out in 1985. All the music sort of stuff you'd see like the musicians were wearing adidas, and with all that sort of knowledge because I was right into my music, I was in a band and stuff and all the musicians you'd see them kicking about in Gazelle's, SL 72s, The Rolling Stones, even John Lennon; you've got John Lennon wearing adidas. Yeah, so I had a daft knowledge of that, and I started selling vintage clothes and then I was going through all the catalogues, and you start to see all the trainers and I was just like I'm getting into the trainers. I came across Transalpino (rare, vintage and deadstock trainer shop in Liverpool) and I seen that they

were making it work, and I was just basically amazed at how they managed to get these trainers and boys were buying them, so...

KO: I was, the stories Jockey tells me about his travels is unreal.

KDS: Actually, I know it's crazy right, I know so many people, I search the internet as much as I can, and I speak to so many people, but I can't find what he finds.

KO: He has made interesting connections across the world with this. He travels to Australia to see his son and on the way, he always stops off in...

KDS: Vietnam or somewhere?

KO: Yeah.

KDS: I think he's got wise now, 'cos he used to actually post where he was.

KO: Exactly, so he's got a couple of contacts out there and every time he's going out that way, he brings a suitcase back of about eighty, ninety, one hundred pairs and you go in the shop and they're a hundred pounds a pop and you wonder, how is this working? But there is a tribe and customer there for them.

KDS: Yeah definitely. I think they sparked this new life into it. I'd give him that. They sparked new life into it.

KO: When did you start as 'Dundee Sole'?

KDS: Probably about 2006. Prior to that, I've had my own business entirely, but one thing led to another. I was just cleaning shoes and then I came across Lee (@Refreshed.Kicks) and Blunt Shank (Benji shoemaker) I came across online, because at the time no-one else was really doing it. I remember how big a deal the gold lettering was, and they were the only ones who were able to do the gold lettering at the time.

KO: Lee (@Refreshed.Kicks) was telling us about that.

KDS: Well, it was a massive deal back in the day. Not now because Benji (Blunt Shank, shoemaker) sort of publicised it and ruined it but it was a massive deal back in the day. I would sit up all night looking at the boy's work, trying to work out how they had done it, all night and it sort of took off from there. I went down and worked for Benji (Blunt Shank) for three days. Yeah, I went down for a couple of things. He taught me how to re-sole; he showed me how to do the gold lettering and he also taught me how to make stripes. I was down at his house for three days; it was cool. The guy is super, super talented. I always say if I had his knowledge, I'd be a millionaire, lol. But it's just not the way it works. But it's incredible what he can do, and it was incredible to see as well. So yeah, I done that, I came back and just started up and then one thing led to another basically.

KO: So, do you still customise clothes as well as trainers?

KDS: I do T-shirts. If I'm mucking about sometimes, I'll make designs for T-Shirts and stuff. But it's hoodies that just seem to fly. Every time I release anything like that, they just seem to sell out. But it's one of these things, I don't like to overdo it. So, I just do a certain colourway for a couple of weeks or a couple of months before I release another.

KO: Are you still working across different brands?

KDS: 90% of the stuff I get is adidas. I always say I don't discriminate against trainer brands; I'll work on anything. I've got a pair of O.G. (original) Nike Jordan's here just now, they're an absolute state but they're one of the good projects I'm going to be doing soon. My knowledge is in adidas, I don't really know too much about it (Nike). I'll have to speak to a few boys who are big on the Nike scene. Like I didn't even know that the Jordan had an air bubble in it, the Jordan 1 has an air bubble.

KO: Do you have a favourite project or custom piece?

KDS: I've just recently done a Wu Tang Clan (American hip hop group formed in NYC '92) custom during lockdown. I ended up hating it 'cos I ended up looking at it too long. I was amazed it sold out before anybody had seen it. I done two raffles for them, and it sold out like on the day no-one had even seen the trainers, and it inspired instant fear 'cos I was like, oh God people are going to see them and hate them.

KO: I like the yellow ones.

KDS: They're the ones that drove me daft. I just thought they'd look different in my head, but I had fun with it.

KO: Can you talk us through the process on that Wu Tang custom?

KDS: Yeah course. Well at first, I had the idea, the thing is with doing a customisation I'm finding out now what I really don't want to be doing because I think the custom game has just got so tacky over the past years, because so many people have learnt how to do it. And like I said stuff has been publicised and so people don't always have the same care and detail they just want to throw anything on a trainer and think it's a custom job. I'm just kinda more interested in the ridiculous stuff. So, my idea was to do something that I wanna do, make it look as cool as I can and go from there. I've done it a couple of times. I done a Wild Warriors (Baseball Club of Michigan, USA) custom last year. That took off quite well as well because it was the Warriors and that was a Warriors shoe and a baseball shoe reissue it was the same idea with that, I'll do it at the same time. I'll get the boxes 'cos my mate does boxes so me and him had a sit down and we talked about how to make them look and he done an outstanding job of putting them together. He even put for the Shaolin (Kung Fu martial art) custom, German text on the stripe on one side which I was amazed by. I've got them here. It was just an idea to try and make it look totally different to what everybody else is doing. He (Lee Refreshed Kicks) put me on to this American boy actually and said have seen what this boy's doing? 'Cos the Americans are right into this drip effect (paint drip) just now. It's done with a rubber paint, so it's not the easiest to work with and to be honest, I never actually thought it would go down that well here, I thought people would look at that and be like, that's terrible, it's not our culture. So, I was quite scared of that one, but I just ended up going for it in the end.

KO: So that's hand painted black on yellow?

KDS: The (adidas) Studebaker, I dyed one of them black. If you look at the (adidas) Shaolin custom there's a little Wu Tang (clan) symbol under the heel and what I had to do with that, I had to stick a vinyl on the shoe, thicken up the dye for the dye job, so it was a bit clumpy, and then paint over it so the dye didn't start going underneath the vinyl. Waited for it to dry and then wipe it off and I had a clear Wu Tang symbol so that's the original colour of the suede. But the whole idea was to make it look like it was from the street.

KO: That's interesting, because the yellow one's almost look embossed because the texture of the suede is still three dimensional.

KDS: That's just going hard at it with a brush

KO: It's such a good job. I like the fact that you can't tell how it's been done. It's that professional.

KDS: I had other plans for it, I wanted it to go onto the heel tab, but I could not get a proper match of vinyl to colour the (adidas) Jamaica. So, I ended up scrapping it because I thought it would end up looking silly with too many different colours. I had to do 3D printing for them to get some of the stuff done, and I'd never done that before, so that was a fun couple of days. I done a Wu Tang label, like (adidas) Spezial label which just hang on. I had to do that, and I made them on the (3D) printer. It would have been more interesting if I'd have got it to look how I wanted it to. I wanted it to be round, and Dundee Sole etched into it, but that was hard as I'd learnt to 3D print in a day. So that got scrapped and we made a flat one.

KO: People buy into trainer customisation and this sub-culture, but there's also another side to the craft in terms of keeping attire for longer, and ethically and sustainably that's a positive thing. I'm wondering if you feel there are skills and processes that you use within the customisation of trainers which could be applied to garment, which may encourage people to see their clothes as 'flexible' to love it longer, so they are not just

discarding it to land fill when they have worn it too many times, it's in need of repair or they literally just get bored of it?

KDS: I think with today a lot of things comes down to how limited it is. It's like that 'one up man-ship' still. Supreme (Skate/ fashion brand established in N.Y.C., 1994) for example whenever they drop something and then boom, the resellers market, like a brick (2016 Supreme release an actual branded boxed house brick). I'm sure someone was telling me it's five hundred pounds for a Supreme brick, but who would wanna buy a brick? Lol.

KO: I think some of those bricks went for £3000!

KDS: People don't even care what it is, they just want it 'cos it's Supreme. The whole customisation T-shirt would be a cool thing. Remember the thermo thing in the 1980s (Hypercolor clothing brand established 1991) where people would put their hand on the fabric, and it would change colour. Thermochromic it was called. I always thought that was cool.

KO: Yeah, I actually did a collection in the 1990s that had that fabric in the hood section of a dress. You lose the most heat from your head, so you achieved more change visually so gaining more impact.

KDS: That's cool. Everything seems to come around again. Now, there's a thing that they're all wearing embroidery. Everything is embroidered. There's these big baggy T-shirts and they've had them embroidered with little logos and slogans.

KO: I think that embroidery tends to be viewed as more luxury. That's the notion. A print which is flat is quite accessible and I think if its embroidered people consider it more lux.

KDS: I think that is the case just now.

KO: There's a lot of glow-in-the-dark stuff currently. Vetements (French fashion brand established in 2014) have been doing a lot with 3M (reflective fabric).

KDS: I do remember that back in the days when I used to go to the nightclubs, and it was big back then. Hey, I'm waiting for flares to come back in lol. That's something I've not seen. The last time I seen someone wearing flares was for the music, Rob Hardy I think is his name. That's the last guy I seen wearing then. I'm waiting for flares to come back.

KO: You've mentioned the guy you work with on the trainer boxes. Do you ever collaborate with anyone from a garment or trainer perspective?

KDS: Have you never heard about the boy that stole the Raymond van Barneveld (professional dart player) custom trainer off me? That was a great story that. Do you know who the darts player, Ray Barneveld is? RVB he's called he's from Holland. He messaged this customiser boy, but this boy couldn't do it. I'd say this is probably my worst mistake yet. But this guy made out that we were gonna be on the job together so we'd both get all this media attention. Stupidly I said yes to it. Done the whole shoe and basically then he wanted me to send the shoe, which I thought was a bit fishy, so I took photos of my work, 'cos I'd done most of the shoe. Then next thing wham bam I post the shoe, give all the credit to the boy called Billy. Then it's all over the internet. Eventually I'm not gonna lie, I fell out with him, but I let it lie for a few months and then he was in the paper again with this trainer, so I went and got all our conversations and plastered it all over my (Instagram) page. Next thing the paper was in here (Dundee Sole shop) the next day, but it turned out that Billy and Barneveld got a photo together, so I'll get him back for that one day lol.

Yeah, it's a true story that. One of those funny stories to be fair. The funniest thing is the boy got big after that, yeah, he had like 70,000 (Instagram) followers, but he just got took down for copyright. He must have annoyed somebody!

KO: I have noticed from talking to craftspeople, that there is blatant copying in this game.

KDS: Yeah, and you can't police it. There are some things that lads get annoyed about. Like in Leeds now it seems as though everyone is going on about this Leeds custom, a blue and yellow trainer. Lot of lads are getting uptight about these Leeds customs

that they're doing and all they're putting on the side of it is 'Leeds' and a badge. You can't really copyright that. So, there's a lot of that sort of stuff going about. It's one of those things, it going to happen now because the whole custom thing is getting bigger.

KO: Who is your typical customer, Kris? Are they regional, global?

KDS: I've got customers from everywhere. The customs are something I've not been doing for a while. The restoration is what I get loads of. I've got a big pile of customs to do as well. I've not been taking on work since the start of the year I used to have staff a year ago, but I don't now. I got this big job list to do and I'm trying to get through it and there's only me, it's a bit of a nightmare.

KO: Is restoration the biggest element of your business in that case?

KDS: I don't know, erm, I do the cleaning, I get quite a lot of cleaning. I do get quite a lot of restorations, even if that's classed as a touch up of paint, I suppose. I get a lot of that. I started off predominantly it was customs, that I started off doing, 'cos everybody was giving me their customs, and then I started doing the restorations because I don't know how many people do it now, but at the time I was one of the drivers, doing the colours and that 'cos I could mix colours properly. So, I started getting a lot of that but to be honest with you, there's a max. There are people who understand that you can get a trainer looking a certain way after whatever condition it gets sent and there's people that don't. The stresses, I've had some ridiculous jobs, like a boy sent me a pair of (adidas) Manchester's that he'd sprayed black with black protector. If you know the (adidas) Manchester it's a light blue shoe, so if it's now black, there's nothing I can do about that. But he's determined to give me the dye and I keep saying look mate if I dye that you're going to have one shoe darker than the other. Do you know what I mean, there's nothing I can do about that, but some people just don't understand.

KO: That must be tricky, trying to get customers to understand what's possible.

KDS: A lot of the time is me trying to keep the peace lol.

KO: You must have repeat customers who know the depth of your talent though.

KDS: I have got a very loyal customer base I must say, a lot are really understanding. The boys I do work for, I've been working with for years.

KO: You've got your shop and Instagram, but do you showcase any of your work at trainer festivals. How do you prefer to showcase your customs?

KDS: I went to Laces Out! (Liverpool based trainer festival) last year, twice and another festival called Steel City (trainer festival) in Sheffield. He asked me to take some stuff. Laces Out! is not bad is it, it's like get as many trainers in as you can. That boy wanted me to present stuff. At the time, I'd made a prototype Liam Gallagher custom, for a laugh. I got a paisley shirt glued it to a bit of leather and then cut up the stripes, it was like these mad paisley stripes. There's a picture of them it was last year sometime. I had that there, I had my Warriors shoe there. Have you heard the story about Carlos? (Carlos Ruiz owner of an adidas dead stock store in Argentina). Well, I've had shoes from Carlos's shop from time to time. A pair of Argentina TRX, which had a thin sole unit on it which no-one could get the sole unit. Obviously that Dave (Charlesworth Vintage Trainer Repairs) is the boy for the re-soles, but he'll just put a sole on to it. Whereas the people I deal with, they wanted a thin one. We waited about a year and a half until we got the sole, and we eventually got them on. There's a picture of me (on my Instagram) throwing them in the air at some point. Somebody said it was impossible, I would never get it, so when eventually and it was like a year and half later, when I got it, I said I've done the impossible and threw them in the air! But I took that one, and I took an (adidas) ZX800 OG (original) that I re-soled as well. And in terms of display purposes, that is the only displaying thing I've done in my life.

KO: Do you want to do more of that type of presentation?

KDS: Just now, my plan is I'm trying to get out of the restoration stuff, because I'm exhausted with having to deal with thingy people and to be honest, I'm having to do a lot of stuff that I don't want to do. Like, this might sound petty, but I really don't like Rangers (F.C.) I do a lot of putting Union Jacks all over (adidas) Gazelle's and stuff. I'm trying to focus on my own stuff and still sell the trainers but still do it different.

KO: Do you feel you want to pass down or share your skill with others?

KDS: I've tried to. The problem is I want to find somebody who's like me, who actually wants to do it. The people that I've had in, and I can understand it, if they're not really interested, you get that vibe, you know what I mean. I'd be happy to teach anybody who wants to learn. I've done videos of how to dye and how to clean trainers for lockdown, to try and keep going and a lot of people bought them to be fair.

KO: So, when you are doing a custom, do you make a conscious decision to record the process?

KDS: For people who want to see my work I'm good at putting stuff on my (Instagram) story. If I like something, then I'll put it up. But it goes day to day, whatever I'm doing on that day. Unless I'm keeping it a secret, then I try not to (post). In a way stuff is sort of documented. I do put it on my stories. I used to try and make videos and stuff. There's a video on my page; I think it was an (adidas) 1974 Malmo and I re-soled and re-dyed it and it was a five-minute video which showed from start to finish.

KO: So, it was hours' worth of footage sped up to be five minutes?

KDS: It was about two weeks.

KO: Wow two weeks' worth of footage in five minutes, that's cool!

KDS: The thing was at the start they were absolutely covered in glue and then you see at the end I get all the glue off. I was going at the suede with a knife, and I even took footage of that. It was the best I've ever done from start to finish.

KO: I'll have a look at that, sounds like it would fit into my research in terms of preserving the process.

KDS: It's a good one, 'cos you see it at the start, and it was absolutely f\*\*\*ked. That was my first ever (adidas) Malmo, I think.

KO: Are there any other craftspeople who you would cite as experts for customisation?

KDS: I like to look at the shoemakers because that's what I always wanted to get into. I've always liked the Shoe Surgeon (customiser based in LA) he makes some cool stuff. Do you remember all that drama with the Lidl trainer two, three weeks ago? Well about two years ago he made a Lidl trainer out of bags. It was a Nike Dunk I think, and he made it out of bags. I'm pretty sure Lidl got wind of that and eventually brought out those trainers. It's got to be. If you go on his (Instagram) page, you'll see it. I think it was a Nike Dunk, I think it was a hi-top but yeah, it's made from Lidl bags. That was cool.

KO: It's been great to talk to you Kris. Is there anything else you want to add?

KDS: The shop idea was always to be maybe like a Transalpino, dead stock vintage sort of place. Which if it wasn't for the internet, I would never have got away with it, to be fair. I would say that. The City of Dundee wouldn't have kept me going in this place. The shop itself, most of the sales I do is on the internet and the customers I get coming in and buying shoes, but if it was purely down to the shop and that was it, if there wasn't any access to the internet and people knowing about the customs, I don't think my shop would have lasted.

KO: So, like Transalpino, you are a destination store in that case?

KDS: I'm no-where near as big as Transalpino just now. I would love to be in the same category as them. For instance, when I talk about the Liverpool success it's stuff like that you can only dream about. That's the location. It's right time, right place. You've got to be in it to win and Transalpino are, and I totally appreciate that. If I can ever feel like I'm in the same category as Transalpino I'd be a very happy man but just now, I'll be working very hard to even get close, I think.

KO: I've worked with Jay and Jockey (Transalpino) for a while now and as well as being deadstock and vintage specialists, they were there as original casuals, well connected to the Liverpool football scene. But they're also entrepreneurs and they've managed to capitalise on the Transalpino story (Transalpino is named after the student

travel agency which was based in Liverpool in the early 1980s. Liverpool and Everton football fans used the trains to get abroad to matches and to 'buy' European sportswear not available in the UK at the time).

KDS: Yeah, that is something I do think is cool, what they've done with that is cool. I never knew what Transalpino was until I investigated it. The way they have branded it and marketed it is cool. I always say if it hadn't been for them and I'd never seen Carlos's shop, I don't think I'd have done it myself. I seen Carlos's shop and thought that's great, but when you hear what Transalpino was doing, I thought well this is doable, do you know what I mean.

KO: That's great. I'd love to secure a space for you in my poster-zine project, customisation issue. It'll be like a broad sheet but one sheet of paper, which opens to a poster on the centre.

KDS: Yeah, like old school? Got you. I've got a Wanderers custom coming up. That's the next pair I'll be doing. That'd be quite cool man. Yeah, that's cool, I like that. I can even record stuff that I'm doing now, 'cos I do stuff every day.

KO: If there's anything that you want to specifically present and promote then just let us know. For example, I haven't spoken to anyone else about this liquid paint you've used on the Wu Tang and Shaolin pairs. We see it in America and on the Nike AF1's but I've never seen it like this. It's great to showcase this as you, the originator in the UK of the material, technique, and process.

KDS: Yeah, I can send you some stuff over. I've got a colossal amount of stuff, so I can start looking through. I've got over 7000 photos on my Instagram. Go through my page and let me know what you like, and I'll dig out what I've got for you. Anything I can help you with man.

KO: Thank you so much for your time, Kris, I really appreciate you talking to me.

KDS: Anytime, it was good talking to you. Speak soon.

### **APPENDIX 3: ACADEMIC INTERVIEW**

The interview with Professor Yuniya Kawamura provides a critical theoretical perspective within the research, contributing insight into fashion systems, cultural production, and the social construction of dress and identity. Her perspective situates the project within broader academic discourse, helping to contextualise and elevate sneaker subculture beyond purely aesthetic or functional interpretations.

The interview supports the wider conclusions of the thesis by reinforcing the relationship between fashion, cultural value, and social meaning, demonstrating how garments and material practices operate as sites of communication, identity formation, and collective cultural expression.

Owen, K. (2020), Kayla Owen Interviewed Professor Yuniya Kawamura (Sociologist, Author, Educator), 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

**Transcript: Kayla Owen, Interview with Professor Yuniya Kawamura (2020)  
(Sociologist, Author, Educator)**

**Biography:** Yuniya Kawamura is a Professor of Fashion Sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology (F.I.T.), New York. Originally born in Prague in 1963, she studied fashion design and patternmaking in Japan, the UK, and the USA before completing a Ph.D. in Sociology at Columbia University in 2001. Her research examines fashion as a socially constructed and cultural phenomenon rather than a purely aesthetic practice. Kawamura is the author of numerous influential publications including *Fashion-ology* (2005), *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress* (2011), and *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (2012).

**Interviewee:** Professor Yuniya Kawamura

**Interviewer:** Kayla Owen

**Date of Interview:** 28/05/2020

**Location of Interview:** Email

## Can Adopting Fashion’s Pimp Up Posse’s Approach Offer a New Way of Seeing Leather Attire?

**Project Aim:** This study examines the value of an alternative production approach to leather and examines the sub cultural sneaker group who subscribe to or are central to a distinct area of production. Specifically, the craft of restoration, customisation, and conversion. The requirement to blend handcraft with new technologies, rather than employ one over the other. Bridging the gaps and blurring the relationship between consumer and attire, unearthing the subculture of *wearer-as-designer*.

Principle research question: If applied to garment can the sneaker practices of restoration, customisation and conversion create a new more sustainable owner exemplar for the fashion industry?

