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If the Shoe Fits: A Historical Exploration of Gender Bias in the U.S. Sneaker Industry

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Rodney "Merritt" Miller Jr.

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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To my MOM, Jodie Jackson, thank you for being the best mom and support system in the world. Thank you for not killing me each time a new pair of shoes showed up to the apartment. Thank you for instilling your core values in me, I wouldn't be where I am without your undying love.

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Personal Statement

I am a sneakerhead and to some extent I always have been. My passion for seriously collecting sneakers started around eight years ago when I was a Freshman in high school. But my love of sneakers has deep ties to my love of the game of basketball. My grandfather started to teach me the game of basketball when I was just a baby. As you will soon learn upon reading this project, basketball and the sneaker industry are closely related.

I'll never forget when I was in 7th grade and I left my basketball shoes in the trunk of a rental car, after a series of games on a Saturday in the Spring. That next morning, when I woke up and realized I couldn't find my shoes. After scrambling and calling the rental car company, no one could find my shoes. So later that day, my dad took me to NikeTown on 57th Street to buy a new pair of basketball shoes. At NikeTown, I bought the brand-new Nike Air Max LeBron 7 "Black White Gold" and the next week when I walked into basketball practice, on Friday, wearing my new LeBron's, everyone was telling me how cool my shoes were. The feeling of instant gratification is one that I will never forget. Today, that feeling is the same each time someone compliments my shoes or the pure joy of opening a new pair of shoes and you can't forget the feeling and the sound of the crinkle of the tissue paper in sneaker boxes.

Unfortunately, the industry that I have come to love so much has a problem with gender bias towards women, and it is unacceptable. It is time for the sneaker industry to change its ways or the booming industry will soon become a thing of the past, which I will hate to see.

Abstract

In its short history, which barely spans 100 years, sneakers have quickly become a polarizing and captivating commodity, gaining the attention of consumers, fashion houses and major retailers everywhere. Unfortunately, the sneaker industry also has a history of implicit, unconscious bias towards women. A thorough examination of the history of sneakers has discovered three major social movements that can be identified as the key contributors to the growth of the sneaker industry: (1) physical activity, (2) professional sports, and (3) Hip-Hop—the culture not the music genre. Upon further examination, it became evident that each of these social factors have their own biases towards women. Thus, arriving at the conclusion that bias and discrimination in the United States sneaker industry is the result of bias in the proprietary social factors that are responsible for the growth of the sneaker industry.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Why Sneakers?

Shoes have been around for an estimated 40,000 years. One of the first known pairs of shoes was found preserved on a mummy, inside a glacier in the Ötztal Alps, in 1991. Archaeologists noted that the surprisingly well-preserved shoes were made of deerskin uppers, a woven linden bast for the insides, grass fibers for cushioning, and bearskin for the sole.¹ Shoes have come a long way in the 40,000 years since this early pair of shoes were created. The most notable changes would be technological advancements such as the materials used and the production methods to create the shoes. The purpose of shoes is still the same: to protect one's feet. However, it's important to note that over the past century we've encompassed a wave of specialized shoes for specific occupations, activities and shoes are an integral part of fashion. The most important style of footwear from the past century is sneakers.

Sneakers are such a fascinating product because of their distinctive history: from a luxury item that was only available to the elite and upper echelon who enjoyed playing tennis at country clubs, to a symbol of fascism in Nazi Germany, to the standardized footwear choice of rebellious 1960's American teenagers and now millennials, and, lastly, a Veblen good with a boisterous secondary market. Sneakers have always had deep roots to social and political ties. And lately, the meteoric rise and popularity of sneakers has made them the center of not only the footwear industry, but the entire fashion industry. Thus, if

¹ SHOEPASSION.com, "Shoe History," Shoe Passion, accessed April 19, 2018, <http://www.shoepassion.com/shoe-encyclopedia/shoe-history>.

able to provide an answer to why women do not buy sneakers, this will have very important implications to the fashion industry.

