

Sneakerheads and Custom Kicks: Insights into Symbolic Mass Customization

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Abstract

This chapter presents an exploratory study involving a group of athletic shoe enthusiasts and their feelings towards customized footwear. These "sneakerheads" demonstrate their infatuation with sneakers via activities ranging from creating catalogs of custom shoes to buying and selling rare athletic footwear online. The key characteristic these individuals share is that, for them, athletic shoes are a fundamental fashion accessory steeped in symbolism and meaning. A series of in-depth interviews utilizing the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) provide a better understanding of how issues such as art, self-expression, exclusivity, peer recognition, and counterfeit goods interact with the mass customization of symbolic products by category experts.

Introduction

There is a growing consensus that a company's ability to provide customized offerings will be a key determinant of success in the near future. However, there is no consensus as to why this is the case. Many discussions about the benefits of mass customization seem to rely on the truism that one size cannot fit all. Customization, from this viewpoint, is driven by more utilitarian motivations: to achieve a better fit, to eliminate unwanted features, to improve performance, to optimize. The role played by more hedonic motivations is often ignored. The presented research, however, focuses on an instance of customization where emotions rule. Whereas utilitarian products provide practical benefits, symbolic products are consumed primarily for emotional reasons (Holbrook 1986). Furthermore, these products have important social meanings that can be used by consumers to enhance their image (Solomon 1983). Dolfma (2004, p.274) describes symbolic goods as "goods that people define themselves in terms of, goods the consumption and use of which helps constitute people's identity, goods that communicate the kinds of commitments people have." Apparently, as the old adage goes, you can tell a lot about a man (or woman) by their shoes.

We spoke with a group of individuals who would seem to agree. The individuals belong to a community whose members are commonly referred to as "sneakerheads." Sneakerheads have garnered some attention in the press lately for what the average shoe buyer might see as a bizarre compulsion for rare athletic shoes. CNBC recently featured members of this group in their March 2008 special "Inside Nike" (Rovell 2008). In 2005, the Washington Post ran a story starring sneaker head Ian Callendar (Crockett 2005). When asked why he collected sneakers, Ian responded "To be honest with you, I have no idea..."

This type of response is not atypical when researchers ask people why they do the things they do. Individuals often have a difficult time peering into their own subconscious and articulating what they see to curious reporters. Survey researchers often fare no better for, in order to get good answers, they must first know what questions to ask. When consumers have no idea why they do the things they do, it seems unreasonable to expect that researchers should be able to guess.

This chapter presents results from a study utilizing an exploratory technique that overcomes the shortcomings of surveys, focus groups, and other verbatim responses. "In-depth interviews" are designed to uncover fundamental thoughts and feelings that those being interviewed may not even be consciously aware that they hold. In this case, the thoughts and feelings we seek relate to the experience of purchasing customized shoes from online sites such as NIKEiD.com, RbkCustom.com, and others. The participants are those who experience shoe buying in a very different way than most consumers. However, their experience likely parallels that of enthusiasts in other product categories.

Analysis of interview transcripts indicates that the most common theme is "uniqueness." This is perhaps not surprising coming from a group of individuals that covet rare and unusual footwear. However, a number of other themes play an important role. In summary, "extensive customization" creates an environment where these individuals "play" in order to create works of "art" that enable "self-expression", "peer recognition" and a feeling of "celebrity."

The Sneakerheads

The particular focus of this chapter is actually the product of a happy accident. At public universities, research budgets are often stretched thin. As a result, the compensation offered to

participants was initially limited to \$15. Fifteen dollars in exchange for an hour long interview plus up to several hours of preparation is not an especially compelling offer for most busy college students. Nonetheless, a small number of individuals indicated that they were interested in participating. It was soon apparent that those who came in were not a representative sample of the general shoe buying public. Instead, it appeared that these were individuals who would jump at any opportunity to talk about their passion for sneakers. These initial interviews were compelling enough that the focus of the project shifted from shoe customization in general to a new focus of trying to better understand how this group of "gurus" felt about customizing the product for which they had such passion.

