

# A COLOUR STORY; HOW DESIGNERS USE COLOUR AS A VISUAL STORYTELLING TOOL IN SNEAKER DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to unpack foundational colour design practices to discuss how colour designers leverage colour as a visual storytelling device. Analysing how colour designers use colour might open up more significant opportunities for cross-disciplinary research between designers and the disciplines of colour psychology, chemistry, and art while enabling more experimentation surrounding studying colour preference in context. This study focuses on the practices of Colour Designers in the athletic footwear industry, specifically the processes of visual storytelling on sneakers using colour. Knowledge of what a colour designer in the athletic footwear industry does and how designers use colour as a visual storytelling device is primarily learned and held by those practising colour design, creating a gap in aspects of the design process in academia. While there is a lack of academic research, there is a wealth of qualitative data shared within sneaker culture surrounding the significance of colour in sneaker design and the impact of colour on sneaker culture, potentially making them a fitting artefact to discuss how colour designers leverage colour in visual storytelling. This study aims to conduct a material culture study and narrative inquiry to create a "history of things" examination of the Air Jordan 1 High Top (AJ1) launch colourways released in 1985. This study utilises the lead author's ten years of experience as a practising colour designer working with brands such as Nike to expose the potential colour design practices used in creating the AJ1 through autoethnographic writing and design artefact creation. These writings and design artefacts aim to shine the light on foundational colour design practices to create a window into the colour design process. The results of this study suggest an intentional relationship between designers, the sneaker industry and colour as a visual communication tool. Through creating design artefacts, including blocking exercises and an extracted colour palette, the lead author illustrates the influences on the colour design process that help define aesthetically pleasing blocks and how designers use blocking and colour to create cohesive visual storytelling.

## INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to unpack the significance of visual storytelling in colour design for sneakers and how material culture study, autoethnographic writing and design artefact creation might contribute to educating colour researchers outside of design on how colour designers (CD) utilise colour. While there is a lack of academic research on CD in sneaker culture (SC), there is a wealth of documentation by the members of the culture, most notably the history of colour used on sneakers <sup>[1,2]</sup>. The wealth of qualitative data through

storytelling might make sneakers a fitting artefact to examine how colour designers in the athletic footwear industry (AFI) might use colour to create visual storytelling. This study analyses the Air Jordan 1 (AJ1) because of its impact on the industry through colour. Through this study, the authors aim to shed light on AJ1's significance in sneaker colour design and culture and educate on foundational colour design practices like colour blocking and applying colour combinations.

The lead author of this study brings over ten years of experience as a colour designer in the AFI. This study selected a Nike sneaker because of the lead author's familiarity with the Nike design process and product as the lead author gained the majority of their knowledge and experience of colour design and design narrative through working at Nike as CD starting in 2012 as a freelancer or an independently contracted designer and then as a salaried designer from 2013 to 2019. During this time, the lead author worked on a wide range of projects, including applying colour and creating visual storytelling for footwear and apparel. The strategies or approach to colour palette creation or application, colour trends, material applications, or colour preferences are subject to the lead author's experience with Nike. However, sharing this experience might help raise relevant questions surrounding studying colour preferences in context by engaging designers who leverage and manipulate colour meanings and preferences.

Colour is an influential tool designers use to create carefully crafted visual messages involving the principles of aesthetics (balance, colour, movement, pattern, scale, shape and visual weight) <sup>[3]</sup>. Aesthetic principles combined with colour theory and meanings create a product personality (Adams, 2017; Mugge et al., 2009), known colloquially in the AFI as visual storytelling. In the sneaker industry and culture, colour is synonymous with the sneaker models, creating buzz and driving revenue (Falchi et al., 2019). Sneakerheads, a moniker used inside sneaker culture for sneaker enthusiasts <sup>[4]</sup>, engage with colour visual storytelling by memorising colourways or different colour combinations or placements on footwear models and release dates <sup>[5]</sup>. You can find the sneakerhead fandom debating the accuracy of re-releases through colour matching and placement and lining up for small releases of obsessed over colour, materials, and graphic stories to wear, resell or collect (Kawamura, 2018).