1.2 Sneakers by the Numbers

The sneaker industry is the driver of growth and center of the entire footwear industry. In 2017, the footwear industry grew 13%, but sports footwear, which includes performance, outdoor, and sports-inspired footwear, grew at an overwhelming rate of 46%, in the past year.² Analysts, like Michelle Grant of Euromonitor International, predicts the sports footwear industry will continue to grow over 20% in the next five years, while the industry as a whole will only grow 10%. In recent years, sneaker sales have outpaced the combined sales of both dress and casual shoes.³ The stellar growth of the sports footwear industry shows a trend that more and more people are buying sneakers.

The industry continues to grow in volume and revenue. In 2016, SportsOneSource, estimated the international market to be an estimated \$55 billion dollars, which is roughly the same gross domestic product as Kenya.⁴ The US sneaker industry grew by 8% alone in 2015, generating north of \$17 billion in sales, with an overall estimated retail value of \$28 billion. In 2013, industry leaders Adidas, Nike, and Under Armour combined to produce nearly \$25 billion in sales, which showed a 47% increase in sales from 2009-2013. Data from 2014, shows that millennials spent over \$21 billion dollars on sneakers that year, with shoes that retailed for over \$100 being the largest category. Firms like PR Newswire

² Cara Salpini, "What's driving retail's sneaker obsession?," *Retail Dive*, March 28, 2018, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.retaildive.com/news/whats-driving-retails-sneaker-obsession/518625/>.

³ Salpini, "What's driving,".

⁴ Ryan Thompson, "The footsy index: how sneakers became very big business," *Financial Times* (New York, NY), April 2, 2015, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/b3ea93b2-d48d-11e4-9bfe-00144feab7de#axzz3WBgYkYUg>.

anticipate that the sneaker industry is “expected to have the largest market in terms of volume globally from 2014 to 2020.” While Transparency Market Research estimates that in 2020 the global sneaker market will reach \$220.2 billion dollars in value.⁵

The sneaker industry, which can be characterized by its steadfast growth, is complemented by a robust secondary market that has eclipsed the \$1 billion-dollar mark, by some estimates. Fueled by hype and excitement over limited edition and limited release sneakers, the resale market will continue to grow.⁶ Studies have shown that there is a high interest amongst younger generations in exclusive products, products that make them feel unique, and shopping with brands that have personalized shopping methods.⁷ Thus, due to their uniqueness, sneakers have become recognized as a status symbol within the fashion industry, unfortunately it seems that women have been excluded and overlooked as consumers within the sneaker industry.

1.3 Where are the Women?

On November 20, 2018, Chris Morrison posted a photo of a letter, his 9-year-old daughter Riley wrote to her favorite basketball player, Stephen Curry, on Facebook. In her letter, Riley expresses her disappointment with the Golden State Warriors star player and Under Armour because Curry’s latest signature shoe, the UA Curry 6 (Fig. 1), is not for sale in girl’s sizes. However, the shoe is available in boy’s sizes and it’s even available for boys to customize their own colorways. Over the following week, Riley’s letter picked up traction

⁵ Deborah Weinswig, "Sneaker Culture Fuels \$1 Billion Secondary Market," *Forbes*, March 16, 2016, accessed September 15, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahweinswig/2016/03/18/sneaker-culture-fuels-1-billion-secondary-market/#790c94c67911>.

⁶ Weinswig, "Sneaker Culture,".

⁷ Salpini, "What's driving,".

across social media. Finally, nine days after Riley's father first posted her letter, Steph Curry responded to Riley by telling her that he would work with Under Armour to fix the problem and he even invited Riley to a game, on International Women's Day of all days.⁸ While Riley's story is sweet and heartwarming, it points out the reality that many women and girls face when they want to buy sneakers.

The unfortunate reality is that women are often treated as an unimportant and forgotten appendage within the sneaker industry. In a survey conducted by research company FiveThirtyEight (Fig. 2), in which the respondents were users of Campless—now known as StockX, a popular site for reselling sneakers that includes a full stock market—FiveThirtyEight found that 98% of Campless users are male.⁹ While these numbers are glaring and appalling it's important to remember that these number represents female buyers in the secondary market. However, the numbers are not that far off from the primary market. Data from 2013 (Graph 1) shows that men accounted for 59% of sneaker sales that year, while women's sales and children's sales split the remaining 41% at 22% and 19%, respectively.¹⁰ Based on these figures Senior Sports Industry Analyst at the NPD Group and a writer and authority on "Sneakernomics," Matt Powell projects that women's

⁸ Cindy Boren, "'Girls want to rock the Curry 5s too': A 9-year-old's plea gets action from Steph Curry," *Washington Post* (Washington D.C., District of Columbia), November 29, 2018, accessed December 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/11/29/girls-want-rock-curry-s-too-year-olds-plea-gets-action-steph-curry/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d0279ad75ca4.