The initial recruitment had occurred via signs posted at various campus locations. For the subsequent recruitment, a screening questionnaire was sent to members of a university research panel consisting of over 1,300 students. The most qualified were invited to participate and, following their interview, were asked to refer any acquaintances that shared their love of sneakers. Compensation for the second round consisted of a \$25 dollar gift certificate to an online athletic shoe store. Participants who successfully recruited a friend received an additional \$10. The highest earning participant received \$35 which, although higher than our initial compensation, is still remarkably low for a study of this type where participants are routinely paid well in excess of \$100.

Participants exhibited a number of behaviors that many people would find bizarre. One individual stated that the key factor in choosing his apartment was the availability of closet space to house his collection of 78 athletic shoes. Several indicated that they had stood in line outside of a shoe store for hours with hopes of acquiring a limited edition sneaker. Buying and selling rare shoes online was another common activity. The theme of addiction also appeared several

times. Indeed it seemed that the size of their disposable income was the only thing limiting the number of sneakers acquired by these individuals.

I don't have room in my closet for my shoes anymore. That's actually one of the first things I look for in a new apartment, closet space or storage space. I have so many shoes that I had to get a U-Haul van. I couldn't just move them down in the car. (Adam)

It is like an addiction, like gambling Q: Are you addicted to shoes? Yeah. I have over 100 shoes. I have kind of slowed down now. I started to invest my money into other things (Lanisha).

I've customized about 15 of them. You can actually save them on the website. So if I get some extra money, I might just start knocking them off the list. It's like I have my own shoe store online you know (Damone).

You buy shoes you didn't get when you were younger because you couldn't afford them or your parents wouldn't buy them for you. Now that I have control over my money, I can spend it how I want. Shoes are just what I do (Carrington).

I like to say we stalk shoes. There are a number of network sites like Facebook for shoe fanatics. Like Niketalk.com. Employees for Nike might go on there and leak when something is going to be released. There are literally hundreds of websites where you can go and find when something is coming out (Adam).

The Interview Process

Prior to their interview, participants received an official invitation letter detailing the interview process as well as the necessary preparations. Participants were asked to first reflect on their customization experience and write down 5-10 core thoughts relating to online shoe customization. Additionally, participants were asked to collect images that were representative of these core thoughts. Approximately one week to ten days after the initial contact, individuals participated in an interview lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed to enable empirical content analysis via grounded theory methods.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory refers to "insights garnered from data, systematically gathered and analyzed" Strauss and Corbin (1998). In brief, each line in the interview transcript categorized (i.e. coded) with the goal of identifying reoccurring themes. The resulting codes from all transcripts are then combined and further distilled into code families. These code families are then integrated into a conceptual map detailing the linkages between the various concepts. See Strauss and Corbin (1998) for a detailed explanation of these techniques. It is important to note that this type of grounded theory analysis is, in fact, an empirical method. The findings are not simply the result of some global interpretation on the part of the researcher. Rather, the results are the product of a highly methodical process of documenting and analyzing a set of quantifiable data.

Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique

The interview process used in this study is inspired by the steps outlined in the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET). ZMET is a multi-disciplinary technique involving a number of steps designed to tap into areas of the consumer's conscious not accessible via traditional marketing research methods (see Zaltman and Coulter 1996 for a description). A key premise of ZMET, supported by research in cognitive psychology, is that thoughts are organized via metaphorical images as opposed to verbally (Gibbs 1992). Thus, much of the interaction between the researcher and participant is based on a collection of 5-10 pictures assembled by the participant prior to the interview session. Pictures are selected based on the extent to which they represent the participants' key thoughts and feelings regarding the research question. During the interview, a variety of strategies are used to delve into the meaning behind the metaphors created by the participants' image choices.

In-depth interview techniques such as ZMET have a number of advantages compared to other research techniques. The primary advantage of ZMET is that it circumvents limitations inherent in techniques based on participant responses to verbal cues. Another key advantage is that only a small sample size is required relative to other research methods. An analysis of studies using the ZMET technique found that four to five interviews commonly provide up to 90% of the information gathered in all study interviews (Zaltman 1997). As with any research study, the more homogenous the population, the fewer participants are required for generalizable results. In our study we spoke to six sneakerheads. While additional participants would undoubtedly contribute to the nuance of our understanding, the sizable overlap across the interviews suggest our findings are representative of this specialized and unique group of consumers.