<b>Date</b>	May 28th, 2020	<b>Location</b>	New York
<b>Time</b>	11am	<b>Expert</b>	Sociologist
<b>Name/Alias</b>	Yuniya Kawamura		

<b>Phase 1: Background</b>		
1. Please explain what drove you to research and write your acclaimed book <i>Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture</i> .	a. How did it come about? b. Why?	I have always been interested in youth subcultures and their outward appearance because they express their values, norms and beliefs through their distinct dress that is very different from mainstream fashion. I researched and published a book entitled ‘Fashioning Japanese Subcultures’ in 2012 and talked about it in my class. One of my students raised her hand and asked me if a group of sneaker collectors can be considered a subculture. At the time, I did not know anything about them. She explained to me who they are, what they do and borrowed a documentary DVD ‘Just for Kicks’ from her boyfriend and lent it to me. The DVD was incredibly interesting, and that is when I thought I could write another book about a youth subculture, and this time it was about New York because that is where a sneaker subculture in the U.S. started.

<b>Phase 2: Sneaker Subculture</b>		
2. How would you define sneaker subculture?	a. How did you get into it?	A sneaker subculture is a group of young men and boys who are passionate about sneakers and have their own subcultural norms about how to wear, keep and take care of sneakers. I first contacted some industry professionals and designers to begin my fieldwork research in N.Y.
3. Do you personally subscribe to any principal aspect of this subculture?	a. Custom b. Restoration c. Conversion d. Other (state) e. Why?	No, I do not know much about these methods. I have met some sneaker enthusiasts who enjoy painting on the sneakers which I found was incredibly creative. But the hardcore sneaker collectors were not all that enthusiastic about these custom-painted sneakers. What they wanted was the rare, hard-to-find sneakers.
4. Who would you cite as cutting edge within the field?	a. Who? b. Why/How are they cutting edge? c. How do you know about them?	Bobbito Garcia, Godfather of the sneaker subculture, especially in N.Y. Ronnie Feig, an owner of a sneaker boutique 'Kith'. Both have come to my class as speakers.
<b>Phase 3: New Narratives</b>		
5. Do you believe that this subculture offers a new way of seeing attire?	a. How? Please expand.	When we follow a history of sneakers, we can see how it transitioned from a simple footwear that was used for sports and casualwear into 'fashion' which is an abstract concept. We see an institutionalization process of making an object into 'fashion' which contains some aesthetic components. In the same token, we can probably study a garment that transforms into fashion.

<p>6. Have you considered that the practices the subculture subscribe to could be applied to garment?</p>	<p>a. If so, how? b. Would you like to see this happen? c. Why?</p>	<p>Do you mean the customization process of garments? I personally like recycling and upcycling my old garments. Recycling and upcycling can be applied to garments since sustainability is the key concept in the industry. But if we all start doing that and it becomes a ‘trend’, we will no longer be purchasing anything new, and it could affect employment in apparel manufacturing. On one hand, we want to preserve the craftsmanship, but on the other, we need to maintain factory production as well although there is a lot of waste. Maintaining that balance is difficult.</p>
<p>7. In what ways would you consider this application would be viable?</p>	<p>a. Personally b. Subculturally c. Wider fashion industry? d. Why?</p>	<p>I see it as a niche in the sneaker industry or subculture. Those who collect limited edition sneakers to earn their status within their community are probably different from those who customize their sneakers. During my ethnographical study in N.Y., I did not meet anyone who was customizing/restoring their sneakers. That could be a very interesting field to pursue and research. I remember a friend who has a pair of Ferragamo shoes and takes it to his cobbler to get the soles changed every now and then. He has been wearing the same shoes for decades.</p>
<b>Phase 4: Preserving the Craft</b>		
<p>8. Have you considered that the craftsmanship may not always be available?</p>	<p>a. Would this be significant? b. Why? c. How?</p>	<p>I don't know much about the customization craftsmanship of sneakers, but for those who feel passionate about them, it would be a shame if the skill and the technique die out. Crafts in general are dying around the world, we must find ways to preserve them since craftsmen, skilled workers, and artisans are often voiceless.</p>
<p>9. How would this impact on the subculture?</p>	<p>a. Positively? b. Negatively? c. Other?</p>	<p>If there is a subculture that values customization and restoration of sneakers or any objects, that would be beneficial to the world of crafts and craftsmanship.</p>
<p>10. If these practices were archived for</p>	<p>a. Online b. Where? c. Reality d. Where?</p>	<p>It would be nice to see it both online and in reality. Perhaps, you can collaborate with some of the major sneaker companies and</p>

<p>future reference and use, would you prefer to view it online or in reality?</p>	<p>e. Why?</p>	<p>post it on their websites. Someone can plan a tour of the craft shops. Either way, I find the preservation of craftsmanship incredibly important. I am now working on the preservation of needlework around the world.</p>
<p>11. Do you have favourite sneaker?</p>	<p>a. If so, which one? b. How has that item shaped them and their passion for this style code?</p>	<p>Converse Hiness is my favorite because it has the right height of wedges, and it gives me a bit of height. But sneakers with wedges are not exactly popular. I am hoping that sneaker companies will make more styles and models for women.</p>
	<p>&gt;&gt; Do you mind if I contact you with any follow-up questions?</p>	<p>I don't mind.</p>
<p>XX. Thank you very much for your time today. That's the end of my questions, but if there is anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered please continue in the space below.</p>		<p>My profuse apologies for not getting back to you sooner.</p>

#### **APPENDIX 4: ACTION RESEARCH, REFLECTIVE CYCLE**

This appendix documents the action research and reflective cycle that underpinned the development of the study. Through a process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, the research evolved in response to emerging insights generated through practice, participant engagement, and public dissemination activities. The reflective cycle provided a structured framework for critically evaluating decisions, identifying opportunities for refinement, and informing subsequent stages of investigation. As a result, the appendix evidences how knowledge was generated through iterative practice, demonstrating the methodological significance of reflection as both a research tool and a means of strengthening the validity, responsiveness, and rigour of the project.

**APPENDIX 4.1 PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, SNEAKER MAKING**



Fig. A1  
Kayla Owen  
Practice – Sneaker Making ‘Sew Your Own Sneakers’  
Researcher Fieldwork: Workshop with Jason Stocks-Young  
Diamond Awl Workshop, Mossley, U.K. (27/10/2018).

**APPENDIX 4.2 PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, EMBOSSING**



Fig. A2  
Kayla Owen  
Practice – Sneaker Embossing  
Researcher Fieldwork: Workshop with Benji Blunt Shank  
Laces Out! Festival, Liverpool, U.K. (24/11/2018)

**APPENDIX 4.3 PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, BAG MAKING**



Fig. A3  
Kayla Owen  
Practice – Traditional Leather Bag Making  
Researcher Fieldwork: Two-Day Workshop with Jason Stocks-Young  
Diamond Awl Workshop, Mossley, U.K. (16-17/08/2017).

**APPENDIX 4.4 PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, LEATHER ENGRAVING**



Fig. A4  
Kayla Owen  
Practice – Leather Engraving  
Researcher Fieldwork: Workshop with Jason Stocks-Young  
Diamond Awl Workshop, Mossley, U.K. (19/10/2017).

## APPENDIX 4.5 PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, REFLECTIVE CYCLE

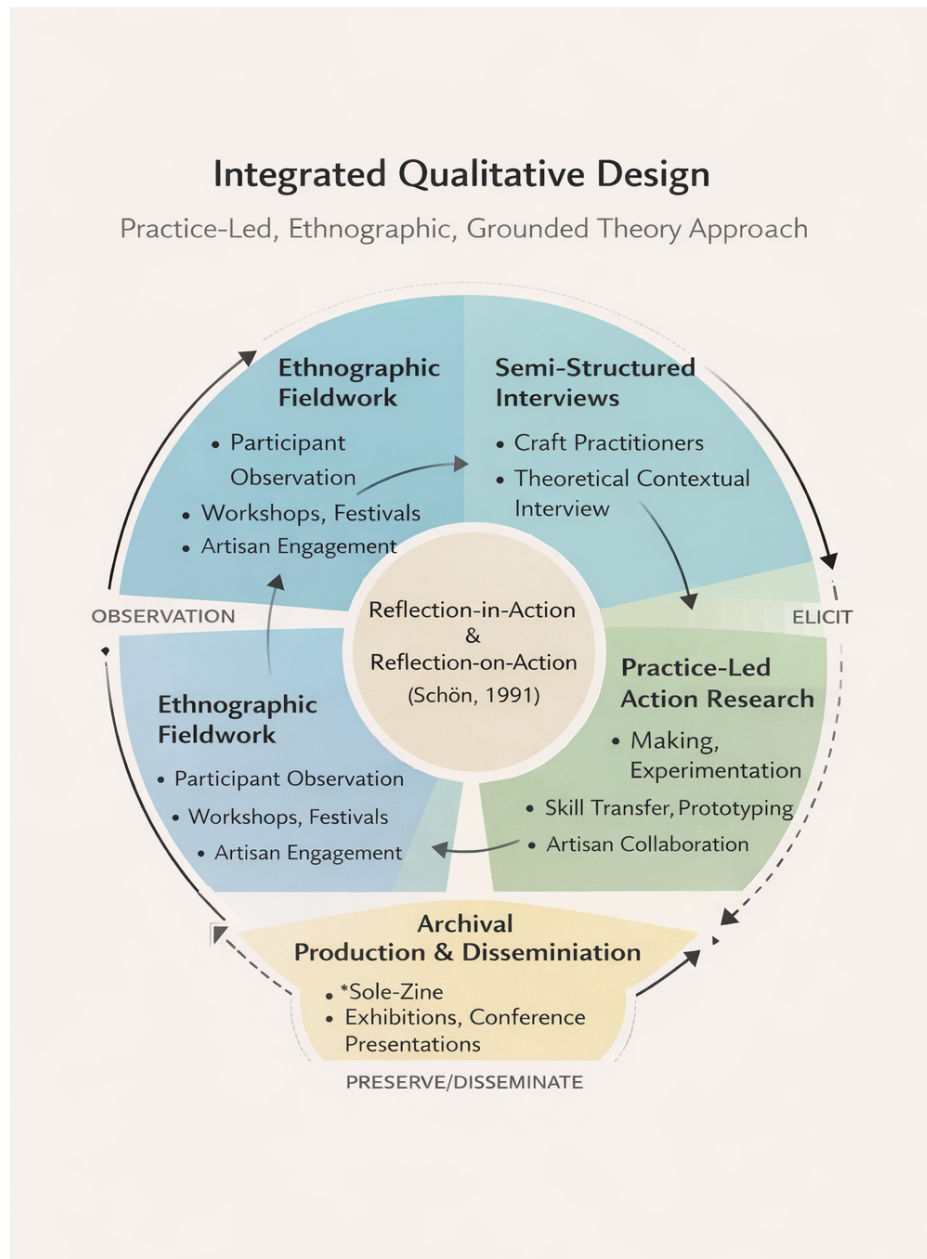


Fig. A5  
Kayla Owen  
Researcher Fieldwork  
Reflective Cycle - Qualitative Design Mapping

## **APPENDICES 5: ARCHIVAL + DISSEMINATION**

### **PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, *SOLE-ZINE* (VOLUMES 01-09)**

Sole-Zine contributes an important archival and community-led perspective to the research through the documentation and preservation of under-represented narratives within British trainer culture. Through engagement with collectors, craftspeople, retailers, and resellers, the project demonstrates how subcultural knowledge, identity, and material histories can be recorded and disseminated through alternative forms of research and publication.

The project supports the wider conclusions of the thesis by highlighting the cultural significance of community-generated archives and participatory documentation, reinforcing the value of preserving lived experiences and material practices often overlooked within traditional academic and institutional contexts.

**APPENDIX 5.1 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (01) MY MERSEY PARADISE  
(SUMMER 2020)**



Fig. A6  
Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine Volume (01) My Mersey Paradise* (Summer 2020)  
Paper Printed Zine  
Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm  
Liverpool, UK ISSN: 2634-7598. Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/78979c8d66.html>

APPENDIX 5.2 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (02) RESTORE (AUTUMN 2020)

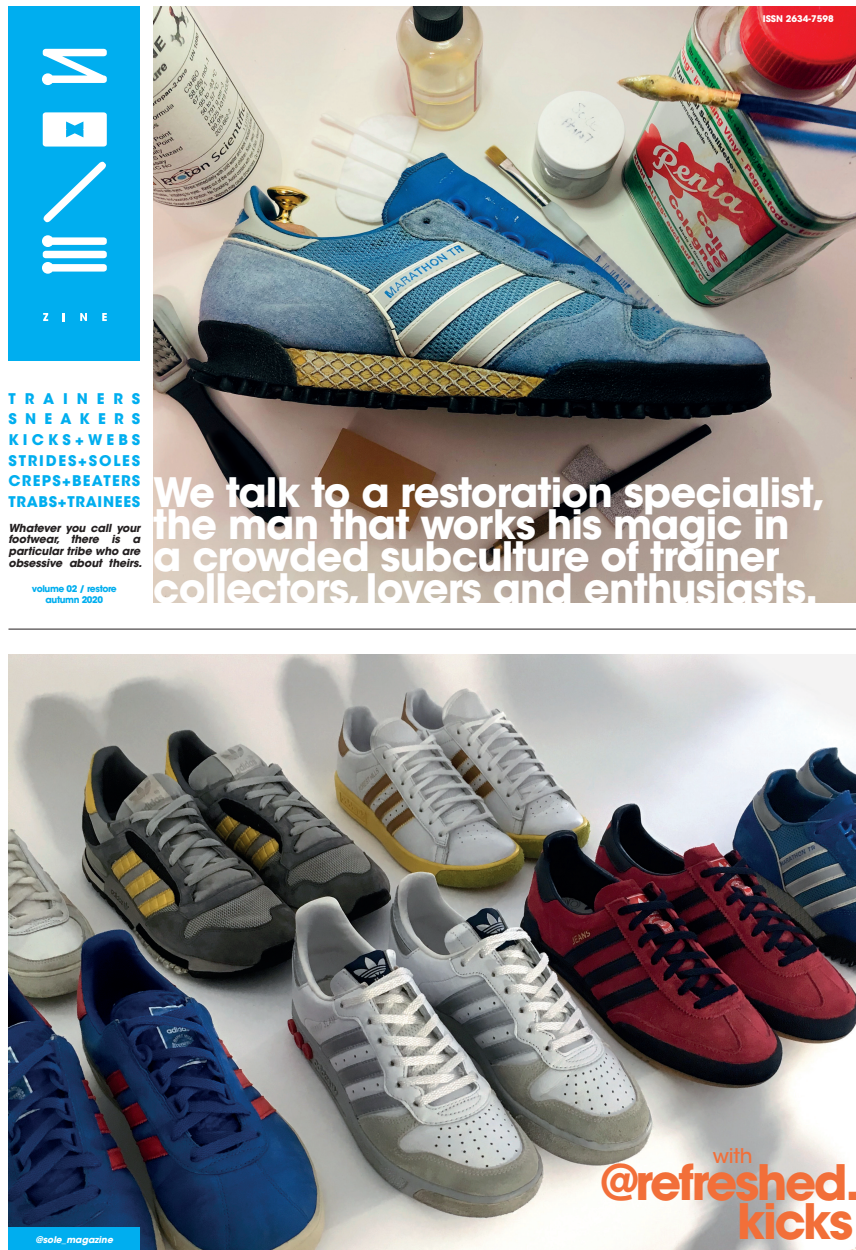


Fig. A7

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine Volume (02) Restore* (Autumn 2020)

Paper Printed Zine

Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm

Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/7c8f82f74b.html>

APPENDIX 5.3 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (03) CONVERSION (WINTER 2020)



Fig. A8

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine Volume (03) Conversion* (Winter 2020)

Paper Printed Zine

Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm

Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/f2ebc2514d.html>

# APPENDIX 5.4 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (04) CUSTOM (SUMMER 2021)



**Z I N E**

**T R A I N E R S  
S N E A K E R S  
K I C K S + W E B S  
S T R I D E S + S O L E S  
C R E P S + B E A T E R S  
T R A B S + T R A I N E E S**

**Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.**

volume 04 / custom  
summer 2021



We talk to Scotland's finest about the art of Customisation

ISSN 2634-7598

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**KO: So, where did your love of trainers begin?**

**KDS:** It's a crazy story. I've always loved trainers and my love of adidas started way before with Redditors you know with the football back in the day. In the '90s everybody whipped out cool adidas trainers but from what I remember you were only getting certain silhouettes in the '90s you might see maybe a Campus and a Gazelle Samba but I wouldn't say there were loads. So my first memory of trainers has to be Lancelotti like loads of tennis shoes. Everybody was looking about in Nike and Lacoste but with football boots it was adidas, because all the best players when I was a kid were wearing adidas. Zidane, even Beckham. But I would definitely say that I started for me with football. I credit that boot alone from what started it for me yeah.

**KO: It was Lee (Westhead) Kicks that put us in touch...**

**KDS:** Yeah that's cool man.

**KO: He's great and like you he's got loads of stories and it's that narrative and community that Paul and I are really interested in capturing... what trainers like looks like for different individuals from the sub-culture. So, how did you get into it?**

**KDS:** I've always had this kind of knowledge of adidas because if you go back to music one thing I will say you know how I mentioned before, about the casual culture here, that it was dominantly Nike that was on the scene, but the thing before that is Nike was nothing until the Jordan came out in '85. All the music sort of stuff you see like the musicians were wearing adidas, and with all that sort of

knowledge because I was right into my music, I was in a band and stuff and all the musicians you see them kicking about in Gazelle's, St. 72's, The Rolling Stones, even John Lennon you've got John Lennon wearing adidas boots so that's sort of knowledge of that and I started seeing whinge clothes and then I was going through all the catalogues and you start to see all the trainers and I was just like I'm getting into the fitness. I come across Transpico (core, vintage and Decadent's trainer shop in Liverpool) and I seen that they were actually making it work and I was just basically amazed of how they managed to get these trainers and the boys were buying them, so...

**PO: When did you start as Dundee Sole?**

**KDS:** Probably about 2016. Prior to that, I've had my own business entirely but one thing led to another, I was just cleaning shoes and then I actually came across Lee (Westhead) Kicks and Benny (BBlunt Shark) online, because at the time no-one else was really doing it. I remember how big a deal the gold lettering was and they were the only ones who were able to do the gold lettering at the time.

**KO: Lee (Westhead) Kicks was telling us about this...**

**KDS:** Well it was a massive deal back in the day. Not now because Benny (BBlunt Shark) sort of published it, would sit up all night looking at these boys work, trying to work out how they had done it, and it sort of took off from there. I went down and worked for Benny (BBlunt Shark) for three days. He taught me how to resole, he showed me how to do the gold lettering and the also taught me how to make stripes.

**KO: The guys are super talented. I'd be a millionaire, lol. So, yeah I done that, I came back and just started up and then one thing led to another.**

**KO: So do you still customise clothes as well as trainers?**

**KDS:** I do T-shirts. But it's hoodies that just seem to fly. Benny (BBlunt Shark) release anything like that, they just seem to sell out. I just do a certain colourway for a couple of weeks or a couple of months, before I release another.

**KO: Are you still working across different brands?**

**KDS:** 90% of the stuff I get is adidas, I always say I don't discriminate against trainer brands. I'll work on anything. I've got a pair of OG (original) Jordans here just now, they're on absolute sale but they're one of the good projects I'm going to be doing soon. My knowledge is adidas, I don't really know too much about it (Nike).

**KO: Do you have a favourite project for custom piece?**

**KDS:** I've just recently done a Wu Tang Clan (American hip hop group formed in NYC '92) custom during lockdown, I ended up doing it. I sort of looked at it for too long, I was amazed if I sold out before anybody had seen it.

**KO: I like the yellow ones.**

**KDS:** Yeah the ones that dove the shirt. I just thought they'd look awesome in my head, but I had fun with it.

**PO: One you talk us through the process of that custom?**

**KDS:** Yeah course. Well of first I had the idea, the thing with doing a customisation I'm finding out now what I really don't want to be doing because I think the custom game has just got so tacky over the past because so many people have learnt how to do it. And like I said stuff has been published and people don't always have the same care and detail, they just want to know anything on a trainer and think it's a custom job. I'm just kinda more interested in the ridiculous stuff. So my idea was to do something that I wanted to do, make it look as cool as I can and go from there. I collab with my mate who does the boxes, some and I'm all down and we talk about how to make them look and he did an outstanding job of putting them together. He even put for the Shaolin (Kung Fu martial art custom, German led on the stripe on one side which I was pretty amazed by, it was just an idea to try and make it look totally different to what everybody else is doing. Lee (Westhead) Kicks just me on to his American boy and said "have you seen what his boys do?" Cos the Americans are right into this drip effect (grain drip) just now. It's done with a rubber point so it's not the easiest to work with and to be honest I never actually thought I would go down that well here. I thought people would look at that and be like, that's terrible, it's not our culture. So I was quite scared of that one, but I just ended up going for it in the end.

**PO: So that hand painted black on yellow.**

**KDS:** The (adidas) Sludgemakers. I dyed one of them black. If you look at the (adidas) Shaolin custom there's a little Wu Tang (drip) symbol under the heel and what I had to do, with that, I had to stick a vinyl on the shoe, thicken up the dye for the dye

job, so it was a bit clumpy, and then paint over it so the dye didn't start going underneath the vinyl. Waited for it to dry and then wipe it off and I had to clear Wu Tang symbol so that's the original colour of the suede. But the whole idea was to make it look like it was from the sheet.