⁹ Lisa Chow, "You See Sneakers, These Guys See Hundreds of Millions in Resale Profit," FiveThirtyEight, last modified October 17, 2014, accessed September 19, 2018, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/you-see-sneakers-these-guys-see-hundreds-of-millions-in-resale-profit/>.

¹⁰ Matt Powell, "Sneakernomics: Marketing Sneakers To Women," *Forbes Magazine*, June 24, 2004, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattpowell/2014/06/24/sneakernomics-marketing-sneakers-to-women/#e0495434e67a>.

sneaker sales accounted for an estimated \$4.8-\$5 billion dollars. Powell states the women's running shoes sales stayed consistent into 2013, but noted lackluster sales in all other categories.

The data presented by FiveThirtyEight and Matt Powell provide evidence that women are an underserved and underrepresented part of the sneaker industry. The data also shows that women are not buying sneakers at the same rate as men. To understand why women don't buy sneakers, we must look at the history and origins of the sneaker industry. It becomes increasingly evident that women have long been a forgotten piece of the market. Therefore, through my exploration of the history of the sneaker market to its current state I will be able to provide an explanation to the question: "Why have women been excluded from the sneaker industry?".

Chapter 2 – The History of the Sneaker Industry

At first glance, the answer to the question of “Why women are not buying sneakers?” is not obvious, but after further examination it seems rooted in the deep social history of sneakers. From its inception the sneaker industry has reflected the ongoing political climate, pop culture, and societal norms. As we explore the relationship between sneakers, politics, and pop culture we will find that the sneaker industry has consistently excluded women and girls. The bias against women becomes evident through the social factors that helped fuel sneaker industry.

2.1 Early Beginnings

The story of the sneaker industry begins in 1834, when a rubber life preserver, in a store window in New York City, caught the eye of 33-year old Charles Goodyear, who was recently released from debtor’s jail, after his family’s hardware store had gone defunct. At the time, rubber was fairly new to the United States, only becoming popular in the 1820’s. Goodyear was inspired by a valve on the life preserver and his bankrupt business had inspired him to now invent the items needed for the modern future rather than manufacture them. Goodyear bought the life preserver and returned to his home in Philadelphia. Three weeks later he returned to New York City, with his new and improved valve. Upon his return, the store clerk introduced Goodyear to the real problem with the rubber industry: it’s chemical property. ¹¹

Rubber unfortunately was extremely susceptible to adverse weather and extreme temperatures: as it melted in heat and turned brittle and cracked in cold temperatures.

¹¹ Nicholas Smith, *Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers* (New York: Crown, 2018), 7-8.

After purchasing large quantities of rubber for pennies on the dollar, Goodyear went to work testing rubber and making improvements.¹² Goodyear would go on to discover the vulcanization of rubber—a process which withstand extreme temperatures.¹³

While the introduction of factories and automation of the workplace combined with a new railroad system that can easily transport materials like rubber or canvas, made it possible for sneakers the mass production of sneakers. But before that point, it was the same factories that created the necessity for sneakers. At the same time that Charles Goodyear was inventing the foundation to athletic sneakers—rubber soles—the niche market for sneakers was slowly arising. The market for sneakers arises from a new-found passion in leisure time, which is a direct result of factory life. In England, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, cotton mills and textile factories were forced to shut down once a year so the machines could undergo routine maintenance. This led to what was called “wakes weeks,” or in other words, a mandatory week-long vacation. For the upper-class, they fled to Blackpool and Brighton, England’s coastal towns, where they enjoyed the beach. Eventually, a shoe was created for the factory-owners whose work boots were getting destroyed or ruined at the beach. These shoes were called “sand shoes” and they are the first instance that one sees a cultural shift or phenomenon leading to the creation of a new shoe.¹⁴

¹² Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 8-9.

¹³ Connecticut Humanities, "Charles Goodyear and the Vulcanization of Rubber," *Connecticut History*, last modified December 29, 2014, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://connecticuthistory.org/charles-goodyear-and-the-vulcanization-of-rubber/>.