The Findings

Presented below are the main themes or concepts that evolved from a grounded theory analysis of interview transcripts. Largely conspicuous by their absence were concerns about footwear fit and functionality. We should point out that the issue of fit was mentioned by two participants. However, it should be noted that both of these individuals wore a size 14 shoe and thus, finding shoes that would fit was a particular sore spot. The vast majority of our discussions were related to issues that might be seen as much less practical. The resulting themes and representative quotations are presented below.

Extreme customizability

Codes appearing in the extreme customizability category included "more colors", "more shoes", "innovative options", etc... All participants noted that the options on the customization websites were too limited. Most often, the critique referenced the color choices and the limited number of shoes available for customization. The general consensus was that there simply were not enough options.

This (picture) is of a street sign with two choices: exit now (two arrows), but it doesn't say which side they are on. It reminded me of the NIKEiD website. It was so limited. I felt like I only had one or two choices when it came to the shoes and the choices that I could make (Rafael).

They have a good variety of colors, but not enough. Like you can't make basic all white shoes...and that's like a basic color, all white. So I put this picture because it's a basic

shoe. And you can't make something too crazy because there are a limited amount of colors (Sam).

All of the participants wanted more control over the design of the shoe. For some, this meant simply adding more colors, or more shoe styles. Others however, required a new level of customizability. Several participants suggested innovative customization options such as the ability to create custom colors or upload personal images that would be printed on various portions of the shoe.

This would be a really good idea. You know if they had one of those RGB color slider things that they have in Photoshop? If you could actually select an area of the shoe...like the area would become active and you could literally put in numbers...not numbers, but you could select exactly the color you wanted. That would be crazy. That would be great. That's a good idea (Damone).

I think that if you are really looking for customized shoes people are going to want control over everything. You never get an option to change the soles or add your own picture into the side of the shoe you have to go to someplace that actually hand paints them or does stitching themselves (Rafael).

Uniqueness

Closely related to the concept of customizability was that of uniqueness. A lack of customization options was seen as a barrier to the creation of unique shoes. This uniqueness was the key characteristic that motivated these individuals. Uniqueness is what motivated them to spend several hundred dollars on a pair of limited athletic shoes. The ability to create uniqueness

is where they saw the value of shoe configuration websites such as NIKEiD. Codes comprising this category included "individuality", "one-of-kind", "standout" and "special".

It's just like if I know that I'm the only person in the world with these exact pair of shoes. Not like the specific shoes, but the design...and I came up with them and all this. Then it makes you feel like special. Nobody else has this. I'm not going to walk around and see somebody else with this, like I'm the only one. You know what I'm saying...unique (Damone).

When you buy shoes, you want to be unique-you want to be the only one wearing those shoes. That is why [collectable shoes] are so expensive. Like these (picture) are \$300 and not many people own them. I would buy them just to be the only one to wear them (Sam).

Knowing that you are one of the few people that have the shoe, it's peace of mind. Q: Why is it peace of mind? If I am going to spend money on the shoe, I don't want to have the same one as you. There isn't a point in going for individuality if you aren't going to be individual. I don't want to get shoes if I know you are going to have it. If I know I can get a shoe with only 150 released like in NYC, sure I will try to get it if it's in my means. I have never spent more than \$150 on shoes but that's because I am really lucky. Its individuality, I want shoes that no one else has (Carrington)...

Part of my taste is to be different and so, I like to think I have an eye for things. So if I put a couple colors together that most people wouldn't put together, but I think look good, I have that much more chance of being unique. (Adam).

Self-expression

So what is the benefit of having a unique pair of shoes? It would seem that for sneakerheads, creating a unique shoe is a particularly salient form of self-expression. This somewhat more internal facet of the customization experience included quotations coded as "personal" and "creativity".