While for many design teams inside and outside the AFI, colour is just an aspect of a designer's work. However, sneaker companies like Nike, Adidas and New Balance leverage colour's storytelling power to drive user interest and demand by employing designers who specialise in colour for product design, which includes apparel, sneakers and accessories <sup>[6]</sup>. The colour designer collaborates with other design stakeholders like footwear designers, graphic designers, textile designers, developers, marketers, product line managers and merchandisers to create visual storytelling intended to utilise colour to evoke a feeling from the user <sup>[6]</sup>. Users engage in colour preference with products based on colour meanings <sup>[7]</sup> defined through historical and cultural references, including meanings crafted by SC and influenced by the user's personal experiences at times defined through the user's engagement in SC <sup>[4,8]</sup>.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted through a material culture study with narrative inquiry surrounding the artefact (AJ1) and its cultural relevance supported by autoethnographic writings and artefact creation based on the lead author's personal experiences as a colour designer. Building from a long tradition of material culture study, author Giorgio Riello introduced a method that weaves in narrative to create deeper personal

understandings of artefacts, which Riello calls "history of things" <sup>[9]</sup>. While an artefact analysis or material culture study without narratives or ethnography may interest those studying the manufacturer of sneakers or sneaker dyes and pigments, this article aims to add research on the cultural impact of colour in both sneaker design and SC.

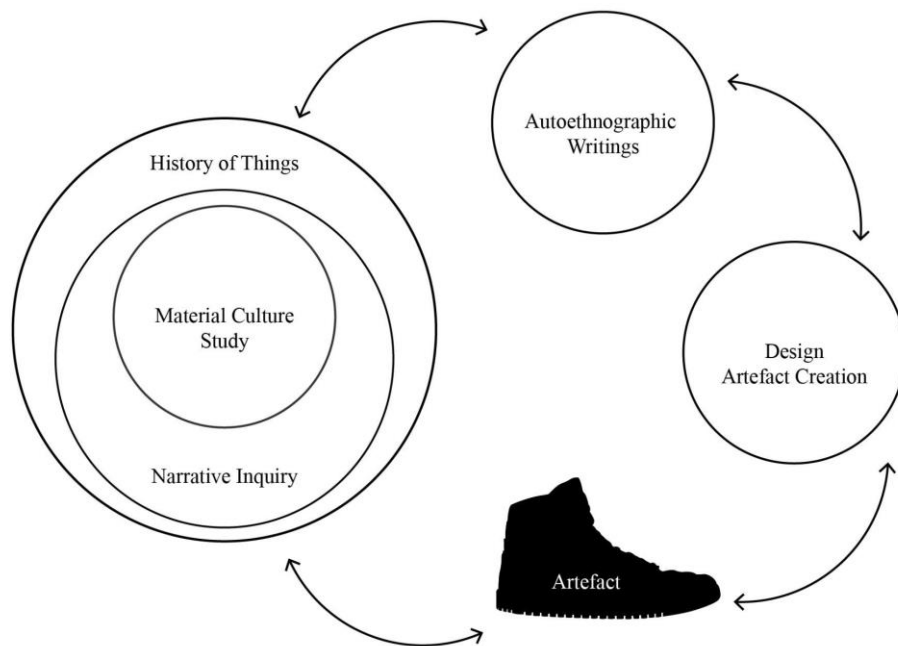


Figure 1: Methods: History of things supported by material culture study and narrative inquiry to analyse the artefact <sup>[9,10]</sup>, which inspired autoethnographic writings <sup>[11]</sup> and design artefact creation <sup>[12]</sup>.