**KO: That's interesting, because the yellow ones almost look embossed because the texture of the suede is still there dimensional.**

**KDS:** That's just going hard at it with a brush.

**KO: That's interesting, because the yellow ones almost look embossed because the texture of the suede is still there dimensional.**

**KDS:** That's just going hard at it with a brush.

**KO: It's such a good job. I like the fact that you can't tell how it's been done.**

**KDS:** I had other plans for it, I wanted it to go onto the heel tab, but I could not get a proper match of vinyl to colour the (adidas) Jamaica. So I ended up snapping it because I thought it would end up looking silly with too many different colours. I had to do 3D printing for them to get some of the stuff done, and I'd never done that before, so that was a fun couple of days. I done a Wu Tang label, like (adidas) Special label which just hang on. It would have been more interesting if I had gone it to look how I wanted it to, I wanted it to be found and Dundee Sole whined into it, but that was really hard as I'd learnt to 3D print in a day. So that got frustrated and we made a flat one.

**KO: People buy into (their) personalities and this sub-culture, but there's also another side to the craft in terms of keeping attire for longer, a more ethical and sustainable approach, do you feel there are skills and processes that you use within the customisation**

**KDS:** I think that embroidery tends to be viewed as more luxury than the others. A print which is flat is quite accessible so embroidery is considered more luxe.

**KDS:** I think that is the case just now.

CONTINUED

**@dundeesole**

Fig. A9  
 Kayla Owen  
 Sole-Zine Volume (04) Custom (Summer 2021)  
 Paper Printed Zine  
 Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm  
 Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/9b8c1fcf90.html>

## APPENDIX 5.5 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (05) STEEL CITY (SPRING 2022)



**Z I N E**

**T R A I N E R S  
S N E A K E R S  
K I C K S + W E B S  
S T R I D E S + S O L E S  
C R E P S + B E A T E R S  
T R A B S + T R A I N E E S**

*Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.*

Volume 05 / Steel City  
Spring 2022



ISSN 2634-7598

# We talk to the man behind Sheffield's vintage trainer festival about his love of classic trainers and cars

with **@steelcitytrainerfest**

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**KO: Let's get the ball rolling, tell us a bit about you.**

**SM:** This will be the least interesting part of the interview for the busy readers. Where do I start? Born and bred in Barnsley (1980). I found my obsession of Trainers and Classic/Retro cars by working as a Mechanical Contracts Manager for a large firm in Don'tonham. Started my working life as a qualified Plumbing and Heating Engineer. Bought my pride and joy of 18 years old and over the next five years built one of the best standard VW Mk1 Golf Gtis in Europe (very proud that Volkswagen UK borrow the car to promote the launch of new Golf GTis so I must have done something right). Took over the running of a VW show in my early 20s and have grown the show to the extent we even have cars now offending from Holland/Beijum and Denmark, with attendees well over four thousand people a year. If I'm not at a car or trainer show, you'll probably find me hanging out at the various retro BMX shows throughout the county or at my unit working on another VW/Retro BMX... Ok enough about me.

**KO: Where did your love of trainers come from?**

**SM:** As a teenager being brought up by my grandparents, my fashion was not important. They were born in the 1920s and led through the war years so it was a necessity rather than looking good. Being a young lad I just wanted to fit in with friends and the other

kids in school and part of that was wearing the right gear. To my grandparents' trainers and clothes needed to be functional and not about style or what was popular at the time, but to me fitting in to avoid being bullied was number one priority. From their point of view it was never about the money things cool or not being loved or teased about, just basically the generation gap. However, nearly 30 years later my trainees do compliment me on my trainers, so maybe now at 48 she has an idea of style after all.

Once I started working I could finally afford to buy and choose my own leathers the world was my oyster. And finally I could fit in with friends, but the funny thing is once I could afford those delights I wanted something different to stand out, to be unique, which is how I have really lived my life ever since. But looking back, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

**KO: When did you start Steel City Trainer Fest?**

**SM:** Our first event was held in October 2019 at the fantastic venue of Fratiggar Warehouse in the vibrant Donkerside Green area of Steel City, AKA Sheffield. I never really thought about organising my own trainer show, and even after attending Lozes Out in Liverpool for most of their events, I never crossed my mind about my own show until we decided to see what the future was about regarding Clap City. In early 2019 I made a short trip over the Pennines to Manchester

and little would I know that the following few days would spawn Steel City Trainer Fest, Manchester as most people know is a great place to visit, there's some great shopping/eating and drinking to be done so with a hotel booked we were soon excited to be in the queue for the show. As a proud Yorkshireman there was no early bird/ultra-tickets purchased just a case of waiting my turn with the endless amounts of people in front of us. After nearly 3.5 hrs we finally made it into the venue, but we were in for a big shock. Although the venue was amazing the lighting was poor, staff holders were complaining and it was a little overwhelming with not a lot of space or variety on offer. Thirty minutes later we had surfaced back into the night, slightly bemused at what had just happened. Later that night in the middle of sampling the delights of Manchester, the cogs had already been turning and before the evening was over it was decided that I was going to have a shot of organising our very own Trainer Show, and as they say the rest is history.

**KO: What does trainer life look like in Sheffield?**

**SM:** Sheffield's trainer life is very much split into two cultures. With the city having a high population of young students from all over the world there is a large following of modern styles. It's obvious too that there are vast cultural influences from all over the globe (which of course is a good thing). This section of the trainer community

has a loyalty to brands such as Air Jordan, New Balance and Supreme to name a few. What is good for these groups and the city itself are the local independent shops catering for their needs both with trainers and the fashion. I fit very much into the other half of the city which follows a much more traditional/retro/trance style with heavy influence from Sheffield's football and musical history. However again this is well catered for and somewhere in the middle we all have a mutual respect for each other's passions and styles and appreciate each other's choices of fashion and culture which is what makes Sheffield a fantastic place to live and work.

**KO: The North is heavily influenced by terrace culture. How different is Sheffield from other cities like Liverpool or London?**

**SM:** Sheffield is a lot like Liverpool and Manchester, it was and quite possibly still is a Northern Industry Powerhouse, so the area is very working class, and you have many stereotypical towns within a short radius of one another. With this comes the terrace culture of the various small proud football teams that all contribute to a fantastic fashion hub that is glued together with the other famous musical influence and heritage.

**KO: Who are the key individuals from the sub-culture you want to represent at Steel City?**

**SM:** For us here at SCITF there's

a few things we are very proud of and happy to promote. One of these is the small independent businesses that exist in the trainer world, and we have the pleasure of highlighting these fantastic companies. As a once self-employed person it's important that these guys have the best chance of making it in the retail sector because with everything going on in the world these guys need all the help they can get and if in our own little way we can highlight their business and bring them a little more trade its mission accomplished from us. We also love the fact that a lot of the traders who attend the show are local, and I'm more proud of what South Yorkshire can offer the British Trainer industry. In fact, we spent a Saturday earlier this year promoting the show in Sheffield, and it was brilliant visiting the different parts of the city and meeting the different trainer/fashion cultures. Not to mention the cracking food we had along the way. This also makes it obvious why the show also attracts business's from outside the region which is a credit to the city and the wonderful Yorkshire welcome.

**KO: What we wear on our feet is an expression of who we are - what are you wearing today?**

**SM:** Well unfortunately work won't allow me to wear my favourite trainers in the office so the daily pair are Timberland Chukka boots in dark brown (sorry to disappoint).

**KO: Do you remember your first pair?**

**SM:** My very first pair of trainers were purchased in 1993. They were a pair of adidas Equipment Ten's Clay Court made in France. This was the first pair of trainers that I was allowed to choose and buy myself with pocket money saved and without my grandparents having their opinion. In the early 90s I was really into sports and for whatever reason these trainers drew me in. They were bought from a sports shop in Scarborough when we were away on holiday, but sadly I no longer have the originals and been trying for years to source a pair to me. These are the holy grail as they bring fond memories of my childhood and happy times.

**KO: Do you have a favourite piece of footwear you heard first your favourite was a pair of 1976 black and yellow adidas Oslo made in West Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall - is that so, and why is significant?**

**SM:** That's correct - the Oslo were the first real pair of trainers I purchased from someone in the trainer community. Up until then I just dabbled on eBay, but with this pair I soaked to a fellow collector and gained valuable knowledge and contacts so that's why the Oslo are one of my favourites as it opened a whole new world that I had not really had much knowledge of. The Oslo colour way of black and yellow has always appealed to me and there are

CONTINUED

Fig. A10  
 Kayla Owen  
 Sole-Zine Volume (05) Steel City (Spring 2022)  
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# APPENDIX 5.6 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (06) TRIMM TRAB TALES (SUMMER 2022)



**T R A I N E R S  
S N E A K E R S  
K I C K S + W E B S  
S T R I D E S + S O L E S  
C R E P S + B E A T E R S  
T R A B S + T R A I N E E S**

*Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.*

volume 06 / trimmtrabtales  
spring / summer 2022



ISSN 2634-7598

**Liverpool has fashion deeply rooted in its identity. The Terrace Casuals were born in the late 70's on the terraces of Anfield and Goodison. This British Subculture went on to influence modern menswear as we know it today. Arguably it provided the first accessible space where the working-class man could engage with fashion in a positive way. In this issue we talk to Chris Staunton, (the first employee of the businessman and pioneer in the scene Robert Wade-Smith) to find out about those early days of trab culture...**



with **@trimmtrabtales**

**KO:** Hi Chris, welcome to Sole-Zine, and thanks for taking time out to talk to us today. Lots of people we've spotted to have been looking forward to hearing your story about working in Liverpool, and that pivotal time of the birth of the Terrace Casuals movement.

**CS:** No problem.

**PO:** Hi Chris, let's start with what you think the best decade for trainer culture of design was?

**CS:** I think I'd have to say the 80's as this was the time we discovered all these amazing trainers that still stand up today in style and design. Culturally they changed our outlook on fashion and made trainers something that wasn't just for sport. Good trainer design though carried on through the 90's, Nike Air Max 95 (otherwise known as 119s in Liverpool due to their price) was a triumph of design and style, and of course is still very popular today. For me though by the time the 80's was over, trainer culture suffered a lull and workwear boots such as Timberland experienced a rise in sales.

**KO:** What does the trainer community mean to you?

**CS:** The trainer community at the moment is unique. I've been a part of it for a few years now, offer I put some personal Wade-Smith photos online and these created a massive interest so I started my @trimmtrabtales Instagram page and continued to share more photos. Through this I have reconnected with lots of adidas enthusiasts who shopped at Wade-Smith in the 80's and are still passionate

about the three-stripes. Festivals like Laces Out and shops like Transalpino have brought these people together again, and highlighted the trainer community brilliantly. The knowledge these collectors and enthusiasts have for the three-stripes and other trainer brands is amazing.

**PO:** Do you think you could define a date in time when trainer culture took off in Liverpool?

**CS:** I think it's been well documented that the trainer culture in Liverpool took off in the late 70's, with those who travelled abroad following Liverpool FC predominantly. I think Robert Wade-Smith was massively influential to get the trainers to a wider audience, firstly at the adidas concession in Top Shop, and then when his shop opened in November 1982 (40 years ago this year). Liverpool lads will probably have begun their obsession with trainers when they got a pair of adidas Kick from Jack Sharps or Whiteleys in the mid 70's. Stan Smith though which came a bit later was the gateway trainer to the phenomenon that was to come.

**KO:** How did the local, national, global market differ back then?

**CS:** Locally and in some cities nationally, trainers became leisure footwear, whereas globally they were still seen as sports footwear.

**PO:** So, how far did people travel to Wade-Smith - any stories?

**CS:** Looking back to the early days of Wade-Smith I would

say it was mainly local people who shopped, although talking to people now I hear stories of how they would come from the likes of Manchester in an early morning behind enemy lines trip, to get their trainers and leg it back quick smart to their city. I remember a group of lads from Stoke who made regular trips to get their adidas fix. Mainly though it was local lads who would hang around for hours after buying a pair for a chat. Robert was very knowledgeable about all things adidas and would hold court.

**PO:** What was the best seller, and what was the craziest that came through the door?

**CS:** Definitely the best seller in the early days was adidas Trimm Trab. The trainer was something we hadn't seen before, with its unique sole unit and suede upper in some great colours. At Wade-Smith we sold thousands of Trimm Trab in the first year. Nearly as popular were adidas Marathon TR (about 3000 pairs) adidas Munchen, adidas Olympia 5, adidas Handball Spezial and L.A. Trainer.

As for as rare trainers go lads would come in wearing crockers they had obtained on foreign visits. One lad had a pair of adidas weight lifting shoes on brilliant blue suede with a wooden sole that weighed a tonne, probably took him an hour to walk up Bold Street! But trainers back then like adidas Waterproof, adidas Zaida, adidas Micropanzer, adidas Adistar, Diadora Ed Moses, Nike Air Max 95 to name just a few, would certainly be of interest to today's collectors.



esole\_magazine

Fig. A11  
Kayla Owen  
Sole-Zine Volume (06) Trimm Trab Tales (Summer 2022)  
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Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/72dcc6f5b3.html>

APPENDIX 5.7 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (07) COMMUNITY (SUMMER 2022)



Fig. A12

Kayla Owen

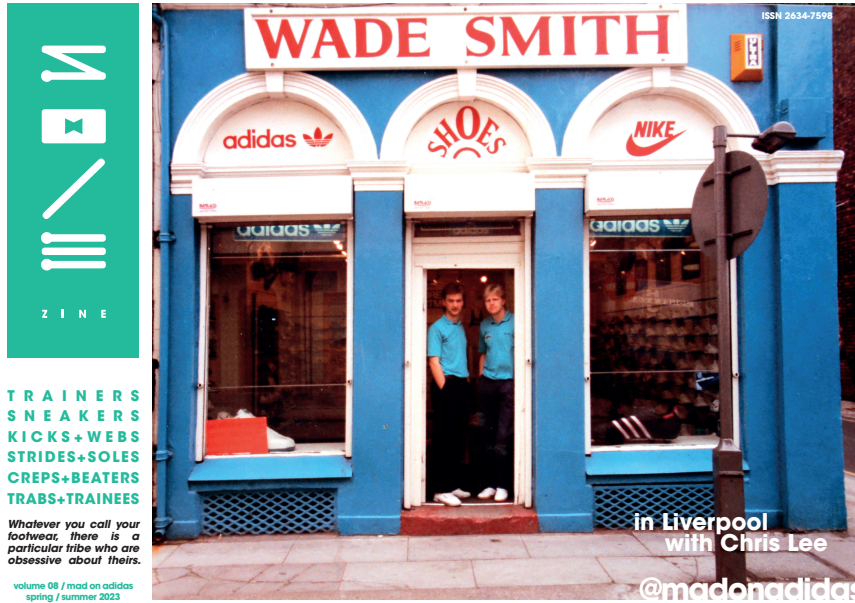
*Sole-Zine Volume (07) Community* (Summer 2022)

Paper Printed Zine

Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm

Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/555ab10325.html>

# APPENDIX 5.8 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (08) MAD ON ADIDAS (SUMMER 2023)



**TRAINERS  
SNEAKERS  
KICKS+WEBS  
STRIDES+SOLES  
CREPS+BEATERS  
TRABS+TRAINEES**

Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.

Volume 08 / mad on adidas  
spring / summer 2023

## THE BIRTH OF TRAINER OBSESSION AND 80'S CASUAL CULTURE.

We talk to Chris Lee, an influential figure in the Wade Smith story of Casual Culture and Liverpool's love story with trainers. Timm Trab, LA, Munchen or even a Grand Slam, every local sportswear enthusiast had heard of The Wall on Slater Street. Fast forward 40 years, adidas aficionados still talk about their love for the three stripes. Mad on adidas, Chris's exhibition at Star-Head, Birkdale showcases his top ten trainers from back in the day in a gallery like setting, with commissioned artwork and memorabilia.

**PO:** Chris, you were pivotal in Liverpool's story of 80's Casual Culture. It was a period where style was changing rapidly. Tell us how the story started for you.

**CL:** I had my first adidas t-shirt (white three stripes) when I was seven or eight, 1974/75 and was given a pair of adidas foody boots by my uncle which I can remember clearly. I got into punk after that and seen a few bands play at Eric's like Casals and the Skids. The late 70s fashions were moving on monthly and adidas was getting worn more. Loads of lads had Stan Smith, adidas Jagger and Samba. My older brother Billy was into adidas and had some great clothing and that influenced me. In 1980 I remember seeing all my punk records to Backtrack in Matthew Street, including a 10inch message by OMD to buy a pair of adidas AT1. I also started to write to adidas in different countries asking for catalogues.

The whole thing about getting something different or unique the one upbringing is what

which was great when they sent me some back.

Obviously, a lot of away supporters were seeing what the Liverpool and Everton fans were wearing of games and that had a massive impression on them. Wavy Handster who also worked in Slater Street later told me when going away to Blackburn in the late 70s, early 80s the Blackburn fans still had scores around their wrists, long leathers, and Birmingham bags on, whilst the Liverpool fans were wearing Fila, Ellesse, Tachis, Cerutti, and loads of rare adidas.

**PO:** The North and especially Liverpool has informed the Terence Casual movement, how did you see this evolving at your time at Wade Smith?

**CL:** Wade Smith from early on was a pioneering sports/fashion retailer and for a time a lot of the other regional sports shops: JD All Sports, First Sports etc. spent more time looking at what we were doing than in their own shops.

**KO:** What did/does this culture mean to you?

**CL:** It was always interesting to see what other people were wearing. I'd go into town every Saturday and be looking in every sports store or fashion store there was in case you missed something. I remember trying to get Forest Hills which were like gold dust and Whittys said they were getting some in for the following Saturday but when the sales assistant brought them out, I couldn't have been more disappointed. It was a new version, no gold yellow sole, but a white one the same as the adidas Wimbledon, just with a different toe box. As far as I was concerned, they were crap.

The whole thing about getting something different or unique the one upbringing is what



drove the whole thing. Lads were taking pride in what they wore a bit like the mods in the 60s. Bear in mind if you were earning £25 on a scheme, a pair of trainers would be a week's wages. The only time people would be getting clobber outside of their birthday would be Easter and Christmas and those times you would definitely see the next new thing.

**PO:** Fashion was changing it seemed on a weekly basis. The Liverpool football fans had been bringing all that rare continental fashion back to the city, did that influence the buying decisions you were making at the time?

**CL:** In the early days it did influence what Wade Smith bought because that initiated and created the demand. By 83/84, we were getting direct access to foreign retailer suppliers and stocking them in store.



**KO:** You mentioned how golf and tennis influenced personal style and buying in '80/81, any key stories?

**CL:** A lot of the sports brands were supplying tennis players with their kit. Lacoste, Ellesse Sergio Tacchini, Fila, Cerutti 1881, but also golf had influenced the late 70s early 80s with Pringle jumpers, Lyle and Scott, and even Sizzenges. I started to go up and down the Southport line on my sowersay ticket and visit all the golf shops in Birkdale. There was something exciting about seeing loads of other gear that wasn't in town, I bought a V-neck lambswool adidas jumper and on another time, I'd spotted in a golf magazine a brand called Mustangs, which people would now know, as Penguin, so I got two buses to Umston Manchester to buy a golf polo with the penguin on the collar were too 70s, so I cut them back and stitched it up.



**KO:** Like customisation trends we see today? Tell us more about your own quest for the unique.

**CL:** I didn't really know it was customisation of the time but when we were at school we were all wearing adidas Tenente and Palermo. It was part of the casual range. Palermo were tan leather and I decided to dye the stripes, heel and front vamp brown, and then put brown polish on. As well as changing the golf polo in about 1980, I also cut down a white adidas tennis shirt with green stripes as the collar was too long, the middle green stripe of my adidas Nadi got stuck onto the middle stripe of my adidas ATP tennis shoes, but the best customisation I saw was adidas adicolor where you had a set of coloured pens so you could change the stripes.

It was whilst in Birkdale I asked if they had any adidas catalogues. I'd seen some shoes in a golf

magazine and I always wanted a pair of adidas Adibross from Jack Sharpe which had a black Tirmn Trab but with spikes, which I'd love obviously taken out to wear. But the sales assistant talked my mum out of buying me them, and that still bothers me now. The guy of the golf shop gave me a catalogue by Laraspoff which was the license or division that ran adidas golf. It had some great golf shoes in. They were using either Tirmn Trab or Wimbledon outsoles and some with LA trainer soles. I showed this catalogue to Robert Wade Smith and told him to buy some, which he did. One pair was called lamias and they sold hundreds of them, which is how I was asked to work there one week in 1983 to cover Rob and Chris Staunton going to Germany on a buying trip. I'd wanted to ask for a job earlier but hadn't plucked up the courage.