I picked [graffiti image] for the word creative. Customizing my shoes allowed me to show my creative side. You just can't put any color together and expect it to look right. You have to have a creative side in you in order to get a good output. I guess it comes from my creative side (Laneshia).

I prefer to have control over the options that I have. I think having more options in shoes makes you feel like it's not so much a Nike or Reebok shoe but MY shoe Q: What do you mean by "my shoe"? Tell me more about that. Something that you feel is an expression of you, of the things that you wanted, of your style, of your personality (Rafael).

I picked the diary (image) for the feeling of the process being personal-the end product. When I customized my shoes on the Nike website for the Id I used my name. I put my name on my shoes telling everybody that I have a shoe like a celebrity, MBA star or something like that. It made it feel real personal to put something on there like that. So I put a diary because there is where you put your personal thoughts (Laneshia).

I think that's the main purpose of NIKEiD, to let someone make a shoe that they can call their own. I think that that's the spirit of the site and one of the reasons why it's so popular and keeps growing (Adam).

Art

One participant in particular likened rare and customized shoes to works of art. Others mentioned famous shoe artists. There were comments about inspiration and meaning that sounded as though they could have come from an art history lecture. As a side note, one had the sense that the participants in our study might be divided into two categories: artists and art collectors. The artists were the most enthusiastic about the ability to create their own shoe (or create shoes for other people). Art collectors, on the other hand, seem satisfied to leave the creativity to the professionals. For these individuals, the greatest thrills came in building a collection of rare shoes. However, most individuals exhibited characteristics of both artists and collectors.

In this picture (Kanye West) is wearing Nike Airmax 1's Safari Pack. It's like artwork on your feet. Like some people collect paintings... Q: Tell me more about art work. Certain things appeal to you (pause) if you like certain artistic elements on the shoe. I like the contrast between the red and animal print and the white laces. Wow, I haven't ever seen that before. It's a lot to take in but I like to look at it (Carrington).

A lot of times when Christmas comes around, I'll do that for people. Q: What do you mean? I'll create some for a friend or something. Q: As a surprise? Nobody usually questions me. If I say I'm going to choose some shoes for them they say okay (Adam).

The way I put it together was very creative. People liked how the colors flowed together.

It was like me painting a picture-I guess. Being artistic but with shoes (Lanisha).

The shoe has a meaning. Jordan released a shoe to raise money for a children's hospital.

It was an exclusive shoe. It did what it was supposed to do. I understand why it was made. Just having a shoe with a meaning. Like a painting, how does this painting affect you? What is the meaning of the painting? What are you trying to say? For customization, it lets you put yourself in that shoe. It lets you use the sneakers as a canvas - a vehicle to portray you (Carrington).

Not all of the desired outcomes of customization were as lofty as artistic self-expression. Standing out among one's peers was a desired result of customization and unique shoes in general. On the other hand, sometimes it was not necessary for anyone to recognize your uniqueness. Sometimes just sliding your feet into a pair of custom shoes was enough to provide a feeling of celebrity status. Codes appearing in this category included "celebrity", "exclusivity", "attention" and "admiration."

You've got shoes and when someone sees them, they say "where did you get those from?"

They stand out from the normal shoes that everyone has seen in the store. Maybe four or five people at school have [a particular kind of shoe]...then that is nothing. If you are the only person with that shoe, then you sort of stand out. People ask questions. I picked the BMW because if someone pulls up in a BMW or another expensive car then you stand out from the normal (Laneshia).

People don't even have to compliment your shoes. Sometimes it's just a look. Somebody just might glance at them or you might catch somebody looking really hard... In that way it's rewarding (Adam).

Basically you get the best, tightest shoes when they first come out and you are the tightest person. Like the Jordan's...everybody keeps up with the release dates. They come on Saturday and you have to be in line at the mall at 6:00 in the morning if you want to be the first to get them. That is what it is all about. Like if Jordan's come out this Saturday and I don't get them... if I don't get them this Saturday, then I won't get them (Lanisha).

And I kind of feel like when I go online, if I'm the only person in the world with this shoe I feel, you know, as if I'm some celebrity that has one of a kind stuff you know (Damone).