This study builds its inquiry from Charles F. Montgomery's "steps or exercises" for a material culture study as outlined by authors Blandy and Bolin, which examines overall appearance, form, ornament, colour, analysis of materials, techniques employed by craftspeople, trade practices, function, style, date, attribution, history of an object, the artefact's history of ownership, condition and appraisal <sup>[10]</sup>. Montgomery's fourteen "steps or exercises" were employed as they may enable the extraction of data to support this study's approach to the "history of things" by investigating both the aesthetic qualities of the artefact (colour, material, make, and alterations) along with seeking to examine the motivations of the craftsperson/designer and significance of the artefact within the design culture and the consumer culture. Unpacking the physical information paired with the historical and cultural background may have enabled the lead authors to unpack their practical experience as a CD. To uncover CD practices utilised in the artefact studied, the lead author created with design artefacts supported by autoethnographic writing <sup>[11]</sup> aiming to build an understanding of the role of colour designers in creating sneakers and their (visual) stories <sup>[12]</sup>.

### *Data Collection*

The material culture study, narrative and image research were conducted by reading AJ1 histories in sneaker magazines and listening to podcasts hosted by sneakerheads unpacking the history of the AJ1 along with their personal experiences within the culture and with the artefact and relevance supported by books on sneakers/SC. Sources were selected for their focus solely on the AJ1 model, discussion specifically of colour design of the AJ1 and through the narratives of sneaker design and sneakerhead culture through the lens of the AFI.

### *Study Design*

This study focused on the known first-year releases of the AJ1. This list may not comprise this shoe's official or unofficial releases in 1985, as Nike or Sneaker Culture have not kept rigorous records. Available release information for early AJ1 colourways is only available through the culture's collective memory. This list was compiled by cross-referencing the data with what is publicly available via the Jordan Brand and the Department of Nike Archives (DNA), a website and physical archive run by Nike. This study collected images of each of the known 1985 releases via digital archives like Nike DNA. Each image was labelled with the following information, if available: release date, nickname and colour palette names. Nicknames for the colourways are relevant as they are shorthand in the culture to refer to specific colourways and can give insight into the visual storytelling for each colourway.

Through analysing images of the known releases and reacting to the history of colour in the design of the artefact, the lead author unpacked their knowledge of colour design for sneakers through autoethnographic writing, discussing their own experiences during the colour design process detailing how and why the lead author might approach the colour palette, colour placement, and proportions. To help illustrate the concepts shared, a CAD (Computer Aided Design) was rendered on Adobe Illustrator using an image of the original Air Jordan 1 "Black Toe" (figure 4, left). The Jordan "Wing" logo was omitted from these renderings to help separate the CAD created for this study with CADs from Nike or Jordan brands.

### *Limitations*

This study had no access to the physical artefacts using more traditional methods of artefact analysis or material culture studies, which conduct physical tests to determine the artefact's materials, make or colour first-hand. While contemporary versions of the AJ1 are widely available, considerable advancements in manufacturing, materials, design and colour make them unsuitable for this study. As with many historical artefacts, the exact colours are lost to time as the originals are discoloured and cracking with age, limiting capturing the precise hues of the original releases <sup>[5]</sup>. This study captured approximate colour palettes utilising the eyedropper function in Adobe Illustrator to create the design artefacts to illustrate the colour design process.

As with many artefacts, the stakeholders in this culture, design stakeholders, sneaker companies and sneakerheads, share history through storytelling, which can hold contradictions. Contradictions, along with alignments, are acknowledged throughout this study. While accurately placing the artefact into historical context and understanding the exact chain of events which enabled this artefact to hold influence in this culture may be helpful, this study also sought to understand the mythology around the artefact, which may uncover the greater context of colour as a storytelling device. By employing autoethnography, this study is

limited to a singular perspective on a complex industry whose practices are often protected from outside observation and tailored to each company's processes and cultures.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Air Jordan 1*