Fig. A13  
Kayla Owen  
Sole-Zine Volume (08) Mad on adidas (Summer 2023)  
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# APPENDIX 5.9 SOLE-ZINE VOLUME (09) THE BLOCK P (SUMMER 2024)



**Z I N E**

**TRAINERS  
SNEAKERS  
KICKS+WEBS  
STRIDES+SOLES  
CREPS+BEATERS  
TRABS+TRAINES**

*Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.*

Volume 09 / THE BLOCK P  
Summer 2024



ISSN 2634-7598

**in LIVERPOOL with @THEBLOCKP**

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**FASHION IS ALWAYS CHASING THE NEXT BIG THING, AND IN THE TRAINER COMMUNITY, THERE ARE VERY FEW STYLES THAT DOMINATE THE LANDSCAPE.**

*In Liverpool there is a deep, affectionate, and cultural connection to the Nike Air Max 95, or otherwise known as 110s (pronounced 'one-tens'), a reference to its retail price around the time the hype started. Wherever you observe, from the city centre to the suburbs, in pubs, clubs, colleges, and classrooms, the Nike Air Max 95 silhouette is ever-present. A style code that has defined the city.*

*Experts attribute forces like nostalgia, design innovation, music culture, exclusivity, nonconformity, place, and community all as points of difference and drivers in this obsession with style. We try to unpick this story by talking to one of the most prominent 110 experts in the U.K., 'The BlockP' (officially the world's only independent Air Max 95 store) and their loyal 110 community.*

@sole\_magazine

**PO:** Charlie, The Block P is important to Liverpool's ongoing love affair with 110s. How did The Block P come about?

**CM:** When it comes to The Block P it's important to mention the culture that I had growing up. Me and my mates would always talk about shoes and clothes - how you present yourself in Liverpool is massive. We used to hang out at an abandoned block of flats in Algburth and although there were multiple blocks, we generally used to meet at P Block. This was the go-to spot where we would all talk and discuss shoes and clothes as this was such a big part of our upbringing in the city. I had a few Instagram pages before starting this one. All the pages I have had reflected me and my style. I had a Maharshi page as this was one of my favourite brands growing up as well as a designer clothing page. But it wasn't until I lost a leg to my original depop account, and at the time I was with my mates chilling at P Block and the name just came to me - I was going to set up a new page called BlockP. We would all chat there and talk about shoes, showing each other deals we had just bought, so it only felt right to name my new page after BlockP. But at the time I had no idea that the name would hold so much significance in my life.

The shop was inevitable once I started this page. I always knew it was going to happen as I felt there was such a calling for a shop like this in Liverpool.

I'm glad that we have created a welcoming atmosphere in the shop. In terms of business, you may argue that it would be easier to scale an online ecommerce store than a physical store, but the impact of having the physical store both professionally and personally has been massive. It's hard to measure the impact that it has on our customer base, as some of our regulars who come in all the time use our shop as a sanctuary. 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 110s. We have been open for nearly two years now and have gone from strength to strength with the shop. Our next goal is to take our operation to the next level and enjoy the process.

**PO:** Are your customers pure 110 collectors?

**CM:** Our customers are all kinds of people. Anyone from a young kid coming in with his family to buy his first pair of 110s to the older generation buying pairs they had years ago, reminiscing about times they had worn certain pairs.

**PO:** Are we correct in saying that you are officially the only independent Nike Air Max 95 store in the world.

**CM:** Yes. We believe we are the only independent Nike Air Max 95 store in the world. Without the special relationship that the city of Liverpool has with 110s, it wouldn't be possible to have such a store.

Fig. A14  
 Kayla Owen  
 Sole-Zine Volume (09) The Block P (Summer 2024)  
 Paper Printed Zine  
 Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm  
 Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598 Available at: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/6846c67db2.html>

## APPENDIX 5.10: PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, EXHIBITIONS + INSTALLATIONS

Exhibitions and installations form a key component of the research, functioning as sites where material outcomes, visual narratives, and practice-based findings are brought together and made accessible to wider audiences. These curated environments allow the work to be experienced spatially and collectively, translating the research into an embodied and public form of engagement.

They contribute to the overall project and conclusions by demonstrating how practice-led outputs can operate as both method and dissemination, reinforcing the role of display as a critical tool for interpreting material culture, communicating subcultural histories, and extending academic research beyond traditional written formats into public and institutional contexts.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: It's a Liverpool Thing* Exhibition: *The Block P*, Liverpool, UK, 28/06/25 – 27/07/25.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of '110's'* Exhibition: *The Block P*, Liverpool, UK, 06/07/24 – 27/07/24.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: The Liverpool Style Protagonists Representing the Culture of '110's'*. Exhibition: Locating Menswear Forum, Liverpool, UK, 05/07/24.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2023). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine* Compendium Featured in Art of the Terraces Exhibition, The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK, 05/11/22–12/03/23.  
<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/AOTT>

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2023). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine* (02-07) Exhibited at *FTC FutureScan5: Conscious Communities* Conference, University of Leeds, UK, 7/09/23 – 8/09/23.

Owen, K., Owen, P. (2022). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine 07: The Community Issue*. Exhibition, Talk, and Workshop, Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moore's University, UK, 18/06/22 – 30/06/22.

Owen, K., Owen, P. (2022). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine 07: Community*. The Ultra Issue Exhibited at, *LACES OUT!* Festival, Liverpool, UK, 26/11/22.

- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: The Liverpool Style Protagonists Representing the Culture of '110's'*. Exhibition: *The Block P*, Liverpool, UK, 06/07/24 – 27/07/24.
- Owen, K., (2022). Author and contributor, *20:20 Print Exchange 2021* Exhibition, international touring exhibition, 'Second Skin 5' screen prints, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK, 1/11/21 – 1/08/22.
- Owen, K., (2022). Author and contributor, 'Big Idea's' Exhibition, Liverpool John Moores University, Research Event, Liverpool, UK, 8/06/22.
- Owen, K., (2020). Author and contributor, *Light Night at Home*, images of leather garment design development included as Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition, 17/05/20.
- Owen, K., (2020). Author, Curator and Contributor, *Second Skin 4* [Deconstructing the fashion Leather Aesthetic] Exhibition: MA & Other Postgraduate 2020 Exhibition, Atkinson Gallery, Somerset, UK, 24/02/20 – 21/03/20.
- Owen, K., (2019). Author, Curator and Contributor, *Second Skin 3 – Architectonic* Exhibition: LJMU X SUES Exhibition, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK, 01/07/19 – 04/07/19.
- Owen, K., (2018). Author and Contributor, *Second Skin 2* Exhibition: Materials Hard and Soft Exhibition, Texas, U.S.A. 03/02/18 – 05/05/18.
- Owen, K. and Owen, P., (2017). Co-author, Co-curator and Contributor, *Fractured Identity* Exhibition: Ice-Cream for Crow Event, Make, Liverpool, UK, 12/11/17 – 14/11/17.
- Owen, K., (2017). Author and Contributor, *Second Skin* Exhibition: Northern Eye International Photography Festival, Venue Cymru, Colwyn Bay, UK, 09/10/17.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of '110's'* Exhibition: *The Block P*, Liverpool, UK, 06/07/24 – 27/07/24.

The Nike Air Max 95 trainer has a special cultural connection with men of all ages in the city of Liverpool. Known locally as '110's' the shoe is ever-present. The 110 community are subscribers to the culture of wearing Nike Air Max 95 trainers. They strive for unique colourways, customs, and materials. It has become a uniform synonymous with this community and 'The Block P' has become a mecca for members of this subcultural group. The '110' community have ownership of this silhouette and are proud ambassadors of the shoe.

The Block P Retail Store is the only store worldwide dedicated to the Air Max 95 shoe. A small independent bricks and mortar space, on the 'Nike map', that specialise in sourcing and selling rare Nike Air Max 95. Fondly known by the Liverpool trainer community as 'The Block P'. Charlie McDonough, the founder is a trusted figure at the helm of 'The Block P' whom the '110' community look to for knowledge and expertise in this product. He sources worldwide and has a social media following of 79.7k. He is actively engaged with trainer culture and the work of *Sole-Zine* and believes being a part of this project will engage, celebrate, and archive his work to-date. *Sole-Zine* deems the 110-story pivotal to Liverpool style culture and British trainer culture, and as such should be harnessed, archived and to be available within the wider public domain.



Fig A15  
Kayla Owen  
*Charlie McDonough Founder and Owner of The Block P Retail Store (2024)*  
Digital Photograph  
Dimensions: 100mm x 60mm  
Renshaw Street, Liverpool. UK.

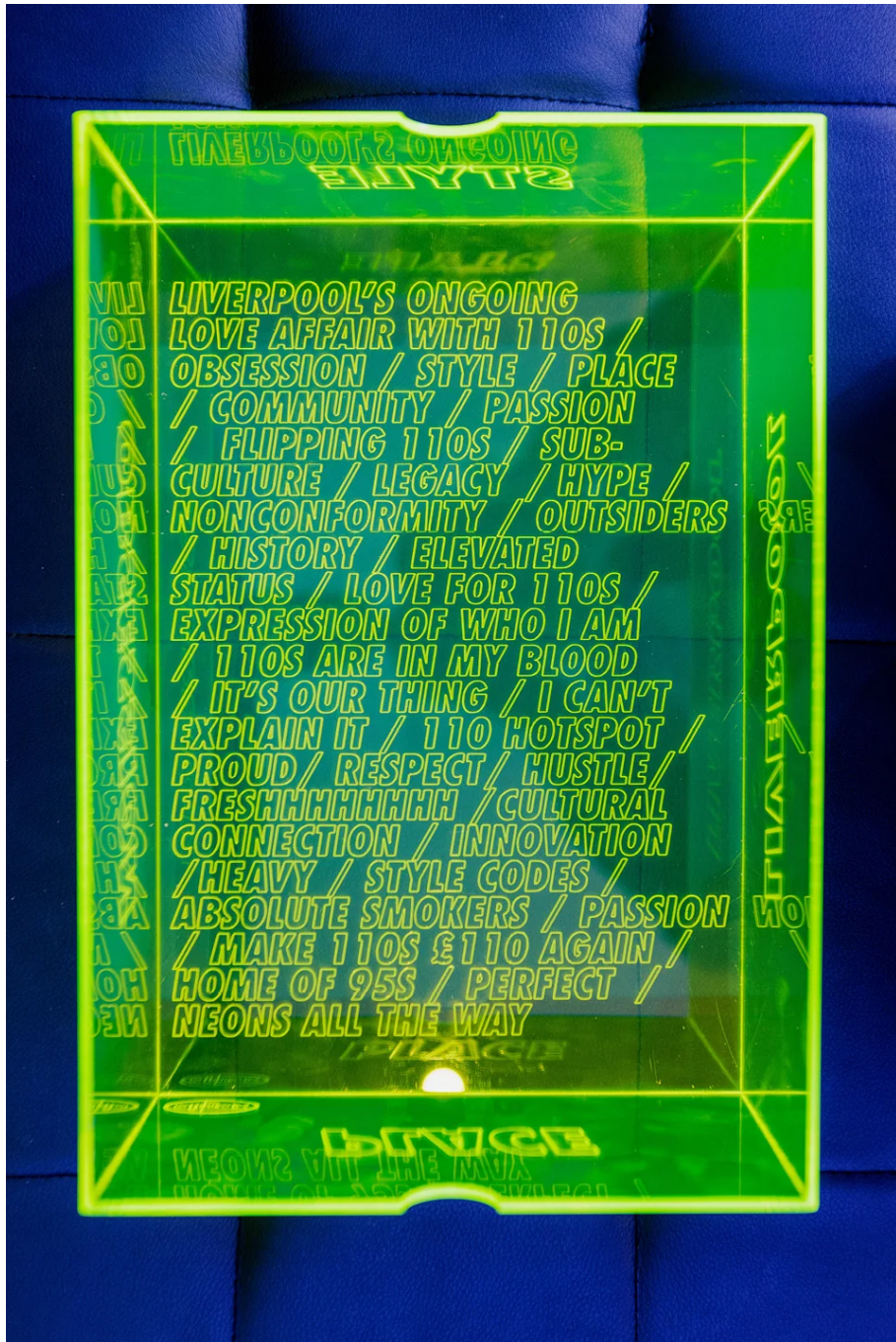


Fig A16

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s* (2024)

Perspex Etched Nike Air Max 95 Display Shoe Box, Highlighting Soundbites from the '110' Trainer Community. Designed by *Sole-Zine* (Owen & Owen)

Dimensions: Shoe Box 340mm x 120mm x 240mm

Renshaw Street, Liverpool. UK.



Fig. A17

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s* (2024)

Perspex Etched Nike Air Max 95 Display Shoe Box and Plinth, Highlighting Soundbites from the '110' Trainer Community. Designed by *Sole-Zine* (Owen & Owen)

Dimensions: Shoe Box 340mm x 120mm x 240mm Plinth 2000mm x 240mm x 340mm

Renshaw Street, Liverpool. UK.

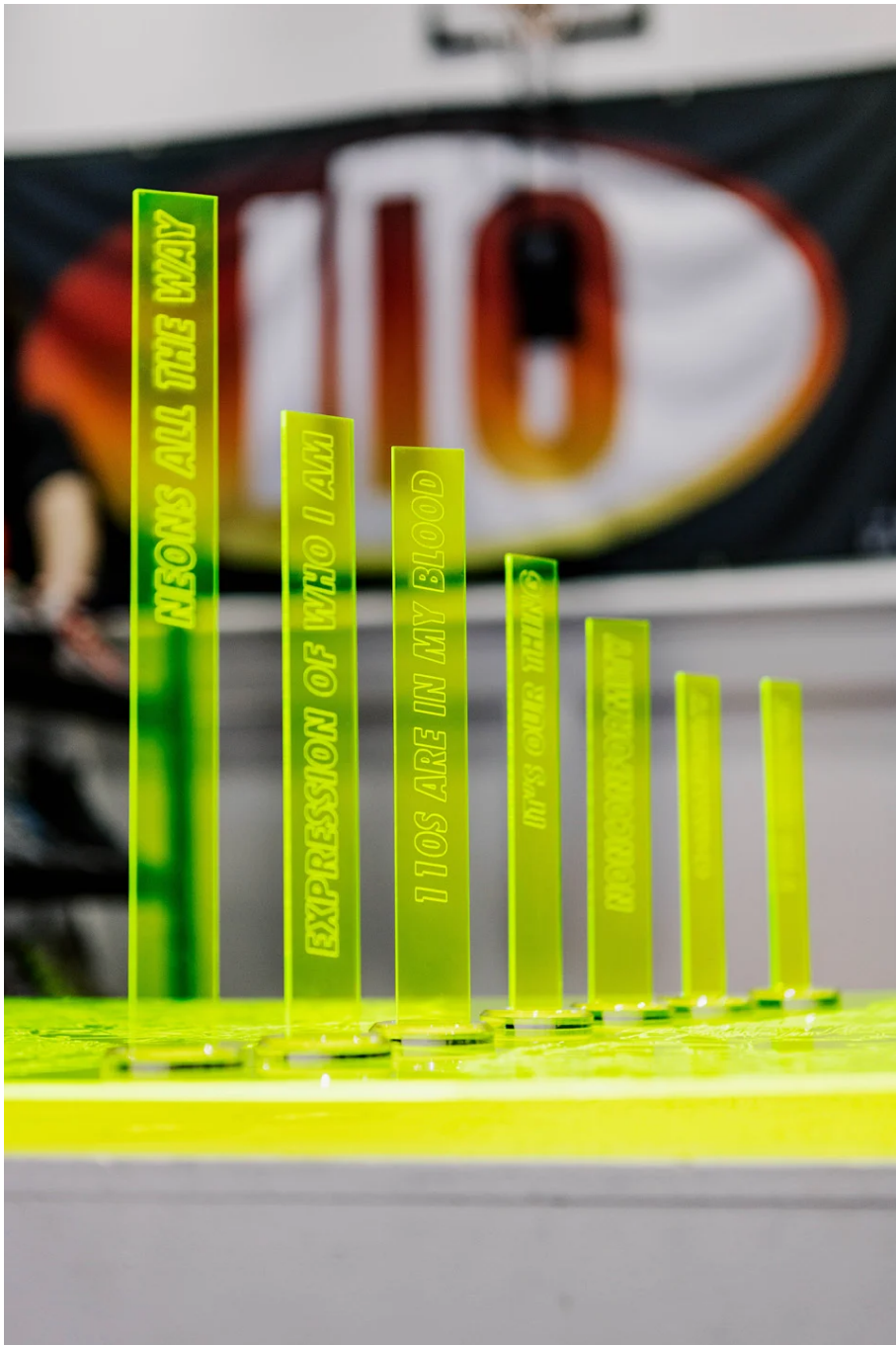


Fig. A18

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s (2024)*

Perspex Etched Totems Highlighting Soundbites from the '110' Trainer Community.

Designed by *Sole-Zine* (Owen & Owen)

Dimensions: Range 30mm x 150mm, 30mm x 200mm, 30mm x 250mm, 30mm x 300mm

Renshaw Street, Liverpool. UK.



Fig. A19

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine x The Block P: For the Love of 110s (2024)*

Perspex Etched Map of Liverpool, and Totems Highlighting Soundbites from the '110' Trainer Community. Designed by *Sole-Zine* (Owen & Owen)

Dimensions: Map 700mm x 700mm Totems Range 30mm x 150mm, 30mm x 200mm, 30mm x 250mm, 30mm x 300mm

Renshaw Street, Liverpool. UK.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: The Liverpool Style Protagonists Representing the Culture of '110's'*.  
Exhibition: Locating Menswear Forum, Liverpool, UK, 05/07/24.

**Menswear and Obsession:** This contribution examines menswear in relation to identity, subculture, and the sometimes-obsessive nature of personal style, within geographically defined communities.

In Liverpool, the Nike Air Max 95 has a special cultural connection with the sneaker community and beyond. Known locally as '110's' (one tens), a reference to its retail price not long after its release, it is seen as a significant fashion accessory for young men.

Now, almost 30 years from launch, the demand for the 110's is so high, that the city has its own dedicated Air Max 95 store, 'The Block P' – the only store worldwide dedicated to this shoe. A true site of menswear exchange and influence, this small independent space specialises in sourcing and selling rare Nike Air Max 95.

This research explores the role of the protagonists, producers, and audience specifically in Liverpool, and records discourse around obsession, style and identity. By working with key players such as Charlie McDonough (founder of 'The Block P') and the surrounding sneaker community this project explores the role of intense personal and cultural focus on this specific fashion item and addresses this theme from a practice-led perspective.

The research was disseminated via printed magazine and an experimental 3D exhibition display as part of the inaugural *Locating Menswear Forum*, in Liverpool 4-5<sup>th</sup> July 2024. The exhibition travelled post conference to 'The Block P' to become an instore display.



Fig. A20  
Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/2024)*  
Perspex Map, Soundbite Totems, Light Box, Perspex Shoe Box, *Sole-Zine* (Vol. 09)  
(all designed and produced by *Sole-Zine*, Owen & Owen), Air Max 95 Trainers, The  
Block P Slippers and Box supplied by Charlie McDonough  
Dimensions: Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm  
Locating Menswear Forum, Space, Liverpool, UK. Available at:  
[instagram@prof.andrewgroves](https://www.instagram.com/prof.andrewgroves)

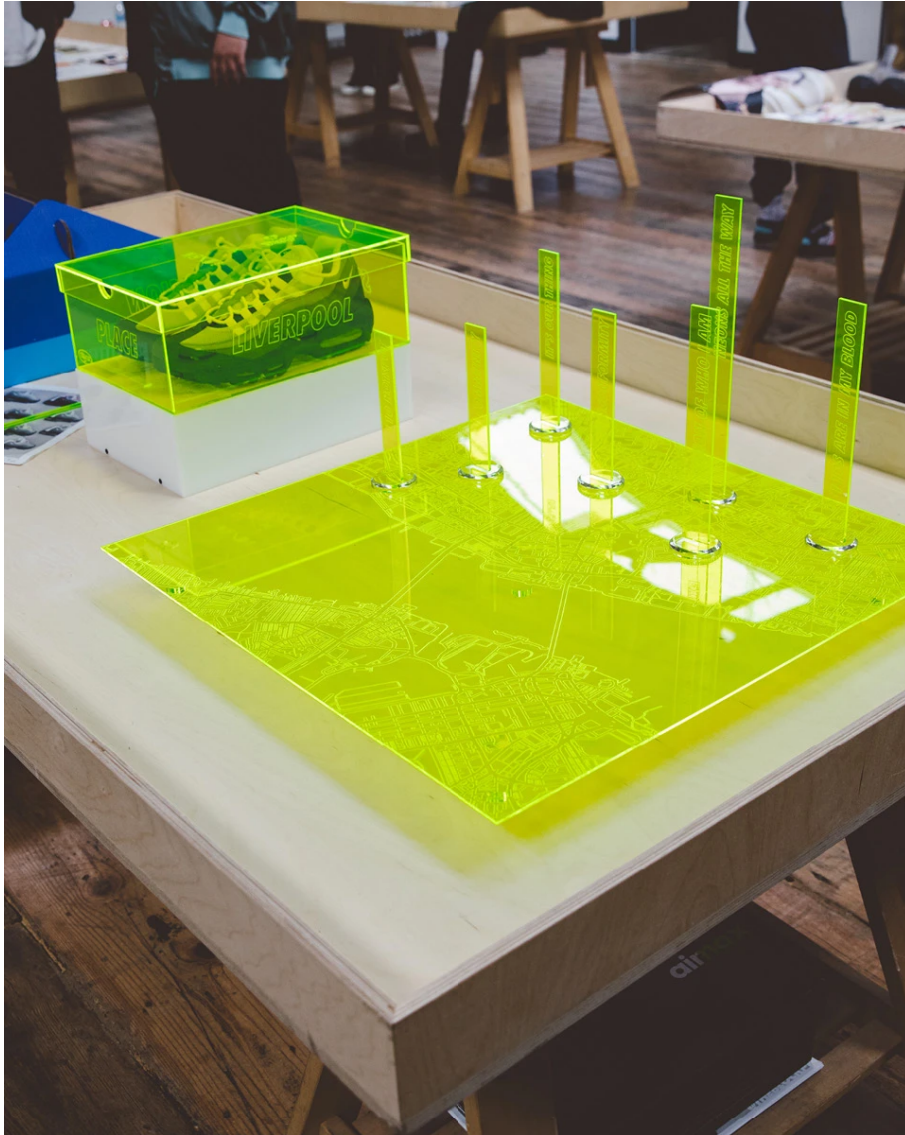


Fig. A21

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/2024)*

Perspex Map, Soundbite Totems, Light Box, Perspex Shoe Box, *Sole-Zine* (Vol. 09)  
(all designed and produced by *Sole-Zine*, Owen & Owen), Air Max 95 Trainers, The  
Block P Slippers and Box supplied by Charlie McDonough