¹⁴ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 11.

Those who couldn't afford to travel to England's beach resorts found other ways to spend their free time: sports. At the time, the only athletic shoes—using the definition of a “specialized footwear required for a specific physical activity”—were ballet flats and riding boots because until then recreational and leisure activities were only available to the elite, who enjoyed the arts and hunting. By 1861, thanks to Charles Goodyear's innovations rubber-soled shoes had finally gone into production.¹⁵ British and US rubber companies produced rubber-soled shoes with cloth-like or leather uppers.

2.2 The 20th Century Sneaker Industry

2.2.1 The Early 20th Century

The rise of sneakers from a luxury that was only available to the wealthy as a secondary option from work boots, to sneakers being worn solely for the purpose of athletic competitions, to today where sneakers are a staple to the fashion industry all starts with their introduction to American culture in the late 19th Century. The rise of popularity in the United States sneaker industry dates back to the late 19th Century and early 20th Century with the birth of the first sneaker companies. In 1897, the Sears Roebuck & Company catalog first started selling sneakers for sixty cents a pair. The New Liverpool Rubber Company had developed a special sneaker just for playing croquet. The United States Rubber Company introduces Keds, a sneaker specialized just for kids. And lastly, Converse Rubber Company made a sneaker that was dedicated for playing basketball.¹⁶ These companies which all laid the early foundations for the sneaker industry were all

¹⁵ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 11.

¹⁶ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 12.

found prior to 1915. By this time, many entrepreneurs had started to recognize the possibilities of producing sneakers, and many of the companies that are present today were started.

In the early 1900's, sports like basketball, baseball, football, and tennis were becoming increasingly popular amongst teenagers. Prior to this time, it was very common for teenagers to be working in factories or on family farms. In fact, it was very common for children to stop attending school by the age of thirteen, in order to join the workforce. However, the addition of child labor laws that limited child labor allowed teens to continue their education through high school.¹⁷ Additionally, by not having to work as much children, teens, and adults alike started focusing their new free time on sports. Entrepreneurs of the time seized the opportunity to produce specialized sneakers for each of these sports with the hopes of giving athletes a competitive advantage on the court or field. Furthermore, as more and more teenagers attend high school from increasingly diverse social and racial backgrounds sneaker companies saw the potential of teens creating a new marketplace. In the following years, companies will go on to vie for the attention of teenagers.

Two of the most successful companies early on were The United States Rubber Company and the Converse Rubber Company. In 1916, the United States Rubber Company focused its production on one shoe, "Keds" (Fig. 3). The name comes from a combination of the words "kid" and "ped," the Latin word for foot. The concept of Keds were simple: a white, canvas lace-up, with rubber soles, and on the back a blue, rubber rectangle that read

¹⁷ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 15.

“Keds”. For decades, Keds were the most popular shoe among kids.¹⁸ Keds were the only sneaker of the time that was even remotely advertised towards women and young girls. Equal opportunity was a crucial part of Keds motto, at the time, a concept that was arguably innovative and ahead of its time. In fact, in a 1928 issue of *Everygirl's Magazine*, the magazine for the Camp Fire Girls, an advertisement for Keds revealed the shoe to be perfect for active girls. Similar to an advertisement from *Boy's Life*, the *Everygirl's Magazine* ad pointed out the increased traction that was helpful for girls when climbing, the added speed on sports fields, and quietness of the rubber soles was useful when bird watching.¹⁹ What the Keds story demonstrates is that they were one of the first sneaker companies to include women and young girls in their business model and not surprisingly they were able to withstand the Great Depression.

In 1917, the Converse Rubber Company, located just outside Boston, Massachusetts, started approaching teenagers through the sports that they loved to play. Converse's methodology would prove to be crucial to their business success as their high-top canvas sneaker, the “All-Star” (Fig. 4) was the primary footwear choice for all basketball players just ten years after its creation. The rise of Converse was thanks to Chuck Taylor, a professional American basketball player whose name is now more synonymous with the shoes he wore than his play on the basketball court.²⁰

In 1933, rubber and sneaker company, B.F. Goodrich, wanted to find an athlete to promote their signature line of sneakers. The company picked the world champion in

¹⁸ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 15.