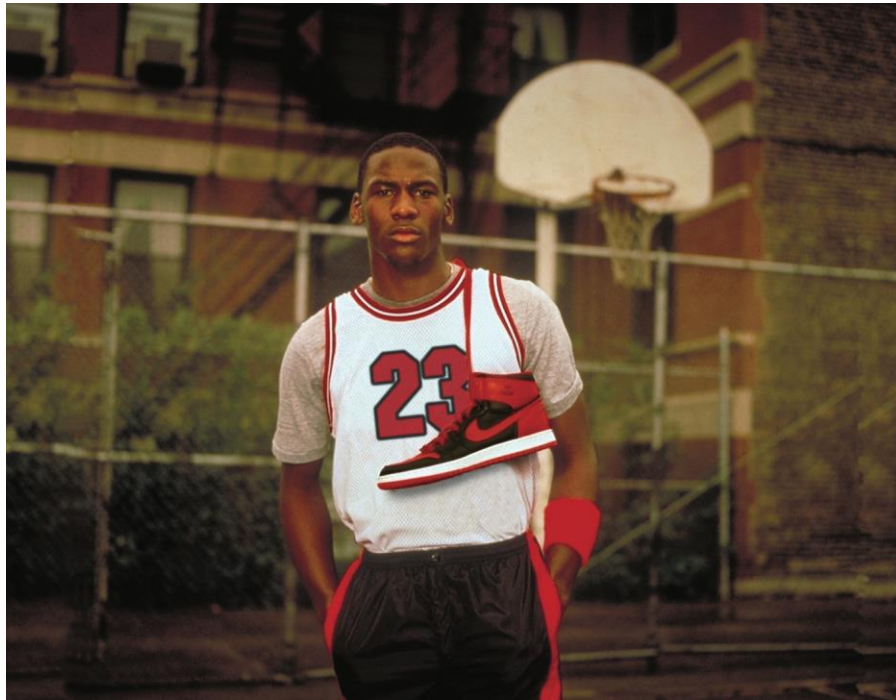


Figure 2: The “Bred” or “banned” black/red colourway of the launch of Air Jordan 1. Photographed by Jacobus Rentmeester for LIFE magazine, 1984.

### *Context*

When Nike signed Michael Jordan straight out of college on his way to his rookie year in Chicago, footwear colours in the (American) National Basketball Association (NBA) followed a strict NBA rule called "uniformity of uniform", where player's footwear had to be at least 51% white and matched both their team's uniform and their teammate's footwear (Hammell, 2018). For much of the 1984-85 season, Jordan wore Nike "AirShips" in a white/red colourway that adhered to the rules and looked much like the sneakers his teammates and opposing teams wore. To create Jordan's first custom sneaker, the Air Jordan 1 (AJ1), Jordan worked directly with Nike Sneaker Designer Peter Moore to give feedback on Nike's existing designs and insights into his specific needs. Under Jordan's direction, Moore took inspiration from competitor brands like Adidas and Converse that Jordan had played in while in college, along with existing Nike Basketball sneaker models. Jordan's feedback led to a design that didn't stray too far from existing sneaker designs aside from minor alterations. Jordan gave feedback he wanted something "eye-catching" and "low to the ground" and that Nike's existing basketball sneaker midsoles were too high, so Moore reduced the height of the midsole, or the area between the shoe upper and the outsole, or shoe bottom, (see figure 3, below).

A thinner midsole may have made it more aesthetically pleasing and aided in what is now considered an iconic silhouette. When it came to footwear construction innovation, Moore only added an "air" cushioning to the heel that was invisible to the viewer, creating a design that couldn't rely on "design innovation" like materials, technologies or new design techniques as a way to disrupt the market <sup>[1]</sup>.

“The idea was to break the colour barrier in footwear...Prior to that, 99 percent of shoes were white or black, so I decided to design a shoe that would really take colour well. And the colours were red, black and white” AJ1 Sneaker Designer, an excerpt from his Book *Peter Moore: A Portfolio* (Davis, 2023).