Dimensions: Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm

Locating Menswear Forum, Liverpool, UK. Available at:

<https://www.sevenstore.com/editorial/locating-menswear-part-two-manchester-and-liverpool/>

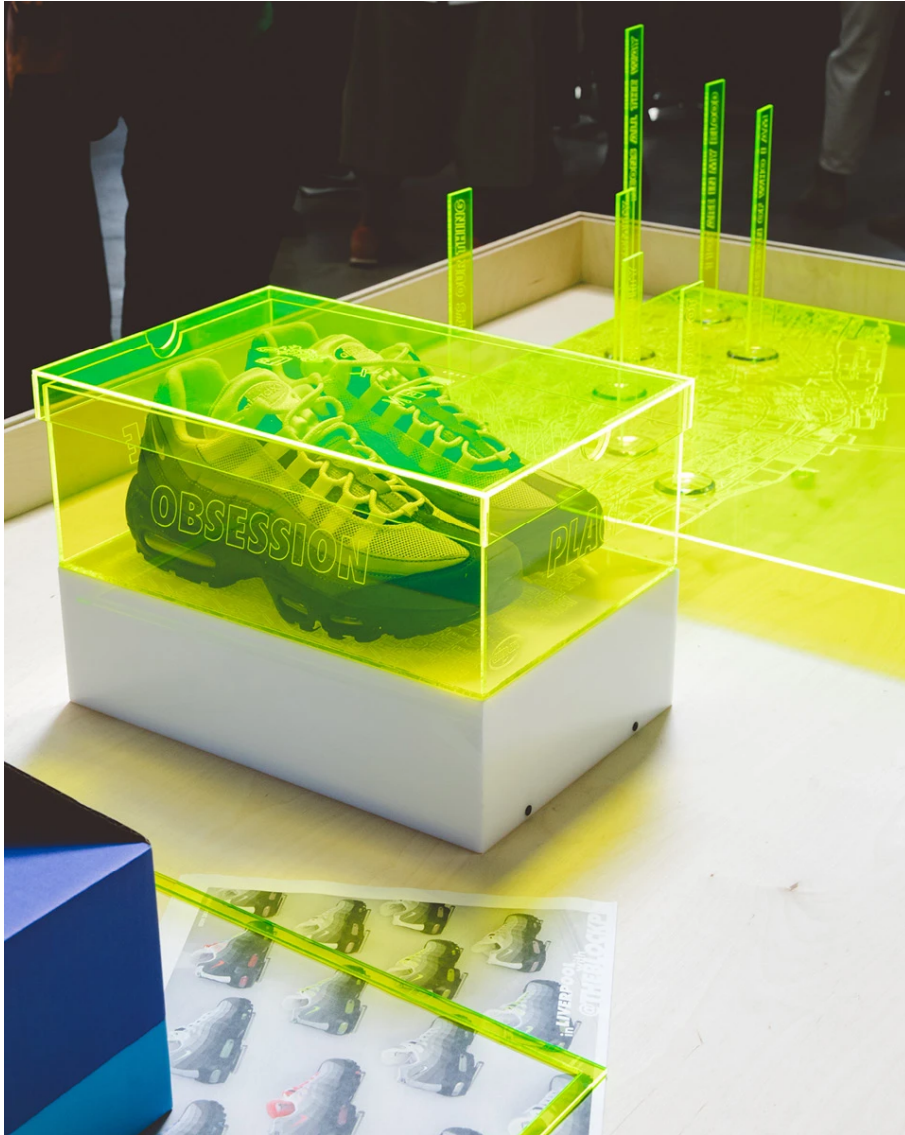


Fig. A22

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine '110' Locating Menswear Conference Presentation (05/07/24)*

Perspex Map, Soundbite Totems, Light Box, Perspex Shoe Box, *Sole-Zine* (Vol. 09)  
(all designed and produced by *Sole-Zine*, Owen & Owen), Air Max 95 Trainers, The  
Block P Slippers and Box supplied by Charlie McDonough

Dimensions: Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm

Locating Menswear Forum, Liverpool, UK. Available at:

<https://www.sevenstore.com/editorial/locating-menswear-part-two-manchester-and-liverpool/>

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2023). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine*  
Compendium Featured in Art of the Terraces Exhibition, The Walker Art  
Gallery, Liverpool, UK, 05/11/22–12/03/23.  
<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/AOTT>

The Walker Art Gallery ground-breaking new exhibition combining fashion, football and art, as told from the terraces of the stadiums. *Art of the Terraces* (5 November 2022 to 12 March 2023) is the first major exhibition to tell the story of a movement that defined sports culture of the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

This pioneering exhibition considers the culture of football ‘casuals’, which began on Britain’s football terraces in the late 1970s. Through the medium of art, it highlights the clothing brands and sports footwear, music and encounters between rival groups of football supporters which defined an era and generation.

In a fusion of art, fashion and popular culture, *Art of the Terraces* explores the work of a generation of contemporary artists and designers who have been influenced by this movement over the last 40 years. It celebrates a cultural scene that has been overlooked by the mainstream art world, but which has created its own dynamic art forms, and which is now credited with the mass popularisation of sportswear as leisurewear - a worldwide phenomenon.

Visitors will see artwork by leading contemporary artists such as Leo Fitzmaurice, Turner Prize winners Mark Leckey and Mark Wallinger, Pete McKee, Lucy McKenzie, Ross Muir and Dave White.

The story of the movement, its wider significance in British and European popular culture and its artistic legacy will be told through more than 100 paintings, graphic designs and fashion items, as well as installations, video and installation art. This movement created a whole new approach to fashion, which still inspires brand loyalty today, and has attracted a new generation of fans of retro and classic sportswear and footwear. National Museums Liverpool is the first British museum to present the story of this sub-culture, which has had significant and far-reaching influence.



Fig. A23  
 Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine Compendium Displayed as Part of the Art of the Terraces Exhibition*  
 (05/11/2022–12/03/2023)  
 Paper Printed Zine  
 Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm  
 The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2023). Co-author and Contributor,  
*Sole-Zine* (02-07) Exhibited at *FTC FutureScan5: Conscious  
Communities* Conference, University of Leeds, UK, 7/09/23 – 8/09/23.

*Sneakers, trainers, kicks, webs, strides, soles, creps, beaters, trabs or trainees,  
whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about  
their footwear...*

Sneaker enthusiasts are attached to their possessions unlike any other sub-culture. Obsession, Style, and Place is an ongoing project intended to highlight specific subgroups who live significantly for sneakers. From the birth of the Terrace Casual, the unique seekers and the under-represented sectors born out of this culture. Emphasising this much-loved fashion area gives rise to the tribes and cohesive socio-groups who define and are defined by values and tensions around status, belonging and the need for individuality.

This research offers new insight from stories from the terraces, provides opportunity to view rare, original, and vintage sneakers that informed the birth of the Casuals in Liverpool, UK. To those who subscribe to the pimping up of their sneakers and those not yet heavily featured. Early and emerging research regarding the under-representation of 'Restorers, Convertors and Customisers' within the Sneakerhead community. Including the shortage of stories being told in terms of Menswear, it's past, present, and future status contextualises and places the subject within arenas for larger debate, thus raising awareness, and bridging gaps within the field.



Fig. A24  
Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) Exhibited at FTC FutureScan5: Conscious Communities Conference (7/09/2023 – 8/09/2023)*  
Paper Printed Zine  
Dimensions: Zine 350mm x 500mm Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm  
University of Leeds, UK.



Fig. A25

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) Exhibited at FTC FutureScan5: Conscious Communities Conference (7/09/23 – 8/09/23)*

Paper Printed Zine

Dimensions: Zine 350mm x 500mm Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm

University of Leeds, UK.



Fig. A26

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine Compendium (Vol. 02-07) Exhibited at FTC FutureScan5: Conscious Communities Conference (7/09/23 – 8/09/23)*

Paper Printed Zine

Dimensions: Zine 350mm x 500mm Display Table 2000mm x 1000mm

University of Leeds, UK.

Owen, K., (2022). Author and Contributor, *Big Idea's* Exhibition,  
Liverpool John Moores University, Research Event, Liverpool, UK, 8/06/22.

Using insight recorded in *Sole-Zine* (07), The Community Issue this presentation revealed the impact and significance that vintage sports footwear has on a specific trainer subgroup. Sharing stories through a poster display of digitally recorded artefacts, photography and other ephemera that informs the ethos of this community and unearths how they continue to shape cultural standards. The study seeks to explore their relationships experienced through fashion, revealing how these members seek out specialists in the field to restore and rework trainers in their quest for the perfect adidas collection. All members share a common value - that regardless of age, style is timeless and keeping it, vintage is authentic. This subgroup excludes the 'hype' of millennial trainer enthusiasts and firmly believe that the young are not always the authority on style. Afterall, who really sets the tone for age-appropriate dress?



Fig. A27  
Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Research Poster Presented at the Big Idea's Exhibition (8/06/2022)*  
Paper Printed Poster  
Dimensions: 420mm x 297mm

Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., and Owen, P. (2022). Co-author and Curator, *Sole-Zine 07:*

*The Community Issue*. Exhibition, Talk, and Workshop, Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moore's University, UK, 18/06/22 – 30/06/22.

*Sole-Zine* is a printed publication which has identified and developed engagement with a particular demographic, who have previously considered themselves alienated from academic institutions, galleries, and museums. Liverpool has fashion deeply rooted in its identity. The *Terrace Casuals* was a Sub-Culture born on the terraces of Anfield and went on to influence modern menswear as we know it today. Arguably it provided the first accessible space where working-class men could engage with 'fashion' in a positive way. Aligning with City Labs strategy to produce impactful research which does not discriminate, but rather, highlights and celebrates via subjects which have prominence within local, regional, national, and international under-represented communities. Engaging, welcoming, and enhancing the Centre's research and resulting in impact outside of academia.

This project involved research between; LJMU, ERL, City Lab, Liverpool City Council, Liverpool adidas collectors, and Liverpool craftspeople from the trainer subculture. The exhibition, demonstration, talk and workshop provided an original insight via first-hand artisan community interactivity and the exhibition of adidas trainer collections central to this movement, enhanced the influence and impact of the event. Reaching community and subscribers at local and regional level via the event, and national and international post-event, via the dissemination of *Sole-Zine* (07) and engagement with academics, researchers, museums, galleries.

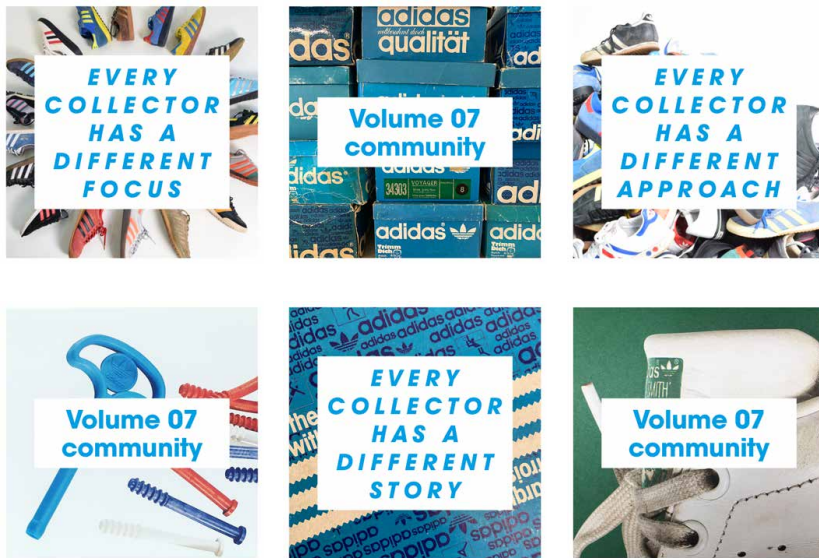


Fig. A28

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/2022)*

Exhibition of Collectors Rare Trainers, Expert Shoe-Maker/ Trainer Converter Talk,

Artisan Demonstration of Trainer Conversion Technique and Make a *Sole-Zine*

Keyring Workshop

Dimensions: N/A

Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moore's University, Liverpool, UK.



Fig. A29

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/22)*

Exhibition of Collectors Rare Trainers, Expert Shoe-Maker/ Trainer Converter Talk, Artisan Demonstration of Trainer Conversion Technique and Make a *Sole-Zine* Keyring Workshop

Dimensions: N/A

Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moore's University, Liverpool, UK.



Fig. A30

Kayla Owen

*Sole-Zine (Vol. 07) The Community Issue Live (18/06/22- 30/06/22)*

Exhibition of Collectors Rare Trainers, Expert Shoe-Maker/ Trainer Converter Talk,

Artisan Demonstration of Trainer Conversion Technique and Make a *Sole-Zine*  
Keyring Workshop

Dimensions: N/A

Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moore's University, Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., and Owen, P. (2022). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine 07: Community*. The Ultra Issue Exhibited at, *LACES OUT!* Festival, Liverpool, UK, 26/11/22.

*Sole-Zine (07) ULTRA Community Pop-Up* in collaboration with Laces Out! Liverpool's leading trainer festival and the UK's largest celebration of trainers, fashion, and lifestyle. Exploring the distinct biographical sartorial space, of a specific subgroup of identities fashioning dress codes harnessed within communities by emotion, memory, time and place. Emphasising the camaraderie, respect and integrity shown to individuals who are part of these networks and drawing attention to the significance of the friendships constructed within these supportive, safe spaces for like-minded ageing style makers, to highlight the importance of the well-being benefits that emerge.

The *Sole-Zine (07) ULTRA Community* exhibition at LacesOut! Trainer Festival 26th November 2022, offered an opportunity to showcase Volume 07 (the collector and community issue) and participate in photographing, recording and documenting the Ultra Community as part of a one-day live experience.



Fig. A31

Kayla Owen

*Live Data Collection for a Special Edition of Sole-Zine 07: Community. The Ultra Issue (26/11/2022)*

Using Printed Door Mats Designed by Sole-Zine (Owen & Owen) to Capture Data as Part of the *LACES OUT!* Festival

Dimensions: Mat 900mm x 560mm

Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., (2022). Author and contributor, 20:20 Print Exchange 2021 Exhibition, international touring exhibition, '*Second Skin 5*' screen prints, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK, 1/11/21 – 1/08/22.

The 20:20 Print Exchange is run by hot bed press and started in 2009 with ten artists from hot bed press print studio in Salford, exchanging prints with another ten from Red Hot Press in Southampton. It has since outgrown these humble beginnings. To date over 133,000 prints have been created especially and exchanged between creatives in the UK and abroad. Each artist produces an edition of twenty-five prints, measuring 20x20cm – that includes twenty prints for the exchange between artists and four for boxes that go to studios. The no.1 of each edition goes on tour internationally during the following year, before the next exchange takes place and we start all over again!

*Second Skin 5* is a series of screen prints featuring close-ups of leather garment details, texture, stitches, and folds with the aim to exhibit leather fashion as art. Capturing the durability, flexibility and value of leather items as pieces, to nurture and preserve.



Fig. A32

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 5, Presented as Part of 20:20 Print Exchange 2021 Exhibition*  
(01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)

Screen Prints of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 200mm x 200mm

International Touring Exhibition, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK.



Fig. A33

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 5, Presented as Part of 20:20 Print Exchange 2021 Exhibition*  
(01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)

Screen Prints of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 200mm x 200mm

International Touring Exhibition, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK.



Fig. A34

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 5, Presented as Part of 20:20 Print Exchange 2021 Exhibition*  
(01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)

Screen Prints of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 200mm x 200mm

International Touring Exhibition, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK.



Fig. A35

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 5, Presented as Part of 20:20 Print Exchange 2021 Exhibition*  
(01/11/2021 – 01/08/2022)

Screen Prints of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 200mm x 200mm

International Touring Exhibition, Iceland, Hungary, India, UK.

Owen, K., (2021). Author and contributor, Light Night: 2020, Light Night at Home, images of leather garment design development included as Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition, 17/05/20.

A series of investigational images of leather garments developed to evoke the material properties and cultural dimensions of leather in relation to the artists research into the notion of Second Skin [Deconstructing the Fashion Leather Aesthetic] and her perspectives of how the theme of 'Home' and 'Leather' are interconnected and inseparable.

Both [ my home and my leather garments ] are a reflection of my identity.

Both [ ] protect and shelter me.

Both [ ] are moulded and sculpted by my body's habits which leave their mark in the memory of [ ] folds and scratches.

Both [ ] I cherish.

Both [ ] stay with me for years (until handed down to the next generation).

Both [ ] are home to me.



Fig A36  
Kayla Owen  
*Light Night 2020: Light Night at Home* (17/05/2020)  
Digital Photograph of Leather Garments  
Dimensions: 1080 x 1080 pixels  
Online Presentation on Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition

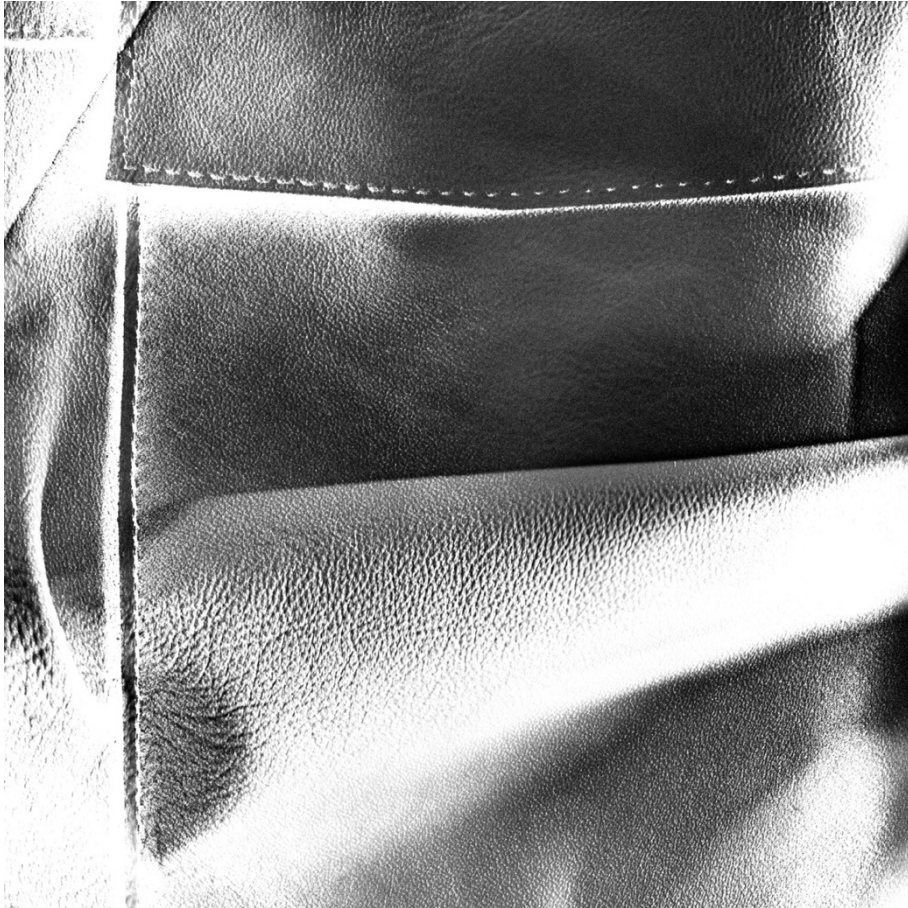


Fig A37

Kayla Owen

*Light Night 2020: Light Night at Home (17/05/2020)*

Digital Photograph of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 1080 x 1080 pixels

Online Presentation on Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition



Fig A38

Kayla Owen

*Light Night 2020: Light Night at Home (17/05/2020)*

Digital Photograph of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 1080 x 1080 pixels

Online Presentation on Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition



Fig A39

Kayla Owen

*Light Night 2020: Light Night at Home (17/05/2020)*

Digital Photograph of Leather Garments

Dimensions: 1080 x 1080 pixels

Online Presentation on Instagram @aplaceforeverythingand Exhibition

Owen, K., (2020). Author, Curator and Contributor, *Second Skin 4* [Deconstructing the fashion Leather Aesthetic] Exhibition: MA & Other Postgraduate 2020 Exhibition, Atkinson Gallery, Somerset, UK, 24/02/20 – 21/03/20.

*Second Skin 4* [Deconstructing the Fashion Leather Aesthetic] is an ongoing practice-led research project visualising the 2D and 3D exploration of leather and suede garments.

The objective of this creative photographic series is to elevate the fashion collection designed and manufactured by Kayla Owen by using experimental image making to capture and reinforce the metamorphic quality of the material, shape and texture. This chameleon-like covering, half protection and half ornamentation, is a bastion against the standardisation of appearance. From shelter to adornment and luxury, the common occurrence of animal skin products through time, attest to its enduring versatility, utility and desirability.

