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## SNKRS

The average American owns nineteen pairs of shoes (Fuller 194). This number appears large, but it pales in comparison to someone who would be dubbed a 'sneakerhead.'

Collections can range from those pulling their first pair from the box to world-record holder Jordy Geller's "Shoe-Zeum" of 2,388 pairs. Regardless of how many a person owns, one thing is certain: shoes are a significant part of self-image and personal expression. Sneakers have seen an explosion in popularity due to limited releases, low supplies, and the influence of the internet. To understand the relevance of sneakers, one must first be acquainted with the factors that have led them to the crossroads of sports, culture, and capitalism.

Some of the most recognizable brands in the world are shoe companies. Everyone knows "the swoosh" and "the stripes" and *everyone* seems to have an opinion on which is better. In 2017 alone, Nike and Adidas stood atop a behemoth 246 billion dollar industry (Zion Market Research). Everyone can associate a memory or an experience with either one of these brands or another type of shoe altogether. Sneakers have the power to bring someone back to their childhood in both positive and negative ways. They are vessels of nostalgia and privilege in a society that has grown into an unstoppable force of materialism.

In September of 1984, Nike dropped the Air Jordan I and changed the way sports, shoes, and culture interact (Knight, 356). The NBA initially banned the shoes because they

“did not contain any white elements” (Sneakerheadz). Nike took this “rebellious” ruling, ran with it, and never looked back. The “banned” Jordans became one of the most recognizable shoes ever produced. There are still reproductions of Air Jordan I’s made today and the original shoes are worth up to \$2,000 a pair. The Jordan line acted as a resurrection for Nike and saved the company from the financial struggles of the early 80s (Tinker Hatfield: Footwear Design).

Hip-hop became one of the most influential parts of sneaker culture around the same time that Michael Jordan started sporting his signature shoes. With the rising popularity among sports stars, musicians began to collaborate with brands and establish their own influence on the newly-minted sneaker subculture. The first well-known group to do so was Run-DMC. Their song, “My Adidas,” became a smash hit in the summer of 1986 (Garcia, 140). This song was a direct response to a poem entitled “Felon Sneakers” which was written by Dr. Gerald Deas. He and other members of the African-American community tried to dissuade African-American youth from buying sneakers due to the idea that they were seen as “prison shoes” to older generations. This excerpt from “Felon Sneakers” embodies the worries of Dr. Deas:

You're felon sneakers can't fill the bill,  
you got to know yourself to be really chill,  
you rob, you rape, you shoot and kill,  
you wearing those sneakers but you lost your will. (11-14)

Run-DMC rebutted this attack on sneaker subculture with the line, “I wore my sneakers but I'm not a sneak.” The rest of the song discusses the lifestyle that the group associates with adidas

and represents one of the first partnerships between musicians and brands. Run-DMC released four collaborative sneakers with adidas over the following six years and contributed to adidas' revival in American culture; a resurgence which has been well-maintained since the 1980s (Garcia, 144).

The current state of the shoe industry is a difficult situation to grasp. Exclusive sneakers used to be sold to those who were willing to wait outside of stores. However, with the emergence of online shopping, shoe companies have turned their attention to the web with one minuscule change to the business model: *low supplies*. This has led to stocks of just thousands of shoes being depleted in seconds. This is where the process takes an interesting turn. Most people who get their hands on an exclusive pair will never wear them. They will, instead, turn around and sell them for up to 1000% of the retail value (Correl, 390). The resale market of sneakers alone is a 3 billion dollar industry (Sneakerheadz). This process has led to the birth of a concept that those who subscribe to sneaker culture refer to as *hype*. Hype is similar to a fad or anticipation; it's something that companies will spend millions of dollars marketing in hopes of being the "next big thing" on social media and beyond. However, hype is not necessarily achieved ethically.

On a recent episode of Netflix's *Patriot Act*, Hassan Minhaj discussed Supreme, the skateboarding and lifestyle brand that has taken over the world, and how hype has been the foundation of this empire, now worth a billion dollars thanks to being purchased by The Carlyle Group (00:18:08-00:18:30). Minhaj raised concerns as to where some ethical and moral dilemmas lie when it comes to massive lifestyle brands such as Supreme. According to Minhaj, The Carlyle Group manages upwards of 212 billion dollars of assets and has been

linked to supplying Saudi Arabia with Eurofighter Typhoon bombers. These planes are being used in the Saudi's war with Yemen that has killed more than 57,000 people and displaced more than 3 million as of October 2018 (00:20:05-00:21:20). This brings consumers to an intriguing precipice: is wearing one of the most popular brands in the world worth sacrificing ethical and moral judgment of a situation that results in death and destruction? The sneaker industry overall has become more transparent, but will consumers like what they see?

As the world becomes more connected due to globalization and the internet, the potential impact an individual can have expands immensely. The more that's learned about the sneaker industry, the more consumers will need to demand ethics and morals guiding the processes. Holding those in power accountable for their actions can have a vast impact on the progression of sneakers as an art form and a culture. The diversity of consumers that the sneaker industry maintains is one of the most unique aspects of the culture. Aaron Cooper, a shoe designer at Nike, says it best, "A shoe by itself doesn't mean jack. It's the stories that matter."

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