¹⁹ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 44.

²⁰ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 15.

badminton, Jack Purcell, to be their signature athlete. Purcell designed a low-top canvas sneaker, now called Jack Purcells²¹, that looks very similar Converse shoes (Fig. 5).

Together Jack Purcell, Converse, and Keds dominated the sneaker industry in the 1920's and 1930's.

2.2.2 Wartime Sneakers

World War I had a profound effect in shaping the human perceptions on the importance of exercise, but more importantly World War I helped shape the sneaker industry by being an underlying inspiration to two of the most prominent sneaker companies today. As Elizabeth Semmelhack stated:

“the fragile peace of World War I increased interest in physical culture, which became linked to rising nationalism and eugenics. Countries encouraged their citizens to exercise not just for physical perfection but to prepare for the next war. It's ironic that the sneaker became one of the most democratized forms of footwear at the height of fascism.”²²

According to Semmelhack, World War I inspired a cultural revolution on the importance of the human physique. In some instances, this would lead to large fascist exercise rallies in Germany. While this is a rare case, in most other countries the revelations of the human body translated to extreme nationalism and the desire to compete during the Olympics.

Around the same time, due to growing nationalism because of the World Wars, the Summer Olympics, especially Track and Field, became a very popular spectator event. Starting with the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany where Ohio-native Jesse Owens took the world by surprise with his performance on the track. During the Olympics, Owens

²¹ See Figure 5

²² Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long Political History of Sneaker Culture," *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2016, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/sneakers-have-always-been-political-shoes/511628/>.

wore all-black shoes that were handmade and personally delivered by a German man named Adolf “Adi” Dassler—who would go on to start the company, Adidas.²³ Dassler attended the Games with the hope of handing out as many shoes as possible hoping that at least one champion would wear them and be a proud endorsement for his family’s brand. Fast-forward to the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, Italy and it’s clear the Adi’s business model worked as nearly all the top track-and-field athletes wore Adidas shoes.²⁴

Outside of the Olympic Games, when the United States government had to ration rubber, suede, and leather, the primary materials of sneakers, during World War II they were met with public outcry and even riots, in some cases. On February 7, 1943, the U.S. Office of Price Administration (OPA) announced that there would have to be rations on products such as meats, dairy, sugar, tires, gasoline, nylon, leather, suede, and rubber, all as a result of the ongoing war. The OPA issued coupon books that were supposed to limit peoples’ consumption of these goods, more importantly, they were constricted to just three new pairs of shoes a year.²⁵ The coupon system paved the way for original black markets involving shoes since coupons were bought and sold in secondary markets. As some people became impatient and unable to wait for coupon periods to end to purchase new shoes, they would wait in long lines outside shoes stores in the days leading up to new coupon periods and, in some cases, people paid hefty prices for shoe store owners to overlook the

²³ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 47-48.

²⁴ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 32.

²⁵ FOTO Staff, "These Photos Captured What Happened When the United States Started to Ration Shoes During WWII," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 8, 2018, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/shoe-rationing-wwii-america-180968428/>.

three-shoe policy. Eventually, due to their extreme popularity, sneakers became exempted from the war rations solidifying them as a central part of the American identity.²⁶

In the 1950's the US economy experienced a boom following an Allied victory in World War II.²⁷ The decades following World War II were a period of exploration for teenagers—some even refer to this period as a “golden age” for teenagers—where they experienced having more free time and more spending money in their pocket. In addition, the increase in accessibility to television and movies gave teens a new viewpoint on the world. Inspired by movie stars and icons like James Dean, who donned Jack Purcell's in his movie *Rebels Without a Cause* (1955), or Steve McQueen, who became famous for his role in *The Great Escape* (1963), teens seized an opportunity to wear sneakers as a way to make a statement. The trend of strong male icons continued into the 1960's and was even reinforced amongst younger audiences with children's films like *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961) and *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969).²⁸

Teens changed the preconceived notion of sneakers by challenging the status quo. The simple act of wearing basketball sneakers off the court forever changed the sneaker industry. Some even argue that James Dean himself, rebranded Converse Chuck Taylor's from the most popular basketball shoe to the footwear choice for young rebels.²⁹

²⁶ Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long,".

²⁷ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 28.