The artistic and narrative intentions of the use of light was significant to represent the fusing of wearer and their attire. Flesh as fabric. Investigational representation techniques were used to evoke the material properties and cultural dimensions of leather, identifying ways in which these fashion manifestations may deviate from or hybridise a new perspective, redefine the agency of materiality and blur the human-animal relationship between our skin and our clothing.

Sculptural Volume and Reconstructed Shimmer celebrate the dichotomy of our relationship with leather fashion by capturing how beautifully digital innovation can sit alongside traditional artisanal handcraft processes to create contemporary outputs.



Fig A40

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 4* (24/02/2020 - 21/03/2020)

Framed Paper Photograph of Leather Garments Designed and Manufactured by Owen

Dimensions: 450mm x 630mm

MA & Other, Postgraduate 2020 Exhibition, Somerset, UK.

Owen, K., (2019). Author, Curator and Contributor, *Second Skin 3 - Architectonic* Exhibition: LJMU X SUES Exhibition, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK, 01/07/19 – 04/07/19.

*Second Skin 3 - Architectonic* explores the parallel practices between fashion and other design disciplines. Investigating and analysing the cross fertilisation of materials, processes, and methodologies between fashion and architecture.

The research resulted in the development, design, production and exhibition of a leather womenswear collection – *Architectonic* (2009) – underpinned by and influenced from research findings, which analysed cross-disciplinarity of approach and technique between fashion and architecture. Using this knowledge to create experimental pattern cutting which was inspired by architectural structures and process, using leather and suede fabrication to enhance the surface and structure and align further to blur the lines between disciplines and promote the value in a cross-disciplinary approach.



Fig A41

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin 3 – Architectonic* (01/07/2019 - 04/07/2019)

Digital Photographs Printed on Durotran, Displayed in Light Boxes.

Dimensions: 573mm x 573mm

LJMU X SUES Exhibition, Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., (2018). Author and Contributor, *Second Skin 2* Exhibition: Materials Hard and Soft Exhibition, Texas, U.S.A. 03/02/18 – 05/05/18.

This project investigates the interface between hard and soft leathers. Leather affects us indelibly with its singular texture and feel. Traditionally living as a mold, sculpted by the body's habits which leave their mark in the memory of its folds and scratches. Conceptualising how the body's flesh merges with the animal hide as an identity revealing second skin that defies the seasons and stays with its owner for years (until it is handed down to the next generation).



Fig A42  
Kayla Owen  
*Second Skin 2* (03/02/2018 - 05/05/2018)  
Digital Images of Leather Garments Designed, Manufactured, Styled and  
Photographed by Owen  
Dimensions: Large Scale Projection  
Materials Hard and Soft Exhibition, Texas, U.S.A.



Fig A43  
Kayla Owen  
*Second Skin 2* (03/02/18 - 05/05/2018)  
Digital Images of Leather Garments Designed, Manufactured, Styled and  
Photographed by Owen  
Dimensions: Large Scale Projection  
Materials Hard and Soft Exhibition, Texas, U.S.A.

Owen, K. Owen, P., (2017). Co-author, Co-curator and Contributor, *Second Skin: Fractured Identity* Exhibition: Ice-Cream for Crow Event, Make, Liverpool, UK, 12/11/17 – 14/11/17.

Collaborative work from Fashion Designer and Academic Kayla Owen and Art Director and Academic Paul Owen from Liverpool School of Art & Design, responding to themes of identity for the Ice Cream for Crow exhibition, showcased at MAKE Liverpool as part of the Captain Beefheart Weekend, organised by Professor John Hyatt.

This series of artworks responded to the contrasts in private and public life. Experimental leather garment construction techniques are used to explore shape and structure of materials around the human form, whilst postproduction image making techniques in projection and digital glitch art blurs the two worlds of traditional and twenty first century digital domains creating a fractured sense of identity in a modern world that refuse to conform to what is deemed as 'normal'.



Fig A44  
Kayla Owen  
*Fractured Identity* (12/11/2017 - 14/11/2017)  
Digital Images of Leather Garments Designed, Manufactured, Styled and  
Photographed by Owen  
Dimensions: Large Scale Projection  
Ice-cream for Crow Exhibition, MAKE, Liverpool, UK.

Owen, K., (2017). Author and Contributor, *Second Skin* Exhibition: Northern Eye International Photography Festival, Venue Cymru, Colwyn Bay, UK, 09/10/17.

The Northern Eye festival, Cymru, was an art trail displayed throughout the North Wales Coast, from Colwyn Bay to Llandudno. This *Second Skin* artwork responded to the theme - *When Material and Mountains Meet* - Mountains loom large, like legends, holding a position of awe and wonderment. They rise and erupt in our minds as much as they do on our landscapes. Leather remains, a bastion of time, holding a position of familiarity and comfort. Materials, hard and soft undulate landscape-like connected in infinitely complex ways, equally symbolic, mythical, majestic.



Fig A45

Kayla Owen

*Second Skin* (09/10/2017)

Paper Print of Leather Garments Designed and Manufactured by Owen

Dimensions: 210mm x 297mm

The Northern Eye International Photography Festival, Venue Cymru, Colwyn Bay, UK.

## APPENDIX 5.11: CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

This appendix lists the conference presentations delivered during the course of the research. These presentations formed an important strand of knowledge exchange, allowing key ideas from the project to be tested, refined, and articulated within academic and practice-led contexts.

Presenting the work in these settings provided an opportunity to engage with diverse audiences, including researchers, practitioners, and industry professionals, whose feedback contributed to the development of the project's conceptual and methodological frameworks. The presentations also functioned as a space of reflexive articulation, where practice-led insights drawn from sneaker restoration, customisation, and material culture could be communicated and critically situated within broader debates in fashion studies and design research.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Author and Contributor, *adidas – So Much More than Trainers*, Oral Presentation at *FCVC2025: Fashioning Ageing, Emotion, and Memory in film, Fashion Media, and Clothing International Conference*, Multimedia Centre, Rovinj, Croatia, 18/07/25 – 19/07/25.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Author and Contributor, *True Vintage Lifestyles*, Oral Presentation at *Dress Devolution Three: Still Playing Dress-up: Age, Clothing and Costume Conference*, Falmouth University, UK, 3/07/25 – 4/07/25.

Owen, K. (2025). Author and Contributor, *Re-Framing Leather*, Oral Presentation at *Prosperity Fashion International Conference*, Università degli Studi di Firenze Design Campus, Department of Architecture Florence, Italy, 13/02/25 – 14/02/25.

Owen, K., (2025). Panel Chair, *Prosperity Fashion International Conference*, Università degli Studi di Firenze Design Campus, Department of Architecture Florence, Italy, 13/02/25 – 14/02/25.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: The Liverpool Style Protagonists Representing the Culture of '110's'*. Conference Presentation: *Locating Menswear Conference*, Liverpool and Manchester. In Association with Westminster University, MMU, British Fashion Council, AHRC, C.P. Company, SevenStore, and UKFT, Manchester and Liverpool, UK, 4/07/24 – 5/07/24.

- Owen, K. (2023). Author and Contributor, *The Wearer as Designer*, Oral Presentation at *Fashion Futuring Earth, Water, Air, Fire – The Four Elements of Fashion* Conference, Università Luav di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 16/03/23 – 17/03/23.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2020). Author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine: An Insight into British Trainer Culture*, Oral Presentation at *Fashion Institute of Technology*, New York, U.S.A., 20/10/2020.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2020). Author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine: An Insight into British Trainer Culture*, Oral Presentation at *Chicago Fashion Lyceum: Fashion at the Periphery* Conference, Chicago, U.S.A., 22/09/20 – 11/10/2020.
- Owen, K., (2018). Author and Contributor, *Disruptors of the Fashion World*, Oral Presentation at *Textile and Place Conference*, Manchester School of Art and Whitworth Art Gallery, UK, 22/09/20 – 11/10/2020.
- Owen, K., (2019). Author and Contributor, *Fashion's Pimp Up Posee: Leather, Sneakers, and Community ID*, Oral Presentation at *Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices Conference*, University of Bologna, Rimini Campus, Department for Life Quality Studies, International Research Centre, Rimini, Italy, 16/05/19 – 18/05/2019.
- Owen, K., (2019). Panel Chair, *International Textiles Institute, Textiles and Life 2* Conference, Manchester, UK, 24/11/2021.
- Owen, K., (2018). Author and Contributor, *Sofa Talks*, LJMU, Liverpool, UK, 16/05/2018.

## APPENDIX 5.12: PRACTICE: KAYLA OWEN, PUBLICATIONS

### PAPERS, ARTICLES, JOURNALS

Publications, including papers, journal articles, and related written outputs, form a key strand of the research dissemination, enabling the findings to be situated within wider academic and professional discourse. These texts document and develop the project's core themes, translating practice-led and archival work into peer-reviewed and publicly accessible formats.

They contribute to the overall project and conclusions by extending the reach of the research beyond exhibitions and practice-based outputs, allowing its arguments to be tested, shared, and critically engaged with across disciplinary contexts, while reinforcing the academic validity and cultural relevance of the study.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Author Full Paper Publication, *adidas – So Much More than Trainers*, Proceedings of *FCVC2025: Fashioning Ageing, Emotion, and Memory in film, Fashion Media, and Clothing International Conference*, Multimedia Centre, Rovinj, Croatia, 18/07/25 – 19/07/25. Intellect Books, London. (ISBN: TBC).

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025) Co-author, *The '110' Culture*. Photo Essay. *Special Issue of Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*. Published by Intellect Books, London. (ISBN: TBC).

Owen, K., (forthcoming 2025). Author Full Paper Publication. *The Wearer as Designer* Proceedings of the *Fashion Futuring Earth, Water, Air, Fire – The Four Elements of Fashion* Conference, Università Luav di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 16/03/23 – 17/03/23. Bembo Officina Editoriale, Italy. (ISBN: TBC).

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Co-author, *Sole-Zine x The Block P: 110 Voices* Poster-Zine: Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.

Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (forthcoming 2025). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 10: The Grand Slam*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.

Owen, K. (2025). Author Full Paper Publication, *Re-Framing Leather*, Proceedings of the *Prosperity Fashion International* Conference, Università degli Studi di Firenze Design Campus, Department of Architecture Florence, Italy, 13/02/25 – 14/02/25. Fashion Highlight – Special Issue No.1/2025 Italy. (ISSN: 2975-0466 Online).

- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024) Co-author and Contributor, *Sole-Zine* Issue 09: Chasing the 110 with The Block P. Available [online] <https://www.sevenstore.com/editorial/sole-zine-issue-09-chasing-the-110-with-the-block-p-2024/>
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024) Contributor, Locating Menswear Part Two: Manchester and Liverpool. Available [online] <https://www.sevenstore.com/editorial/locating-menswear-part-two-manchester-and-liverpool-/>
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2024). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 09: Sole-Zine x The Block P*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., (2023). Author, *Sole-Zine* Exhibit Report in Conference Proceedings of the *FTC FUTURESCAN5: Conscious Communities* Conference, University of Leeds, UK, 7/09/23 – 8/09/23.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2023). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 08: Mad on adidas*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2022). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 07: Community*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2022). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 06: Trimm Trab*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2022). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 05: Steel City*. Liverpool John Moores University UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2021). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 04: Custom*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., (2019). Author and Contributor, *Zonemoda (Vol:10), Fashion's Pimp Up Posee: Leather, Sneakers, and Community ID*, Conference Proceedings of the *Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices* Conference, University of Bologna, Rimini Campus, Department for Life Quality Studies, International Research Centre, Rimini, Italy, 16/05/19 – 18/05/2019.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2020). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 03: Conversion*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2020). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 02: Restore*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., Owen, P. B. (2020). Co-author, *Sole-Zine 01: My Mersey Paradise*. Liverpool John Moores University, UK, ISSN: 2634-7598.
- Owen, K., (2019). Author and contributor, *Architectonic: A Hybrid Experiment*, *Journal of Textiles Science & Fashion Technology*, Iris Publishing, San Francisco, U.S.A. (13/12/2019).

## **APPENDIX 5.13: PUBLISHED PAPER SAMPLE 1**

Owen, K. (2025 forthcoming). Author Full Paper Publication, *Re-Framing Leather*, Proceedings of the *Prosperity Fashion International* Conference, Università degli Studi di Firenze Design Campus, Department of Architecture Florence, Italy, 13/02/25 – 14/02/25. Fashion Highlight, Italy. (ISBN: TBC).

**Re-Fashioning Leather: A Study to Bring to the Fore a New Awareness of How  
a Specific Material (Leather) Does not have to be Finite as Nature.**

Owen, K.

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March 2025

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## **Abstract**

This research, interrogates and offers insight into the potentiality of leather, emphasizing that it is time to re-align thinking, provoke introspection and challenge existing norms. The aim is to demonstrate the value in forming a prosperity fashion philosophy centered on a specific by-product (leather), which offers a more ethical and sustainable viewpoint. Examining and promoting creative circular initiatives integral to a specific subgroup and creating an open collaborative and cumulative knowledge transfer, it is hoped that these shared ideas and practices gain strength, to create a blueprint for a prosperity fashion philosophy. To provide an actualized possibility for re-alignments and new approaches for leather production, consumption, and value as a starting point for cultural discussion. Challenging the fast fashion industry by presenting a slow, flexible future where leather fashion become investments because of their flexibility, and durability. Urging us to collectively forge new systems that disrupt and replace the current destructive cycle. Decreasing the negative impact of fashion on the environment, and people, through a focus on the ultimate circular material.

*Keywords:* Leather; Nurture; Restore; Sustainable; Philosophy.

## Introduction

Re-framing, leather as an ethical by-product, aims to educate a new generation to conceive a new belief system and material awareness of leather's durability, flexibility and value. The research serves to examine and highlight specific leather handcraft techniques and processes which have the potential to be disseminated at wearer/ consumer-level and shape new social and cultural models oriented towards a prosperity fashion system.

Prosperity encompasses so much more than money; it is when all people have the opportunity and freedom to thrive. Prosperity is underpinned by an inclusive society, with a strong social contract that protects the fundamental liberties and security of every individual.<sup>5</sup> If the notion of prosperity is considered from a fashion perspective, and the future of fashion is regarded ethically through its relationship with economy, environment and society, new approaches and design strategies can be developed which encompass this ethos. This study places education, communication, manufacturing processes, and sustainability first and foremost, offering a social model which improves individual elements – using natural and recycled material together with alternative slow methodologies, in sharp contrast to fashion brands current need for constant and exponential economic growth. As a designer and educator, we bear a responsibility to create work that serves as a catalyst for change. I believe, our creations and research should provoke introspection and challenge existing norms, urging us to collectively forge new systems that disrupt, and ultimately replace the destructive cycle of fast fashion.

This analysis contributes to and enriches a relevant debate on the role of activism in fashion, just as Fletcher (2014), champions a holistic consideration of a

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<sup>5</sup> Definition. Retrieved from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prosperity> [Accessed 20/09/2024]

garment's lifecycle, promoting the concept of a circular fashion economy (Fletcher, 2014), this study looks to leather handcraft production techniques, specifically, restoration and customization, and investigates whether dissemination of knowledge and skills at wearer/ consumer-level could support a fresh belief system - quiet activism against disposable fast fashion. Challenging current industry practices to present a slow, flexible approach, where the user has an elevated sense of ownership, belongings are nurtured, and in-turn become valuable investments. If we as wearers/ consumers, begin to treat leather as an active source of design information and invite the making of tacit knowledge through direct material handling, we can then establish an intrinsic relationship between material, maker, and user (Sampson, 2020). This is one which allows a connectedness to emerge, driving new interpretations of materiality, preservation, and sustainability. Looking to other creative communities for examples of best practice is key to providing tangible models and methodologies to create potential for new ways of seeing leather garments within our wardrobes.

### **Perspectives on Leather**

Leather, man's earliest garment, has come to occupy a unique role in the history of fashion. The most extreme images are associated with leather, from the animal hides that caveman wrapped themselves in, to haute couture dresses as finely cut as gemstones. Whether sophisticated or crudely fashioned, fragile as gossamer, or tough and synonymous with power, leather shows up in every kind of wardrobe, in every kind of climate. In Greenland, clothing from the fifth century BCE has been recovered in a state of perfect preservation (Quilleriet, 2004). Proving the durability of leather as practically indestructible. Clothes made from leather and suede allow ventilation, absorption, and evaporation of moisture. In other words, it breathes. The

millions of tiny air spaces among the fibers provide insulation and ventilation for warmth in the winter and comfort in the summer (Allyne, 2016). An organic material which continues to move and change with use, exposure to the elements and age, in fact, tend to enhance it.

Every piece of leather is unique, and a well-designed leather product will make the inherent strength, grain and beauty of its raw material more apparent. No two leathers are alike, every hide has its own distinct features, depending on any number of factors - not only breed, but also age, gender, diet, and the way in which an animal has been reared. Leather is easily cleaned, comfortable to wear, and straightforward to work with, since it drapes well and is sewn like fabric (Harris and Veldmeijer 2014). Leather items can be considered old friends, and if cared for, products last a life-time – a standard to aspire to. Leather affects us indelibly with its singular texture and feel. A living mould, sculpted by the body's habits which leave their mark in the memory of its folds and scratches. In this total fusion of body and clothing, leather should stand out in fashion. This chameleon-like material, half protection, and half ornamentation, acts as an identity-revealing second skin that defies the seasons and stays with its owner for years, until it is handed down to the next generation (Quilleriett, 2004). Leather takes on experiences, embodies memories and acts as a witness to every age and era. The true beauty of leather's durability is that it can be repaired, restored, altered, enjoyed for a lifetime, and passed down through generations. This makes it the perfect material to develop circular ways of thinking. Leather craft is the ultimate upcycling activity, turning industry's trash into treasure.

## **Leather the Most Circular Material**

Circular design embodies an ethos of prosperity through sustainability, aiming to minimize waste and extend product life cycles (Circular Design Institute, 2024). According to the Circular Design Institute (2024), this means reimagining the traditional linear production models to create systems where resources are continually reused, recycled, or regenerated. This approach within fashion could affect real change and recenter our view of fashion. In doing so, fashion can become agents of social and environmental change, promoting ethical morality in a world shaped by colonial legacies and capitalist exploitation (Barber, 2022).

Buying cheap items has meant not worrying if it is only worn once, or if it is not good quality, simply shop again. The environment can no longer sustain this cycle or mindset; the way we see our pre-loved fashion items must be altered to lose the ethos of the owner 'falling out of favour'. In this context leather, the most durable flexible and luxurious material, should be foremost. Restoration and customization are natural ambassadors to leather, and this study explores these processes to provide a flexibility which could garner a fresh fashion philosophy and attitude. Supporting the belief that looking to artisan crafts and heritage is vital for conservation, change, and for future concepts to emerge.

Fletcher (2014) considers that by focusing on creating circular systems of design the whole life cycle of a garment can be considered, which means that the ethical impact of garment manufacturing and the sustainability of a garment is considered from the very beginning of creation (Fletcher, 2014). The argument for a systemic shift is also central to Thomas's argument (2019) and links with Fletcher and Grose's (2012) call for a change to our approaches in design. Recognizing the claim that designers have a responsibility to create change within their work, to drive

a catalyst for necessary change, this research harnesses this ethos by interrogating the relationship between material (leather), techniques, and processes (restoration and customization) in practice, and developing opportunities to breathe new life into existing leather fashion, to develop a circular system that disseminates fresh perspective, understanding and skills.

### **The Value of Pre-Loved**

Existing fashion, i.e. fashion we already own, pre-loved and/ or second-hand is key to this study, and altering perspective, heightening nurture and garnering desire to preserve pre-loved items is integral to the development of prosperity fashion, through ethical thinking and sustainable ways of seeing our wardrobes. Fashion produces a multi-sensory experience, which both mediate and create our experience of the world. This tactile experience of our garments binds us to them. As we use fashion items, they become records of our experiences, archives of the experience of wearing. Worn things are the outcome of our being in the world; they are a mediating layer at the confluence of environment and bodily self. As, such our used garments hold a particular place in our networks of things, at once intimate and public, visible and on display (Sampson, 2020).

Extended tactile engagement with a garment creates imprints, both on the body and the garment itself. As established, leather already has imprints, scars and experience of the animal which initially 'wore' it. Each imprint is a record of our body-selves or the garment at a particular time and place. As consumers and wearers of clothes, we implicitly understand that people and the garments they wear are entangled, and that a garment holds meaning, and memory. This is particularly pertinent when the garment is made of leather, due to its durability, flexibility, and ability to mould itself to the wearer, forging the perfect fit. The garment is akin to a

second skin: a two-sided surface, touching the body and the world. The garment is, as a substitute or second skin, the site on which multiple tactile encounters occur (Winnicott, 1971). We cannot help but engage with material culture in the context of meanings and memory that we and others have ascribed to the garments we wear (Sampson 2020). In wearing a leather garment, the boundaries between the self and the garment, blur, and we – materially and psychically – are incorporated into it. Therefore, our leather attire is intrinsic to ‘ourselves’ and as such, should be cherished, celebrated, nurtured and preserved.

### **Restoration and Customisation**

By developing slow fashion practices rooted in anticapitalism and circular design aimed at pre-loved garments, this research vision is representative of an idea of prosperity fashion which could lead to a shared and widespread well-being. The philosophy advocates for a transformative shift, challenging existing power structures within consumer thinking, behaviors and the fast fashion industry. The connection we have with our clothes is described by Chapman (2015) as emotional durability, a bond between wearer/ consumer and their material things, with meaning at the center. He examines consumers’ experiences within object relationships and the role of possessions in our lives. Objects relate to people and place, and witness a continuous, systematic narrative of events. They become a personal record of lived experiences and gather their own history. They become priceless and irreplaceable, elevating them beyond monetary boundaries, disrupting the conventional hierarchy of our value systems (Chapman, 2015). This research highlights emotional durability, celebrates material durability, and provides a blueprint of knowledge and skills at wearer/ consumer-level which could improve the life cycle of leather fashion and inspire a more sustainable ethos of nurture and preserve.