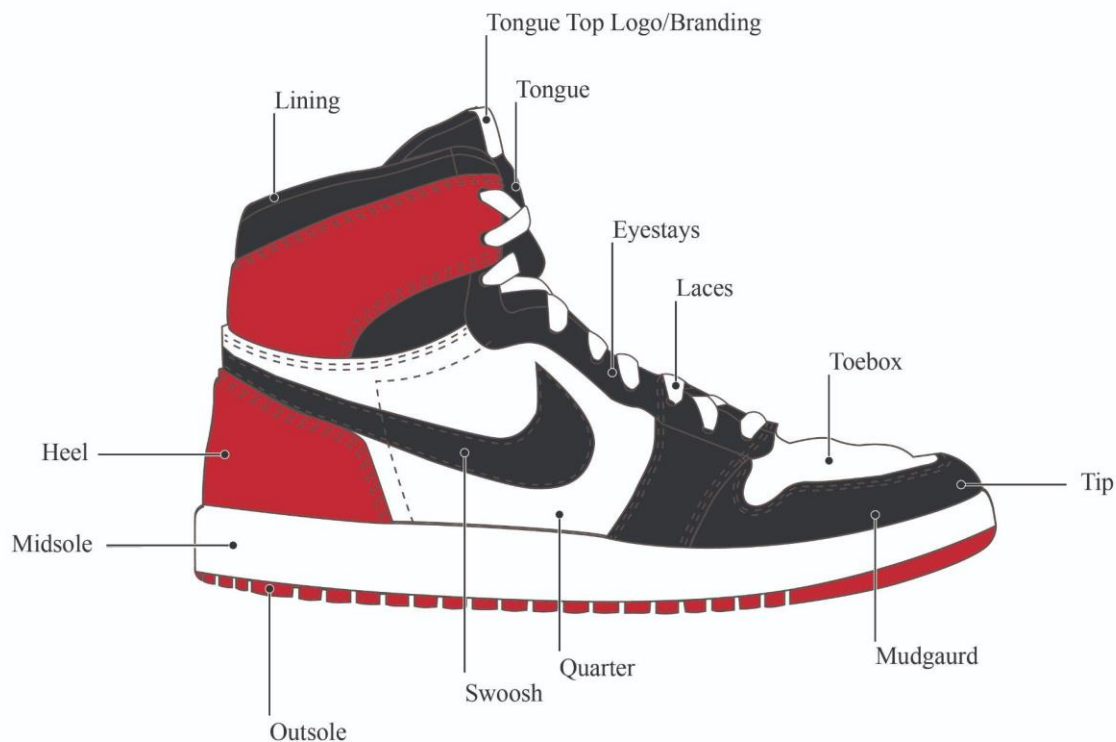


Figure 3: Anatomy of the Air Jordan 1 <sup>[13,14]</sup>.

Nike had taken a considerable risk signing Jordan and wanted to take "something eye-catching" to industry disruption. From materials to silhouette, most shoes worn by basketball players in the 1980s followed a formula: "leather upper and a pretty hard outsole midsole combination" (Falchi et al., 2019). Moore created the "Black Toe" colourway to match Jordan's NBA team, the Chicago Bulls team colours (red/black/white), but pushed the 51% white rule. Jordan disliked the colourway and requested "Carolina Blue" to pay homage to his college team, but Nike decided that although they sought to push the boundaries, the shoe still needed to stick to team colours (Davis, 2023). Some sources say that he called them "the devil's colours", maybe because of a rival of his college team, but this moniker added to the brand's aura (Hammell, 2018).

To solidify this myth, Nike created a black/red colourway that pushed the NBA's rules and came to be known as the NBA's "banned shoe" <sup>[1]</sup>. While reports of the exact sequence of events vary, most sneaker historians agree that despite Nike's advertising campaign, which touted the AJ1 as a "banned shoe", the ban

wasn't on the model. It was the (black/red) colourway nicknamed in the sneakerhead community as "Bred" (Figure 1) (Falchi et al., 2019). The "Bred" colourway (Figure 2, see above) was introduced at the All-Star Weekend's Slam Dunk Contest in February 1985, which is not an official NBA event (Hammell, 2018). However, the appearance of the colourway led the NBA commissioner's office to write a now infamous warning to Nike to remind them that Jordan couldn't wear the black/red colourway during an official NBA game. Still, from this, the myth of the "banned shoe" gave Nike the storytelling lore and added to Jordan's myth as someone who was pushing boundaries (Falchi et al., 2019). The colour and the storytelling around the colour made the Air Jordan 1 an icon of the sneaker industry and launched the second wave of SC (Kawamura, 2018).