Like the Kanye West picture, he's a celebrity. If I have my shoes, I can be a celebrity, too (Carrington).

No fakes

For our participants, however, there was a looming threat to the value of custom kicks. In the interviews we conducted, perhaps nothing was so consistent as the concern over counterfeit shoes. Forgeries, it would seem, are universally despised by sneakerheads. So much so that they can even decrease this group's motivation to acquire unusual shoes. However, most take heart in

their confidence that, if no one else, at least their sneaker head peers are able to recognize the real deal.

I don't wear fake. Q: Even if you could get the colors you wanted? Even if I could get the colors I wanted. Just me knowing that it is fake, I wouldn't allow myself to do that (Damone).

No. You can't do that. I am trying to think of what it would be equivalent to. It's more of a subconscious thing. I am walking around with an inferior product on my feet. ... As a sneaker person, if someone saw me with a pair of fakes that would ruin my credibility. It's like you trying to prove a point with me but using a false fact or something (Carrington).

It can be difficult because, at first glance, someone might not know that you got your shoes from NIKEiD. Someone else might think you have on fake shoes. But, if you know that you bought them from Nike... and at a closer look, if someone is really interested and involved in sneakers then they will know they are from NIKEiD. (Adam)

Just knowing that you might wear a shoe that somebody else might think is fake, might be enough motivation for someone to say it's not worth it. It's not that they personally have a problem with NIKEiD. It's just that they think it's not worth it. (Adam).

Fun and games

On the lighter side, one of the benefits of extreme customizability is that it makes the process of designing a sneaker more fun. The co-design process was often likened to a game where the sneakerheads could wile away the hours.

The Monopoly game (picture). I picked that because ... I'm having fun and the word for that one was fun. The whole process of going on the web site picking the different colors and seeing how it looks and if you don't like it, you can start all over and pick a different color for this part and that part. It was fun to me. Like a game (Lanisha).

Sometimes I just go in there and play with the colors. When you have the Nike.com membership, they send you emails with updates about the new colors that they get or the new shoes that they let you play with. I'll just go in (NIKEiD) and fool around and see if I can come up with something I like... When I'm playing around with shoes I might spend an hour. Like time might just go by on me (Adam).

Summary

As a final step in the ZMET process, each participant works with an individual with graphic design training in order to combine their images into a single montage summarizing their thoughts and feeling about the research topic. Figure 1 below is one such summary image. In this example, a diary is set next to a lock (with a unique combination) and cans of spray paint that are used in a game-like setting (monopoly board) to create a status symbol (BMW automobile). The angular blocks (featuring the colors of the resulting shoe) represent the "process" by which the shoe becomes customized.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Summary montages are interesting to look at and the process of creating them will often uncover new insights. In a grounded theory analysis, however, a more conventional approach to distilling the numerous codes into a theoretical understanding is the consensus map. A consensus map shows how the various concepts relate to one another across participants. In Figure 2 below, we see the central and important role of uniqueness. Uniqueness is important because it allows not only for self-expression, but the achievement of the interrelated sensations of peer recognition and celebrity status. In order for this process to begin however, our sample of sneaker heads claimed that more customizability was needed. This extreme customizability provided the additional benefits of making the customization process more fun and allowing these individuals to realize their artistic vision. However, on the flip side, the prevalence of counterfeit "custom" merchandise threatens to dilute all of customization's benefits.

Insert Figure 2 Here

Discussion

A number of authors have provided compelling evidence that customization opportunities will be essential to success in many markets. What is not always clear, however, is why some individuals seem so eager to participate in the design and production of the products they consume. Often, customization is assumed to be driven by utilitarian or practical considerations such as fit or function. Our study, however, explores one instance in which individuals are

compelled to customize for primarily hedonic reasons. In particular, we explore sneakerheads' thoughts and feelings regarding customization of athletic shoes, a product category that is highly symbolic and instrumental in how they present themselves to the world. In doing so, we hope to gain a deeper understanding regarding a subset of motivations fueling the growing interest in customization.