In *The Craftsman* (2008), Sennett explores the ‘intimate connection between hand and head’ (Cooper, 2008, p.9) examining the physical attributes of craft, such as movement and touch as well as the rhythm of concentration in a repeated task. The book seeks to better understand the making of things, that through the experience and action of craft, knowledge is gained in our hands. The craft of restoration and customization of clothes can also be considered in the context of Marx’s theory of the value of labor. That the value of things should be calculated in terms of the amount of labor in production rather than its market value. Marx observes that greater value is attributed to the final product when the maker has a sense of ownership and control over the process of production (Trainer, 2017).

The craft of restoration, and customization gives fashion a new lease of life, and reason to be worn, providing flexibility to the item. These processes provide style elevation, a new sense of ownership and longevity to pre-loved fashion items, improving their life cycle. The development of a deep relationship through craft and the ability to change a garment by restoration and customization are ways in which clothes can evolve. Repeated tasks are hailed as a mindful experience, one of slowing down and reflection. Cooper (2008) asks ‘what the process of making ... reveals to us about ourselves’ (Cooper, 2008, p.8) and Marx also identifies the value of making to our emotional well-being (Trainer, 2017). Through these processes, restored and/or customized garments become so much more than the functional objects they were made to be. Instead, they become physical representations of individual ideas, theories, dreams, and accomplishments; they live on as timestamps of innovation and human achievement, elevating the object. This supports the notion of nurturing difference, as innovation is what makes things unique.

Considering that true innovation can percolate design across society, necessitates the need to alter what people find valuable, and redefines what value looks like, within a fashion context. A person's emotional response to an object is unique, articulating a complex combination of life experiences and cultural surroundings. This makes objects critical devices in forming identity and navigating place in society, the relationship is intrinsic to who we are. Chapman (2015) theorizes that by appreciating the role of meaning, not only do consumer-product relationships endure, they 'flourish within long-lasting empathetic partnerships' (Chapman, 2015, p.22). This research harnesses this thinking by developing plural networks where basic skills and processes of restoration and customization is disseminated at wearer/ consumer-level. With the end aim of progressing greener, adaptable, durable attire; through sustaining and nurturing pre-loved leather fashion, and developing a more ethical, and flexible connection towards existing garments.

### **The Power of Plural Networks**

Much can be taken from the practice of sharing particularly within the new fashion landscape to nurture, wear vintage, and restore our garments, rather than throw them away and contribute to landfill. According to Hoette, R. and Stevenson, C. in their book, *Modus* (2000), Modus networks demonstrate that the need to find other ways of understanding and operating within fashion is urgent and shared. Experimental networks and spaces, which interrogate and expose tensions between theory and practice, between disciplines and individuals, are a necessary divergence within fashion. Fashion is in many ways a process rather than a thing: an activity whose outputs and products are frequently impermanent and transitory (Hoette and Stevenson 2000). This research seeks to evidence that this does not have to remain the case or the only way, and that by creating the network, and the mechanisms

through which to adopt a skill, gain insight, or realize a new way of seeing existing fashion; that the 'knowing' increases and cultivates. These networks create and uncover spaces of overlap through forging individual connections, highlighting emotional durability and offering scope to broaden awareness between, in this case, practice (restoration and customization) and product (garment) whilst maintaining and re-framing the basic material contingency (leather).

Supporting socially responsible actions and building inclusive plural networks where communication and practice drive campaigns through social engagement will go some way to counter this. As established, true prosperity extends beyond monetary gain to encompass a rich tapestry of relationships, experiences, and personal growth. A country's future prosperity depends to an extent upon the quality of education of its people, therefore as Dudley (2010) affirms, museum exhibitions, workshops, and educational programs increase public understanding and appreciation (Dudley, 2010). Driving an open economy that harnesses ideas and talent to create sustainable pathways so that investment can grow, and supporting the economic sustainability of traditional arts, encourages younger generations to maintain these traditions and learn the art forms (Duncan, 2013). If circular systems are refined and new slow creative methodologies are presented and disseminated, at all levels, to diverse communities and industry, then fashion could move beyond its singular profit-driven vision to develop the idea of multi-faceted shared well-being, one which could offer a blueprint to redirect other knowledge and disciplines.

Challenging the fashion industry in terms of ethical, environmental, and social aspects, by highlighting the positives of coveting, adapting, and self-creating our fashion. By making the collaborative and cumulative nature of a specific material, and fashion knowledge explicit and open, via accessible networks, it is hoped that

these shared ideas and practices gain strength, and culture can be preserved, through plural networks which trigger more opportunity, and greater platforms.

## Method

As the research aims to establish if a new way of seeing leather may contribute to the construction of plural networks who challenge the current fast fashion landscape and consumer behaviors - examination of a specific subgroup of artisans from the sneaker community who embrace and celebrate the craft of restoration and customization was an integral source of data.

To bridge theory and practice the aim was to provide rich perspectives by mixing ethnographic methodological approaches, including object research and participant observation via action research. Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which a researcher studies a particular social/ cultural group with the aim to better understand it (Kramer and Adams, 2017). Professor Gary Alan Fine's 2003 article 'Towards a Peopled Ethnography: Developing Theory from Group Life' argues for a distinctive form of participant observation- 'peopled ethnography' - and suggests that ethnographic research is most effectively carried out when one observes the group being studied in settings that enable him/ her to 'explore the organized routines of behavior' (Fine, 2003:41). Thus, by entering a group of people with a shared identity at sneaker festivals, workshops, and retail outlets, allowed specific materials, techniques, and processes of leather handcraft, to be explored, experienced, and recorded. Observation of subgroup members, and artisans during restoration and customization workshops opened natural dialogue and allowed conversational data to be gathered. This method was a successful and authentic tool for collecting data about people, process, and culture, which in-turn immersed the researcher into sneaker subculture.

Participant observation encouraged two-way communication between the researcher and artisan, providing high validity as the researcher could gather first-

hand detailed accounts of perceptions, actions, and roles among the practitioners. The qualitative and ‘conversational’ data derived effectively collated and recorded to form a new strand of research - *Sole-Zine* [Figure 1], a research output dedicated to archiving and recording British Trainer Culture. Engaging with process, learning through investigation and taking an empirical approach by occupying global sneaker specific events, such as Sneakerness,<sup>6</sup> Sneaker Con,<sup>7</sup> Crepe City<sup>8</sup> the UK’s original sneaker and streetwear event, SOLE BLOC<sup>9</sup> and Laces Out! festival,<sup>10</sup> it was possible to observe subscribers and shoe fanatics coming together to celebrate their passion. These events were an opportunity to gather local and global insights of perspectives on the sneaker scene, and engage with specific materials, techniques, and processes via workshop participation.

The craft of customization was explored in practice at Laces Out! sneaker festival (2023), specifically the use of embossing to alter and elevate a worn shoe. The workshop consisted of a small group of seven sneaker enthusiasts and run by Benji Blunt Shank<sup>11</sup> a well-known UK customizer and shoemaker. Other workshops attended were concerned with traditional leather hand techniques, including sneaker making, bag making and leather engraving. All of which were attended by small groups of approximately three people and run by Jason Stocks-Young of Diamond Awl.<sup>12</sup> Workshop participation was key to embed skills and knowledge, drive discussion and observational data collection which enabled the analysis of practical research to support the understanding of concepts, opinions, and experiences integral

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<sup>6</sup> Sneakerness: Sneaker Festival, Global (<https://sneakerness.com/events/london-2023>)

<sup>7</sup> Sneaker Con: Sneaker Convention, Global (<https://sneakercon.com>)

<sup>8</sup> Crepe City: Sneaker Festival, Global (<https://www.crepe-city.com>)

<sup>9</sup> Sole Bloc: Sneaker and Lifestyle Festival, Scotland (<https://www.crepe-city.com>)

<sup>10</sup> LacesOut: Sneaker Festival, Liverpool, UK. (<https://lacesout.co.uk>)

<sup>11</sup> Benji Blunt Shank: Bespoke maker, designer, restorer and customiser of sneakers, UK. (<https://bluntshank.com>)

<sup>12</sup> Diamond Awl: Leather workshop, UK. (<https://bluntshank.com>)

to this subgroup. 'Making' gives the researcher the ability to alter or enhance their experience of the research subject in a manner that would not be possible through observation alone (Sampson, 2020).

Using action research, participatory observation, and object research, through studying a specific creative subcultural group has impacted value systems to the point of re-alignment and the transferring of skills and knowledge from one leather object (sneakers) to another (garment). Substantiating that the wearer/ consumer can become the creator of the object of enquiry and making this an important methodology within a fashion context. Reinforcing the actualized possibility of an alternative sustainable wearer/ consumer-product relationship.

## Conclusion

The planet cannot sustain current customary fashion consumption, and this gives rise to an urgent and necessary cultural shift in mindset toward leather, pre-loved fashion, meaningful purchases, and preserving items we already own. This study seeks to redefine the concept of prosperity, through cultivating the craft of restoration and customization via plural networks, to offer a more ethical and sustainable philosophy and attitude to leather garments. These principles offer a unique opportunity to work towards a more sustainable and fairer fashion ecosystem. Creating a blueprint which encourages flexible ways of seeing pre-loved leather fashion and supporting the cause for less damage to an already fragile environment (Fletcher, 2014).

The best solution arises out of users and designers working together, Government, civil society and artisans. So, by designing innovative systems of plural networks which promote restoration and customization, nurture and preserve, circularity can be achieved, and the wearer/ consumer can take ownership, and maintain an ethical responsibility.

Centering the research on leather, the most durable and flexible of materials and drawing attention to specific techniques and processes, provides significant grounding for new ways for individuals to transform leather surface into artistic canvas, telling stories through fashion. Developing plural networks, sharing skills and putting fresh perspective on pre-loved leather fashion opens dialogue and has the potential to build cumulative creative spaces for providers who nurture and preserve existing garbs. This practical and problem-solving approach aids the findings to an effective solution, generating useful knowledge that can be applied to real-world situations. This challenges the fashion industry and presents a new slow, and creative

way of using leather, one where the user has an elevated sense of ownership and in turn, belongings are nurtured and become investments due to their flexibility. These processes re-frame leather, push ethical boundaries, and blur the relationship between wearer/ consumer and attire, presenting a prosperity fashion philosophy which additionally could be used to enrich theories of fashion and material culture, influence wearer/ consumer-product relationships, and create an alternative solution which withstands pressure from capitalist industry to buy new and therefore reduce consumption. If the wearer/ consumer can become a 'leather fashion activist' then this blueprint and plural network will serve as a powerful tool.

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Figure 1 (image01\_Owen\_Kayla.jpg)

*Sole-Zine (Volumes 01-09) A Poster-Zine Dedicated to Recording and Archiving*

*British Trainer Culture (2020-2024).*

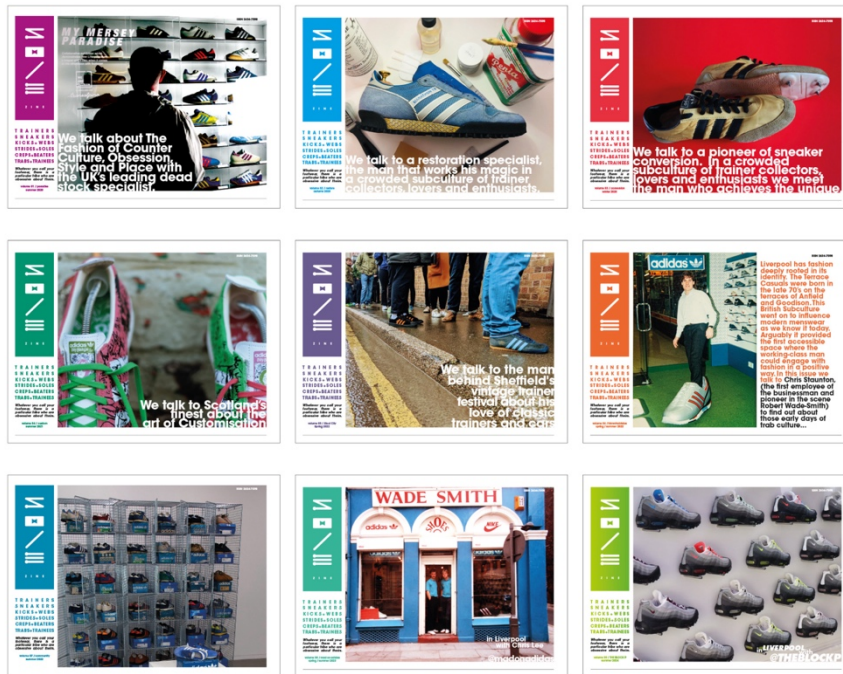


Fig. 01  
Kayla Owen  
*Sole-Zine Volume (01-09) (2020-2024)*  
Paper Printed Zine  
Dimensions: 350mm x 500mm  
Liverpool, UK. ISSN: 2634-7598

## APPENDIX 5.14: PUBLISHED PAPER SAMPLE 2

Owen, K., (2019). Author and Contributor, Zonemoda (Vol:10), *Fashion's Pimp Up Posee: Leather, Sneakers, and Community ID*, Conference Proceedings of the *Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices* Conference, University of Bologna, Rimini Campus, Department for Life Quality Studies, International Research Centre, Rimini, Italy, 16/05/19 – 18/05/2019.

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*Five Keywords:* Leather, Sneakers, Subculture, Customisation, Unique

*Biography:* Kayla Owen is an Academic, Fashion Designer and practice-led Ph.D. researcher currently working predominantly with leather and non-leather, who has worked in the fashion industry and academia for almost twenty years. Currently working as Senior Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University co-ordinating the MA Fashion programme and teaching on the undergraduate BA (Hons) Fashion degree. Kayla is a member of the International Textile and Apparel Association and The Fashion Research Network and is a Fellow of the HEA. She has designed and manufactured fashion collections, shown on catwalks and exhibited 2D and 3D work nationally and internationally.

*Abstract:* The purpose of this research is to assess the value of an alternative production approach to leather (specifically customisation) and examine the sub cultural sneaker group who subscribe to or are central to the craft of customisation.<sup>1</sup> The people who are defined by the need for individuality. The study seeks to establish if this sub-group are rethinking and developing a new relationship towards dress and creating an alternative leather fashion aesthetic through their pursuit of unique. The visibility and symbolic capital attached to these items, in this case sneakers, becomes the display, the piece by which the wearer wishes to be noticed. But it also serves to question our fundamental philosophies of ready-to-wear fashion, and if our clothing and footwear can be honed and changed into new and unique items, the desirability and wanton aspect is altered. Style elevation, ownership and longevity improve the life cycle of these fashion items. This rethinking between sneaker and wearer who will pimp up, restore, custom and convert to sustain and nurture the item develops a new, more ethical and flexible connection towards attire. One which could influence future ways of seeing leather fashion items.

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<sup>1</sup> Customisation (noun) the action of modifying something to suit a particular individual or task

## **Fashion's Pimp Up Posse: Leather, Sneakers and Community ID**

**Kayla Owen**

### **The Metamorphoses of Leather and the Drivers**

Leather affects us indelibly with its singular texture and feel. A living mould, sculpted by the body's habits which leave their mark in the memory of its folds and scratches ... As an identity, revealing second skin that defies the seasons and stays with its owner for years (until it is handed down to the next generation), leather acts as a witness to every age and era. (Quilleriet, 2004)<sup>2</sup>

The fashion industry is changing; sustainability and ethics are core considerations. Ethical and environmental issues surrounding animal hide production has created a culture of constructing new versions of leather and non-leather, and as a result, leather as a material is differentiating. It can now be grown from animal cells, fruit and fungi. Exotic leathers are more rigorously regulated, meaning new methods of creating leather and faux versions are coming to the fore. Techniques to mimic finishes, surface texture, branding etc. are increasingly tested. This has led to the rise of adaptability, personalisation and customisation within leather goods. Opening innovation and ownership, in terms of design, manufacture, materials and processes.

Assessing alternative leather production techniques and deconstructing the leather fashion aesthetic has led to the analysis of the impact of customisation from a fashion context, specifically, the customisation of sneakers. This research aims to examine our cultural meaning of leather as a second skin by materialising it via custom techniques, discarding previous notions of being unethical and environmentally harmful, by displaying it as an art object wholly artisan, unique and valuable. Examining the sub cultural groups who exist within this genre. Specifically, subscribers to customisation and the craftsmen who pimp up sneakers. Those who are not satisfied with being seen in the latest garbs but rather driven by the desire to be part of another fashion sector

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<sup>2</sup> Anne-Laure Quilleriet, *The Leather Book*. (New York: Assouline, 2004), 7-8

who strive for uniqueness and innovation. Their fulfilment comes from others not being able to acquire the fashion items that are intrinsic to their style. Giving new meaning to standing out from the crowd, achieving a rare and unattainable aesthetic, existing at the vanguard of fashion.

Within this pimp up posse exist sneaker loving, visionary creatives for whom constructing one's own exclusive fashion items is their symbol of desire. The artisanal aspect required to be part of this sector provides new material contingencies for leather from a sneaker context. One which no-one else can own. Setting aspiration at such a niche level that these items become even more covetable. Offering new perspectives and redefining the agency of leather materiality and wearer as designer.

Conducting research of peoples within sneaker culture with their customs, habits, and mutual differences and establishing when the opportunity and desire to seek out or create unique products began. It is possible to gain understanding of the value and meanings surrounding these behaviors, and look at, describe and record the experience, ideas, beliefs and values within the world of sneaker pimps and collectors. Providing an appreciation of how sneaker enthusiasts construct an informal network group in virtual as well as physical spaces. Framing how their passion for sneakers has been produced, reproduced, spread, expanded and maintained by competitiveness or other needs, provides research that contributes to various fields of discipline, such as sociology, anthropology, cultural, subcultural, youth, gender and fashion studies. Shedding light on topics and subcultures that are often overlooked or forgotten. Sneakers are a subtle and a latent expression of conspicuous consumption. The public would not recognize the value, and only the insiders are able to share the meaning, and that is the very reason that the community can be called a subculture. (Kawamura, 2016:3)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, *Sneakers : Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3

## The Review of Literature

This research makes use of literature that historically frames and defines leathercraft. The *Leather Book* by Anne-Laure Quilleriet is an excellent case of an anthology of leather. It is the first ever published record that chronicles the history and transformations of this fabric, from prehistoric caves to the houses of haute couture. Quilleriet's study has been followed by many other anthological records such as Harris and Veldmeijer's pioneering volume *Why Leather? The Material and Cultural Dimensions of Leather* (2014) where specialists from contemporary craft and industry are brought together with archaeology experts to examine both the material properties and cultural dimensions of leather. As in, Quilleriet's book, the common occurrence of animal skin products through time, attest to its enduring versatility, utility and desirability. Unlike Quilleriet's study, Harris and Veldmeijer also features vegetable tanned leather in the research alongside fat-cured skins and rawhide. In addition, a more recent reproduced leather anthology by Allyne, L. entitled; *Something About Leather* (2016) is a book which has been selected by scholars as being culturally important and is part of the knowledge base of civilisation as we know it.

Sterlacci, in her (2010) book *Leather Fashion Design*, claims to be the most complete textbook available on the subject. Not only providing a thorough, comprehensive overview of the history of leather production throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but also giving an extremely detailed outline of the tanning process itself. The book covers everything from what to look for when choosing a skin to work with, through to pattern cutting, sewing techniques and finishing. The final chapter includes working with leather-like materials, such as faux patent and Ultrasuede. The book illustrates how to make various types of leather garments as well as providing resource lists for relevant and associated organisations and publications.

Handbooks such as Schwebke's; *How to Sew Leather, Suede, Fur* (1970), West's; *Leatherwork: A Manual of Techniques* (2005) and Newman's; *Leather as Art and Craft: Traditional Methods and Modern Designs* (1973), explain and clarify how to work with leather, and how leather has traditionally been used. Key texts on leather production from; Saravanabhaven, S. *et al.* article on 'Reversing the Conventional Leather Processing Sequence for Cleaner Leather Production' (2006) to Weijun, D. *et*

*al.* review on ‘Carbon Dioxide Delimiting in Leather Production’ (2015) highlight environmental, ethical and sustainable issues.

However, there are very few books that celebrate the luxury of leather artisanship from a fashion custom context. Maki, (2008) in his visual record of personalised kicks features artists from around the world, who employ inventive techniques to originate unique sneaker creations. The book *Sneakers* (2017) by Rodrigo Corral et. al, comes close, a chronical of one hundred interviews investigating sneakers, not as a product but as an idea. They too address the sneaker phenomenon from a sub cultural perspective. Recognising that sneakers define behaviour, capture imagination, are habit forming and generate feelings of lust or even love. The focus is on the wearer, and how sneakers make them feel, not how some sneakers are created as one-off customs.

*Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (2016) written by sociologist Yuniya Kawamura was the first academic book dedicated solely to sneakers. An in-depth theoretical and conceptual analysis of cultural, social, aesthetic, and economic interpretations of sneakers. The first comprehensive non-academic book about sneaker phenomenon is probably Tom Vanderbilt’s *The Sneaker Book: Anatomy of an Industry and an Icon* (1998), which talks about the history of sneakers, the background of major sneaker manufacturers, marketing strategies to sell sneakers, and the social environments that surround the sneaker development. Followed by Bobbito Garcia’s *Where’d You Get Those? New York City’s Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987* (2003). Bobbito Garcia is known as the father of the sneaker subculture. Garcia traces the history of sneakers since the 1960s through a series of stories and anecdotes told by Garcia himself, about his personal experiences and attachment to sneakers.

Since Garcia’s publication, further publications dedicated exclusively to sneakers have emerged. Unorthodox Style published *Sneakers: The Complete Collector’s Guide* (2005) and *Sneakers: The Complete Limited Editions Guide* (2014). Neal Heard, a well-known sneaker connoisseur, has published several books: *The Trainer* (2003); *Sneakers* (2005), *Sneakers (Special Limited Edition): Over 300 Classics from Rare Vintage to the Latest Designs* (2009), and *The Sneaker Hall of Fame: All-*

Time Favorite Footwear Brands (2012). *Art & Sole: Contemporary Sneaker Art & Design* (2012) was published by Intercity, a graphic design studio, which focuses exclusively on contemporary, cutting-edge sneaker design, and explores the creative side of sneaker culture showing the most original items and collaborations. These publications are written by sneaker experts and connoisseurs for sneaker fans and collectors and are not academic in nature, which is an indication that sneakers as a topic in academic research is overlooked or neglected despite their complex and powerful sociocultural meanings.

Therefore, the literature review highlights that, research is available which provides contemporary analysis for the predominant understanding of leather as a material, these are crucial for establishing how leather has been used both historically and currently and the impact this has had on the use of leather within a fashion context over the decades. There is also significant research concerning new advancements within leather production and sneaker technology, both scientifically and technically. However, sneaker books are often non-academic and gender specific, certain socio groups are under-represented and the pimping up of leather from a sneaker context is not significantly recorded. The review establishes that current notable research is concerned with individual facets which pertain to this study, rather than an analysis which explores the interface between each one; advancements in leather customisation, the material development of sneakers and the subcultures that subscribe to and provide the unique and unattainable. Identifying ways in which these fashion manifestations may deviate from or hybridise a new leather aesthetic. It is only through establishing the visual assumptions and material contingencies incorporated within this field of research and maintaining dialogue on the subject that developments can occur.

## Theoretical Framework - Sneaker Subculture

It is important to understand how a subculture acquires subjective meaningful identities. As Stone writes (quoted in Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson 1995: 23): ‘when one has identity, he is situated- that is, cast in the shape of a social object.’<sup>4</sup> It determines one’s placement in a social context which inadvertently affects his behaviour and thoughts. For sneaker enthusiast, it is the type of sneakers that they put on their feet which in turn manifests their identity and the level of fashion they can achieve.

Bourdieu (1984)<sup>5</sup> implies that the working class is not interested in adopting aesthetics, but this can be proved otherwise among sneaker enthusiasts. Sneaker enthusiasts are the most fashionable groups of people. They always feel the need to be in fashion. Buying off the shelf sneakers, which has implications, but then going to the additional enterprise to either customise them or commission someone else to customise them, to aesthetically stand out from the crowd, disproves this theory.

Sneaker enthusiasts compete for uniqueness; they have high regard for one another. They exchange and share information about sneakers that they attain or create, post them online, and nonverbally acknowledge those who are part of the same subculture. The love and passion for, and obsession with sneakers that they share establishes camaraderie, and there is the undeniable emotional attachment and involvement that they feel by being part of the community. Muggleton applies Weberian interpretation of meaning to his study of a subculture phenomenon and emphasises the significance of subjectivity and the social factors that influence the meanings that everyone creates.

[A] Weberian study of subculture must be based upon an interpretation of the subjectivity held meanings, values and beliefs of the subculturalists themselves. This is the premise upon which Weber’s *verstehen* being ‘human understanding’ ... We must therefore take seriously the subjective

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<sup>4</sup> Mary-Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne Eicher and Kim Johnson, *Dress and Identity* (New York: Fairchild, 1995), 23

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1984)

meanings of subculturalists, for these provide the motivation for their conduct. This makes the subjective dimension a central component in any explanation of social phenomena. (Muggleton 2000: 10).<sup>6</sup>

Those who prefer to be part of a subculture are often not in favour of mainstream tastes, beliefs, or lifestyles. Sarah Thornton (1995)<sup>7</sup> suggests that sub cultural capital includes the objects, practices, and beliefs that members of a subculture use to distinguish themselves from outsiders and to prove their authentic status to insiders. Thornton builds on the work of Bourdieu (1984) who discusses several types of capital, including cultural capital used to distinguish oneself from others and project a certain image. The members in this case, enjoy the process of searching for, creating or commissioning one-of-a-kind items that no-one else has, or is wearing. This sets them apart and they believe, adds value not only to their possessions, but to their status within the sub-group.

Theoretical applications and explorations within this research are based on empirical work, which contribute to various fields of discipline in academia, such as sociology, cultural studies, fashion and dress studies. As an academic, it is important to shed light on topics and themes that are often forgotten, dismissed, and marginalised as unimportant. It is a way to raise awareness on both parties, the public and the academics, and to bridge a gap between the two. Tangible objects all contain social meanings if they are situated and placed in a culture or society.

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<sup>6</sup> David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000),10

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995)

## Method

The main objective of this research was to identify the craftsmen and artisans who create and provide new versions of leather for subscribers to custom sneakers and to draw attention to the leather techniques and processes harnessed by this sub cultural group. The desired research method qualities were that they could demonstrably be applied to practical applications and that the detailed methods of research were emergent rather than hypothesis-testing. Grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967)<sup>8</sup> was used to focus on the studies of diverse populations from the customisation subculture. To help close the gap between theory and empirical research. Grounded theory demands that analysis begins as soon as there are data, which is equivalent to letting practice generate the artefacts as data. It assumes no theory or hypothesis in advance.

Identifying the sub cultural group who subscribe to sneaker customisation took a mixed method approach. To examine the relationships between subscribers and artisanal creators it was imperative to take on an empirical approach by occupying global sneaker specific events such as Sneakerness, Steel City, Sneaker Con, Crepe City the UK's original sneaker and streetwear event, SOLE BLOC and Laces Out! festival, where subscribers and shoe fanatics come together to celebrate their passion. These events were an opportunity to gather local and global insights of perspectives on the sneaker scene. It was here that I was not only able to identify the subscribers but also the craftsmen and artisans who are leading figures within the field of sneaker customisation. Dominic Chambrone (aka The Shoe Surgeon), Mache Custom Kicks, and Joshua Vides all highly respected in the sneaker community. Customising has transformed from a niche market into a big part of sneaker culture over the past few years. The game is littered with DIY professionals who sell their services, along with members of a newer, more rebellious subculture who take a product and make it theirs, by giving it a unique work-over. It is fair to say that nowadays it is apparent that there is a specific subculture dedicated to breaking free from the norm and adding individuality and exclusivity to their kicks.

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<sup>8</sup> Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (England: Routledge, 1967)

Custom sneakers are extremely popular right now, arguably more than they have ever been. While there are still some who trivialise its place in sneaker culture, most people would agree that, when done well, custom kicks are works of art and often better than what's on the shelves. The rise of custom sneaker popularity has created a position which is undoubtedly legitimate fashion. Many hours are spent prepping, painting, sewing, and gluing leather, suede, and rubber so that someone can wear a pair of sneakers that they know they won't see on anyone else, they believe that creating something, or having something made especially for them feels much better than being an average consumer.

It was at these sneaker forums that I discovered and established contact with the craftsmen and artisans who create and provide new versions of leather for subscribers to sneaker customisation. Assuming the role of insider-in I immersed myself within the sub cultural practice. Signing up to sneaker making and customisation workshops, participating, adopting the skills, and observing the behaviours, drive and ambition first-hand. To gain credible qualitative data and examine said relationships, a long-term approach had to be taken to foster trust and develop networks where research subjects were as aware and as committed to the potential of the study as the researcher. As an outsider, I do not necessarily share their passion and values, nor do I follow their code or share their sub cultural knowledge (Thornton 1995). While I maintained critical distance throughout the research process, reflexive practice was essential in balancing immersion with analytical interpretation. Schrivener (2004) takes Schon's (1991)<sup>9</sup> theory of reflective practice as a starting point for his recommended framework. Schrivener, maintains that reflection-in action provides us with ways of thinking about the nature of the creative-production process, and allows experience (both personal and collective) to be brought to bear on a project. A way of identifying categories or themes, insights from reflection, review and qualitative data.

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 1991)

Case studies and interviews with individual craftsmen from the sneaker customisation sub culture where undergone. Artisans such as David Charlesworth aka Vintage Trainer Repairs, who is developing bespoke hybrid approaches to customisation and is the only known originator of spike conversions. Where an original spike sports shoe is blended with another sneaker to produce a new casual shoe. (Figs. 01-02) Both shoes are old and worn, but are recycled, restored, recrafted into a new version of its old self. Breathing new life into what would have been considered landfill worthy. Adding true value to an item that once had none. Transforming the sneakers into one-off artefacts of heightened cultural and personal value. David describes some customisation practices as cannibalisation he feels authenticity is compromised. He is a purveyor of tradition, of the OG, meaning original. He is all about blending the past with the mass, maintaining tradition rather than losing the legitimacy of the artefact. Giving new meaning to reuse and rework. Encapsulating heritage, aesthetics and ethics.

Exploring the obsessions and idiosyncrasies surrounding the creators of the one-off sneaker conversion and custom phenomenon, also led me to Lee aka Refreshed Kicks, who takes off-the-shelf versions of sneakers, predominantly (and preferably for him) adidas. Then switches them up via a request for restoration, custom or personalisation specifications. For example, taking an adidas Stan Smith and delicately removing the original figure head tongue label and replacing it with the customers favourite musician or film star. Stripes are colour changed, names are removed and new relevant ones added, the heel tab themed and laces changed. Creating a new version of an old classic. Adding value and personality, a one off, bespoke fashion item for the owner. Unique and personal (Fig.03-06).

The craftsmen samples were purposefully kept small to build longevity, trust and authenticity to the research. And although small, these studies were incredibly valuable, not only to provide a better understanding of the research subjects' opinion, behaviour, experiences and the customisation phenomenon, but it was also through building these relationships that it became clear, that there was a distinct possibility and danger of losing these bespoke, artisan skills, knowledge and processes, and subsequently the sub cultures and new ways of looking at leather, from an ethical and sustainable fashion context. The unique originators and purveyors of these crafts were not handing down this knowledge and skill. There are no protégés currently wishing

to fill the void. So, when these craftsmen finally hang up their shoe making tools for good, will the expertise be forever lost?

This notable finding led to the focus of the research shifting and the outcome becoming archival rather than physical fashion. The empirical data gathering, required preservation. To maintain this heritage and subculture it was essential to not only collect the data, but also to present it in a format that would aid conservation and be desirable enough for future generations to want to access it and eventually use it.

Ultimately the goal of the research became to validate and safeguard the materials, techniques and processes allied to leather customisation and conversion for future generations to access. Data gleaned from the literature review and data gleaned from the work/process/qualitative collection methods constructed appropriate theories and set concepts in context. Re-aligning the study and finding a way to tell the story and represent each stage of individual bespoke sneaker customisations and conversions undertaken by the key subjects.

## **Progression and Preservation - 3D Archiving**

With digital media it is easier to create content and keep it up to date. Unlike traditional analogue objects such as books or photographs where the user has unmediated access to the content, a digital object always needs a software environment to render it. These environments keep evolving and changing at a rapid pace. With the complexities of contemporary society and social mechanisms that shape behaviours, developing a digital 3D archive for fashion preservation purposes makes sense. This is how we view fashion. It is three dimensional in form, flexible, identity changing and acts as an indicator to the self we choose to portray to the world. By recognising the relevance of how contemporary society operates in an increasingly virtual world and designing an archive accordingly to suit, it is hoped that future generations will access and use the platform.

Digital archiving is different from traditional archiving. Traditional archiving practice seeks to preserve physical objects that carry information. Digital archiving seeks to preserve the information regardless of the media on which that information is stored. Computer disks and other magnetic and optical media degrade, and the information on them is lost unless it has been moved to other media. Software and hardware change rapidly: the physical media on which digital data are impermanent. Other methods are necessary to ensure wide access to and long-term preservation of digital data.

The British Library is responsible for several programmes in the area of digital preservation and is a founding member of the Digital Preservation Coalition and Open Preservation Foundation. Their digital preservation strategy is publicly available. The National Archives of the United Kingdom have also pioneered various initiatives in the field of digital preservation. In the most part these archives digitally capture artefacts and even places and spaces where these artefacts are held. Offering a user experience which feels life-like in terms of being there and observing in real time. The artefacts are often captured in three dimensions for full archival records. However, although the materiality and scale of each artefact can be captured, the skills, techniques and processes are not. The goal of the 3D digital social heritage fashion

archive<sup>10</sup> is the accurate rendering of authenticated content to achieve access and preserve research and development in terms of material, techniques and processes specifically applicable to the custom and conversion of leather sneakers. It is hoped that three-dimensional digital preservation will ensure that key records in customisation and conversion remain accessible for future generations in case they are lost or deteriorate over time.

Artec Studio Pro 14<sup>11</sup> is a software program for 3D scanning and post processing. Data is captured and split into several scans which are then processed. Artec's 3D scanners are structured light scanners. They operate by projecting light in a pattern, usually in the form of parallel beams, onto, in this case the sneaker. By projecting a grid pattern on the shoe, the scanners can capture the formation or distortion from multiple angles and then calculate the distance to specific points on the object using triangulation. The three-dimensional coordinates obtained are used to digitally reconstruct the real sneaker. Industry acclaimed Artec Studio Pro 14 was the software of choice for the 3D digital social heritage fashion archive, as it is powerful enough to pick up dark, shiny or fine areas of the leather. Artec analyses the surface of the sneaker and automatically adjusts the sensitivity of the scanner to pick up uneven and tricky areas. Scanning the sneakers in various states, from donor shoe to deconstruction, to new sole implant (in the case of a conversion) to new colour, texture, logo or custom technique, provided invaluable capture data of each stage of each individual customisation or conversion. Finalising the documentation by knitting these stages together using Adobe After Effects software to develop 3D rotating animations of the materials, techniques and process evolution.

Recording each process then putting the story together as a time lapse style 3D rotating sneaker, will showcase not only each stage of the customisation or conversion process, but also the material contingencies, development and juncture digitally. So, to offer a 3D tutorial for future interested parties to maintain the skill and showcase the niche craftsmanship involved.

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<sup>10</sup> 3D digital social heritage fashion archive – the platform developed because of this research. \*Please note this aspect is under construction and not yet available for public view

<sup>11</sup> Artec Studio Pro 14 is the software program being used to build the above archive

## **Discussion - Rethinking and Developing a New Relationship Towards Attire**

Leather has always been a sign of luxury. The grain, the smell, the touch and the richness. Its versatility also makes leather one of the paramount materials to work with; but the toxic tanning process raises issues of sustainability and environmental impact. This has gained considerable attention among leather industry customers, consumers and the community at large, and the industry has been addressing the subject for some time. There is a growing demand for ensuring that no harmful substances are present in leather, and that more eco-social production methods such as vegetable tanning and the increased use of recycled leather are utilised to combine first-class leather quality with economic and ecological benefits. As well as environmental, production and historical factors other influences of fashion are consequential to trend agents, appealing for the most varied animal species to be used in fashions transformational process, sheep, cattle, deer, reptiles, marine mammals, fish and birds. In this total fusion of body and apparel, human and animal, leather stands out as never before in fashion. Today, this chameleon-like material, half protection and half ornamentation, is still a bastion against uniforms and the standardization of appearances.

Material innovation stands at the vanguard of good design. Testing new ways to develop material opens opportunities for new ways of seeing, using and representing leather within a fashion context. Drawing attention to the leather techniques and processes harnessed by this sub cultural group provides significant grounding for new ways of transforming the leather surface into artistic canvas, but also an actualised possibility for re-alignments and new approaches to leather production, consumption and value as a starting point for cultural discussion. Challenging the fashion industry in terms of ethical, environmental and social aspects and presenting a new slow, flexible and creative way of using leather. One where the user has ownership and belongings become investments because of their flexibility.

## **Conclusion**

The overarching purpose of this research was to discover new leather production methods and explore the potentiality of leather, by examining the experimental custom techniques adopted by sneaker enthusiasts. Observation of subscribers and craftsmen as well as experiential research via attending sneaker festivals and learning first-hand customisation skills, established a valuable sample of both customisers and those that subscribe to and adopt a custom approach to their sneakers, in the pursuit of unique. The main themes of this research have brought an acute awareness of the value this pimp up posse place on maintaining, cherishing, hand making, customising, upcycling etc. The requirement to blend handcraft with new technologies, rather than employ one over the other is relevant. Bridging the gaps and exploring the intersections between contemporary, historical and theoretical approaches to dress, pushing social and ethical boundaries, and blurring the relationship between consumer and attire, unearthing the subculture of wearer as designer. Creating novelty and uniqueness.

This research provides a database that highlights the dynamic between new knowledge of leather customisation, the subscribers and the preservers who have adopted this phenomenon. This research challenges some of the traditional boundaries relating to sneakers, leather and craftsmanship, raising opportunities for elongating product life cycle, uniqueness and desirability and in-turn improving current sustainability, and ethical issues surrounding leather fashion goods, an area which has lacked prominence. Contextualising this and placing the subject within arenas for larger debate raises awareness and bridges gaps within the field. Forming fundamental requirement for future progress within this area. In this context, this research could provide efficient and sustainable options for companies using leather within a fashion context. Academically, this research could influence a new generation of designers and potentially inspire individuals from all aspects of the fashion industry, to push social boundaries and continue to blur the relationship between consumer and fashion, taking this research as an example, where the wearer becomes the designer and total ownership is achieved.

New information that arose inspired the development of a 3D animated archival platform where the goal was to preserve and support further, the potential value of the

techniques and processes concerned with the art of customisation and conversion from the context of sneakers. This experimental and developmental 3D digital social heritage fashion archive is the first of its kind, and supports the progressive approach being adopted. This original research will bring a unique dataset and serve to record a new genre of fashion, a sector where social norms are set by the individual. Those that strive for uniqueness and innovation and those that create it. A testimony which details the craftsmanship for future reference to a subculture as broad and diverse as it gets. This study determines the permanent value of preserving the craftsmanship, materials, techniques and processes connected to the pimping up, conversion and customisation of sneakers and captured a key time in sneaker history where the desire for unique was integral to the subcultural ethos and existence. The greater the importance of digital materials, the greater the need for their preservation: digital preservation protects, investment, captures potential and transmits opportunities to future generations and our own.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research continues to raise questions as ideas and theories are investigated and challenged. The outcome will be developed into a dynamic and experiential 3D digital platform. Using software such as Artec Studio Pro 14 opens potential for further developments, in terms of the ability to 3D print models in maximum resolution. Various stages of customisation and/or conversion can be realised three dimensionally, directly from the archive. Whether that be the initial sneaker and result, to evidence the creative and dramatic cycle undertaken within the parameters of customisation or conversion. Or to capture in 3D model form, specific points of custom or conversion, to aid and inspire users own practice. Meaning material surface textures, sewing, gluing, or manufacture processes can be captured, and finishes can be studied. The digital archive can take on screen or physical formats for future tutorial purposes.

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## Figure List



Figs. 01-02

*David Charlesworth adidas Trefoil Running Spike Conversion (June 16<sup>th</sup> 2018)*

adidas Trainers

Size 9

Liverpool, UK. Available at: [@vintage\\_trainer\\_repairs68](#)



Figs. 03-06

*Lee Brown adidas Sneaker Custom: Star Wars Commission (September 5<sup>th</sup> 2019)*

adidas Trainers

Size 8

Liverpool, UK. Available at: [@refreshed.kicks](#)

## **APPENDIX 6: ARCTEC3D TEST SCANS**

Practice: Kayla Owen, Digitisation for Future 3D Social Heritage Archive Project.

This appendix visualises the ARCTEC3D practice undertaken as part of the testing for the potential to develop a 3D digital archive project, led by Kayla Owen. The focus of the archive would be on the translation of physical artefacts (sneakers) into digital archival forms, recording each aspect of practice for restoration, customisation and conversion to form a 3D digital tutorial.

The ARCTEC3D practice formed a key component of the research's engagement with emerging technologies for documentation, preservation, and reinterpretation of material culture. Within the context of sneaker restoration, customisation and conversion, 3D scanning and digitisation will offer a means of capturing surface detail, construction methods, and material degradation, enabling new modes of analysis and archiving beyond conventional photographic documentation.

The sample images included in this appendix are representative examples of the workflow and outputs generated during the project. They are presented to evidence the role digital fabrication and scanning techniques will play in extending the research's methodological framework beyond the thesis, particularly in relation to questions of preservation, authorship, and future-facing archival practice within fashion and material studies.



Figs. A46 and A47  
*ARTEC3D Test Scans of Lee Brannigans Trainers Scanned by Kayla Owen (2019)*  
adidas Trainers Scanned Using Artec Studio Pro14 a Software Program  
Dimensions: Scanner Size 396mm x 405mm x 337mm  
Liverpool John Moores Fab Lab, Liverpool, UK.