While the Air Jordan 1 isn't the first shoe or even sneaker to leverage colour as a way to stand out in the industry or to drive a narrative, it is an example of how colour can influence the sneaker industry and capture the SC's love of colour and storytelling (Falchi et al., 2019). Moore understood colour's cultural power. Designers often describe colour as the emotional or "volatile" part of the design <sup>[15,16]</sup>. Colour designers understand that colour will be the first thing the user sees. The goal is to pique the user's interest and draw them in.

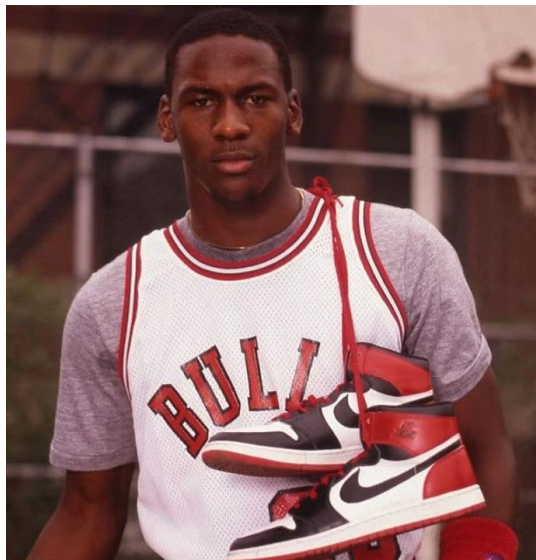


Figure 4 (Left): "Black Toe" or "home" colourway of the launch of Air Jordan 1. Photographed by Jacobus Rentmeester for LIFE magazine, 1984 Image via Highsnobiety.com .



Figure 5 (Right): 1985 Jordan playing in "Chicago" colourway developed to minimise NBA fines Image via Highsnobiety.com, Getty Images <sup>[2]</sup>.

As sneaker historians from the podcast "Sneaker History" outlined in their episode overviewing the history of AJ1, the two colourways that Jordan wore for the NBA were the "Black Toe" colourway (figure 4), initially designed for home games and "Chicago" (figure 5), created to minimise the fines from the NBA for uniform violations, were not new colours. Black or red and white were already worn by his teammates <sup>[5]</sup>. The colours were not groundbreaking tones or dye formulas of red, black or white tones, nor were the material applications innovative. Still, the blocking or leveraging of the sneaker's design by applying

colour(s) to the panels, stitching, and materials to manipulate the visual read of the sneaker within the context of basketball sneakers was. The sneaker designer Moore created large, bold panels and design lines, allowing for multiple variations on the red/black/white palette. As the "Sneaker History" podcast host pointed out, what Jordan accomplished off the court disrupted the sneaker industry (Falchi et al., 2019), where the panels created by the designer easily take on any colour, a wide variety of materials and finishes. This approach led to the storytelling-driven, highly anticipated limited releases that laid the foundation for much of the sneaker industry's athletic and fashion-driven parts (Falchi et al., 2019).

### *Colour Design*



Figure 6 "Row 1": Side by side comparison of the "Black Toe" and "Chicago" colorways, blocking. Details <sup>[17]</sup>; Images via Jordan.com

Using the first two black/red/white commercial releases of the AJ1 High Top (Figure 6, Row 1), we can examine how simple design lines with a variety of panels and overlays, which are pieces of the shoe that are either stitched or fused to the upper, <sup>[14]</sup> give the CD many configurations for colour placement. This example illustrates how the same colour palette can look and feel different by changing the colour block and proportions. When CDs apply colour to sneakers, analysing the colour proportions is critical to the CD design process of either establishing a new colourway in the marketplace or driving a successful colour narrative. In this case, Nike reduced the amount of black from the "Black Toe" CW and increased the red for the "Chicago" CW to avoid NBA fines but in colour stories that are born from more conceptual visual storytelling that may be pulling from sources based in fashion, culture, nature, etc., the "colour read" or colour proportions will help make a visual connection to the inspiration.