Of particular relevance to the volume in which this chapter appears, is the finding that extensive customization emerges as a precursor to the identified themes of uniqueness, fun, self-expression, art, peer recognition and celebrity status. For our participants, more options mean more opportunity to achieve a high degree of uniqueness. Furthermore, it is this extreme uniqueness that drives the positive outcomes of customization.

It is certainly reasonable to suspect that mainstream athletic shoe consumers approach sneaker customization differently and might be overwhelmed by the extensive options sought by the participants in our study. Indeed the popular term "mass-confusion" references this very phenomenon. A challenge for managers will be to develop ways to satisfy the "sneakerheads" of their product category within a customization environment that is accessible to the masses. We would argue against simply ignoring the needs of experts/enthusiasts. In many instances, it is likely that these individuals will act as opinion leaders, and influence the adoption of customization technologies. To that point, we leave you with one final quote:

My high school baseball team, we all got cleats from NIKEiD. We decided on the same cleats and same color, but were able to put whatever we wanted in the ID slots...names and numbers. Q: Who orchestrated that? I did (Adam).

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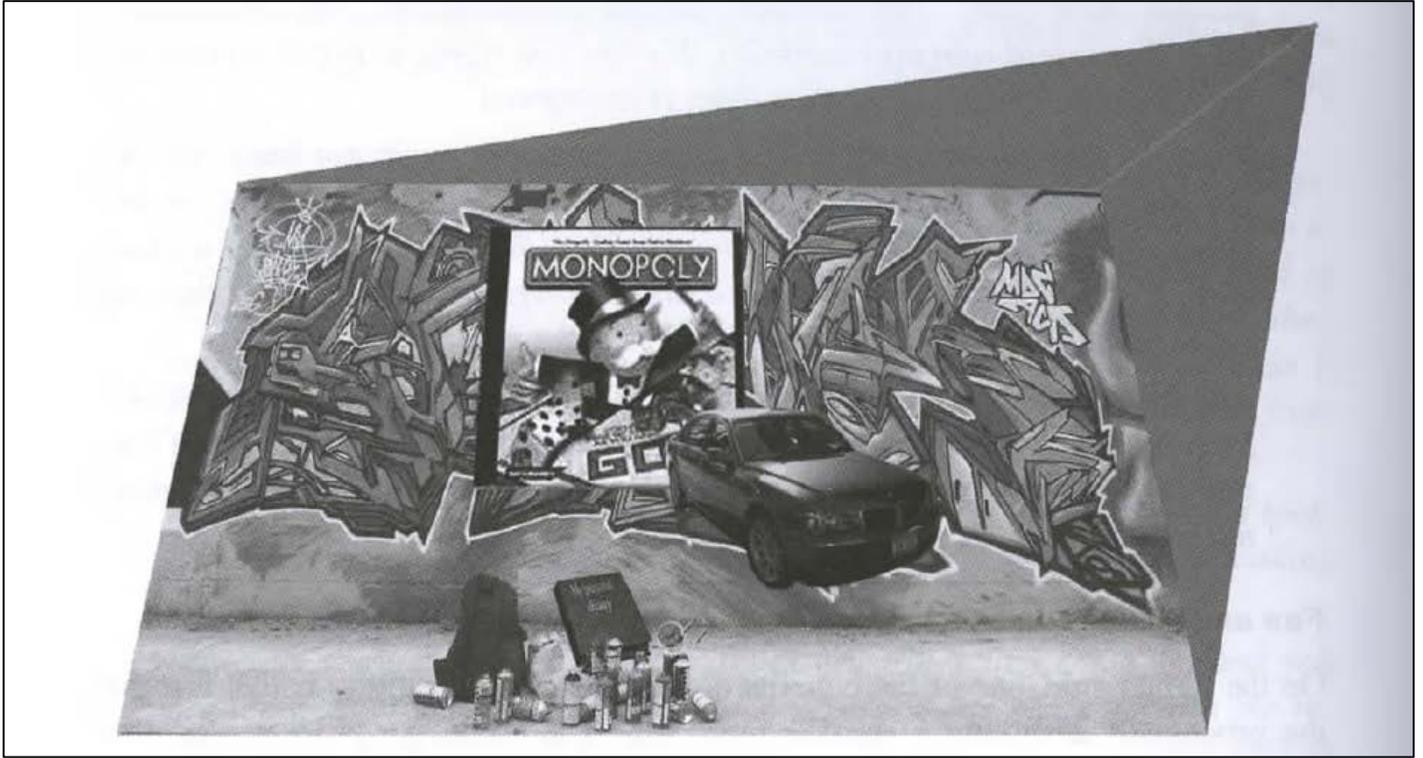


Figure 1. ZMET Summary Image (Latish).

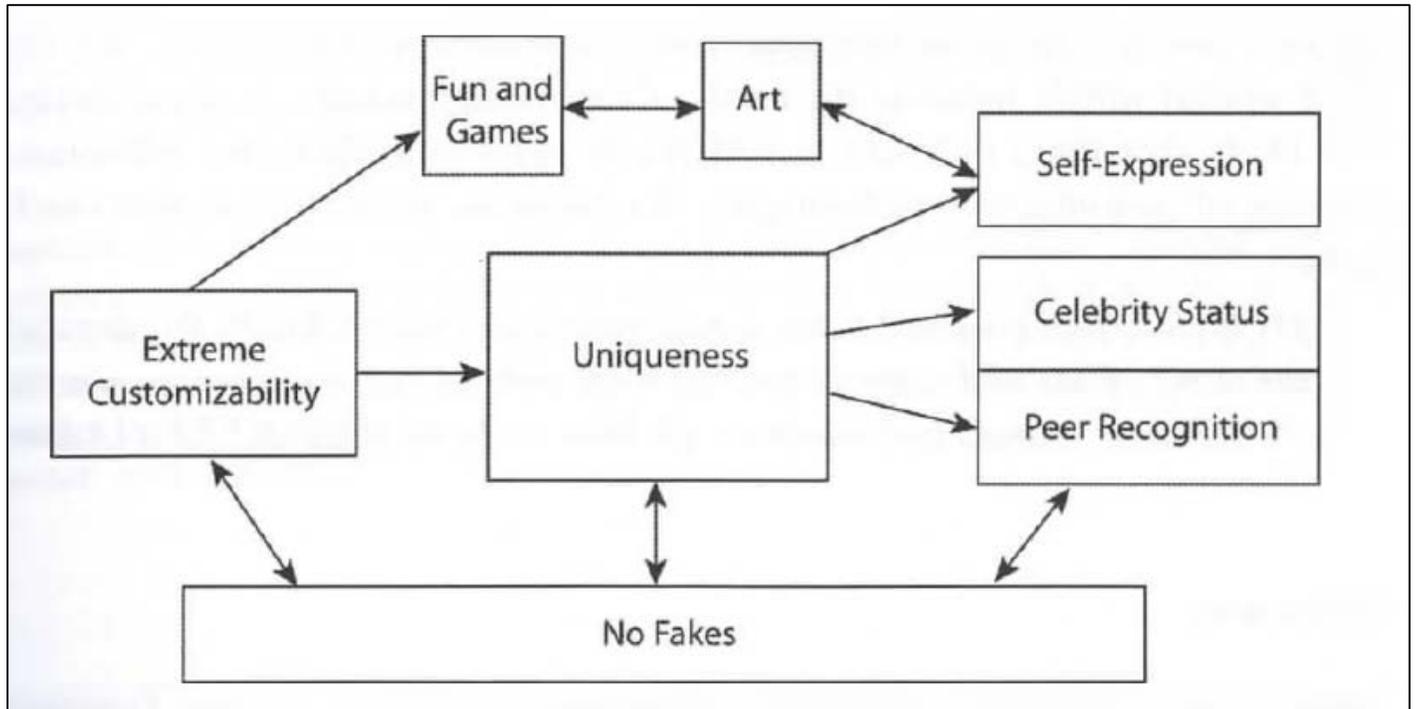


Figure 2. Consensus Map.