Figure 7 “Blocking Exercise”, diagram shows how applying (black/red/white) using different “blocks” can create distinctive looking sneakers.

To illustrate how many colour blocking options a designer might have, even with just the original three colour (black/red/white) colour palette, the lead author created a "Blocking Exercise" (Figure 7 "Blocking Exercise") or an exploratory design exercise that iterates a variety of colour placement options and colour proportions. A CD or sneaker designer might conduct this exercise during the initial design phases of sneaker design to ensure the applied design lines, overlays or panels created enough pleasing blocking options. A CD might also use a blocking exercise on an established sneaker design to help them familiarise themselves with it or find unexplored blockings. These exercises are usually done through a design program like Adobe Illustrator or a growing number of 3D programs, using a CAD (Computer Aided Design), generally a 2D or 3D rendering of the shoe's design. In the example above, a CAD was created for this study on Adobe Illustrator drawing from an image of the original Air Jordan 1 "Black Toe" (Figure 4, left).

When exploring colour blocking, a CD will use aesthetic principles and feedback from other design stakeholders and consumers to help determine what blocks are "aesthetically pleasing". A CD aims to choose the blocks that feel "balanced", either implementing symmetry or asymmetry. The goal of a successful block is to avoid highlighting areas of the shoe that the CD doesn't want to bring attention to or blocking areas or pieces together that create unpleasant shapes. The CD might prioritise highlighting brand details. For the case of Jordan/Nike, the "swoosh", Jordan "Wings", and tongue top logo might be the highest priority. Additional areas a CD might want to draw the user's eye to are new technologies or unique materials. Creating consistent blocking will help the colour design feel intentional and pleasing to the eye. Blocking can also tie a design story together, mainly when storytelling includes other sneaker models.

Row 2



Figure 6 “Row 2”, shows the Air Jordan with the same colour block but a variety of colours can create variety by playing with contrast. Details: (Verheijke, 2022); Photos via Jordan.com.

Row 2 (Figure 6, “Row 2”) illustrates how using the same block but changing the colours and contrast might also create distinctive options. While consistent blocking draws the narrative together, applying a variety of colour combinations that vary in hue and tone creates diversity to appeal to a broader audience. By leveraging a variety of hues, shades and tones, the CD can tell various (visual) stories which might help establish seasonality or evoke a feeling in the user. For example, a dark outsole to make the sneaker look visually more durable, applying light or bright colours to make the sneaker look visually lighter, or neon/bright colours to areas of the shoe that are new to highlight the “innovation” possibly making the shoe feel more futuristic. Depending on the material make-up of the shoe, the CD also implements technical knowledge. For example, a white collar, or the edge around the opening where you put your foot, might be avoided because sweat, dirt and wear can discolour the material. Understanding how specific colours or applications might interact with each other and the wearer’s environment is also essential. For example, placing light or white materials next to dark, bright blue or red materials could result in colour migration or bleeding/staining from the darker colour onto the light colour.

Row 2



Figure 7 “Row 2 Colour Palette”, shows the Air Jordan with the same colour block but a variety of colours can create variety by playing with contrast. Details: [17,18]; Photos via Jordan.com.

This study created a potential original palette using the Illustrator eyedropper tool to isolate the likely original hues of each sneaker from row 2 (Figure 7 "Row 2 Colour Palettes"). This exercise might help us imagine what colour palettes the original footwear designer applied. To support the more colourful CWs, the designer used various neutrals colours and several blues to support the release of the "Bred" black/red with white midsole (see Figure 3 Anatomy of a Shoe). What is immediately striking in this palette is the amount of multiple and potentially competing hues of blue, which a CD today would most likely avoid.

However, if we look at the nicknames of each of these shoes, we might get some insight into the design storytelling that may have driven how the designer applied the colours. The "UNC" colourway is an excellent example of using the athlete to move the storytelling. Using the team's colours, this CW connects its audience with Michael Jordan's life and his college basketball career at the University of North Carolina <sup>[19]</sup>. Using an earlier request from the athlete for this colourway leverages the myth behind the AJ1, creating buzz for the sneaker.



**BE TRUE TO YOUR SCHOOL.**


Basketball team colors by Nike. 



Figure 8 (left) "Be True to Your School" Nike Dunks Ad, 1985. Photo via: Complex.com <sup>[20]</sup>. Figure 9 (right): Michael Jordan "Flight

Guy" poster, 1985. Photographed by Chuck Kuhn. Photo via Footwearnews.com <sup>[21]</sup>.

The remaining two blue colourways, "Kentucky/Storm Blue" and "Royal", have less definitive origins. However, unpacking what we know about these CWs could help discuss other visual storytelling inspiration areas. The "Kentucky/Storm Blue" CW can link to the Nike Dunk, a sneaker with a similar silhouette and design lines introduced in August 1985 <sup>[22]</sup>. Often, CDs will link models or visual storytelling from across a line together. By leveraging colour palettes and, as discussed earlier, blocking a CD can link models together or reference a past sneaker CW, which is a vital part of SC. The duplicate blues could have been an intentional move by Nike and Jordan to create a more style-influenced CW. While never worn on the basketball court or worn by the athlete during a basketball game, the Royal colourway was hand-chosen by Jordan to be featured in a now infamous photoshoot (see above Figure 8, "Flight Guy") <sup>[21]</sup>. The royal blue is attributed to be one of Jordan's all-time favourite colourways and may have influenced how the athlete portrayed his brand off-court <sup>[21]</sup>

Finally, the foundation of any season is neutral colours. As seen through the "shadow" and "panda" colourways, these CWs are the most wearable and purchased CWs in any collection. The greys used in CWs like "shadow" are subject to change, as the exact hues and tints depend on trends, along with other trend-driven neutrals like navy, khaki, olives and browns. Black, white or Black/white colour ways like "panda" are enduring. Blocks for these colourways may evolve and have some seasonality or depend on the season, like primarily white or all over white for summer months and mostly black or triple black for winter months.

## CONCLUSION

This study was conducted through a material culture study with narrative inquiry surrounding the artefact (AJ1) and its cultural relevance supported by autoethnographic writings and design artefact creation based on the lead author's personal experiences as a colour designer in the sneaker industry. While there is a lack of academic research on colour design for sneakers, the authors believe that the wealth of qualitative data through storytelling might make sneakers a fitting artefact to examine how colour designers in the athletic footwear industry (AFI) might use colour to create visual storytelling. By shedding light on foundational colour design practices like colour blocking and applying colour combinations, this study hopes to inspire colour researchers outside of design to engage with designers to leverage more questions about colour preference in the context of design.

By engaging material culture study and narrative inquiry through Riello's "History of Things," this study could unpack the history and mythology around how the sneaker designer created the AJ1 to intentionally leverage colour as an industry disruption and a storytelling device. Through autoethnographic writing and design artefact creation, this study uncovered how designers leverage aesthetic principles during blocking exercises, the voices inside and outside of the design process who might help define a good block vs. a bad block and how consistent colour blocking might help translate a design narrative on to other sneaker models. By analysing the colourways and palettes used in the 1985 AF1 Hi Top releases, this study discussed creating distinctive colour options by leveraging hue, tint and saturation to create CWs that appeal to various users. Finally, this study unpacked the importance of neutrals within the industry and outlined how seasonality and trends might dictate how CDs select and apply neutrals.

### *Recommendations Further Research*

This study gave a window into the colour design processes and their influences. While this paper aimed to initiate a conversation between colour designers and researchers about how CD leverages colour in visual storytelling, it also fails to cover the entire colour design process or all of the aspects of visual storytelling with colour. Other areas that would benefit from further research are:

1. How do designers leverage consumer information through design briefs to create colour visual storytelling?
2. How do colour designers use image research and inspiration image boards to define visual storytelling for colour palettes?
3. How do language and storytelling from colour trend forecasting influence the sneaker industry?
4. How do materials and finishes influence colour design and visual storytelling creation?

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