²⁸ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 30.

²⁹ Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long,".

2.2.3 *The Growing Sneaker Revolution*

In 1964, newfound company Blue Ribbon Sports, which would go on to change its name to Nike, aspired of dominating the global sneaker market. Since they had no shot of competing with Adidas and its lineup of elite Olympic athletes, Bill Bowerman and Phil Knight, track and field coaches at the University of Oregon and the co-owners of Blue Ribbon Sports, partnered with Onitsuka Tiger—a strong and well-recognized Japanese sneaker company—together they started a new movement: jogging. This allowed Bowerman and Knight to market sneakers to the American public. In 1967, Bowerman released a book titled *Jogging: A Physical Fitness Program for All Ages*, suddenly Americans of all shapes and sizes were buying sneakers and jogging in their neighborhoods because it was healthy.³⁰

Nike's jogging shoe, the Nike Cortez (Fig. 6), was more than just that. The shoe was a best-seller for Nike because of the wide-range of colors that it came in. The technological advances of the Cortez were crucial to those who chose to go jogging in the shoe. But with the help of American icons like Farrah Fawcett and Mick Jagger, Nike's signature running shoe became a fashion statement.³¹ At the same time, the Nike Cortez became famous among gang members in Los Angeles. The shoe, which came in multiple colors and materials, was the footwear of choice for rival Los Angeles gangs.³² The Nike Cortez became the part of the standard uniform for the MS-13 gang. While MS-13 was mostly comprised of Salvadorian immigrants, they grew close with local Mexican gangs in Los Angeles, and

³⁰ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 36.

³¹ Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long,".

³² Neal Heard, *Sneakers* (London, England: Carlton Books, 2015), 56.

adopted the shoe as their own because the name, Cortez, represents a strong piece of Mexican history.³³

Crucial to the development of the sneaker industry is the social culture, particularly of African-Americans in New York City during the late 1960's into the 1970's. At this point in time, Hip-Hop and streetball, playground basketball, experienced a flourishing and a surge in popularity. Sneakers were the choice footwear of people who lived in and experienced the hip-hop culture. Hip-hop was answer to the problems that faced Black youth in New York City during the 1970's. It was a channel that allowed them to separate and dissociate from White American culture, which was unobtainable to them. To African-Americans in New York City, hip-hop was more than a genre of music, it was a culture and a style. Black teens used sneakers, an integral part of hip-hop style as a way to separate themselves from white teens.³⁴ At the same time in New York City, the game of basketball—particularly streetball which was played in public parks—was becoming increasingly popular. Players would come from all over to show off the skills and more importantly their sneakers, while fans climbed fences, trees, balconies, and everything in between just to get a glimpse of the games. As, DJ, author, and sneaker expert and historian, Bobbitio Garcia states:

“Before [1970] was the Dark Ages of sneaker culture compared to what came after. Leather and suede sneakers (in colors beside black and white) very slowly made their first entrance into New York stores, and people didn't know how to react! The major showcase for these new sneakers in the street was none other than the Pro Rucker Basketball Tournament...The league peaked in popularity in the early '70's, and as kids hung off fences and trees just to watch their favorite playground legends, the kicks [sneakers] that these

³³ Hanna Kozłowska, "Sneaker Brands Matter the Most in Jail," *Quartz*, August 9, 2017, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://qz.com/1049021/sneaker-brands-matter-the-most-in-jail/>.

³⁴ Kawamura, *Sneakers: Fashion*, 44-46.

legends wore were being noticed and sought after. Some of the sneakers couldn't be found, heralding the beginning of limited supply and hungry demand."³⁵

Streetball was an integral part of New York City culture and the footwear choice of the players certainly played a role in the advancement of the sneaker industry. As the United States city with the most public parks but bound by spatial issues, streetball became popular simply because it's easier to fit a concrete basketball court in New York City than a football field or a baseball diamond. Streetball culture was infused into the culture of urban neighborhoods because basketball fans that couldn't afford tickets or didn't want to see the struggling New York Knicks could still watch high-quality, intense professional and semi-professional summer-league games at Rucker Park.³⁶

Streetball culture sets a precedent for the 1980's when rising superstar Michael Jordan shocks the world with his play on the basketball court. Jordan's accomplishments in college at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill earned him a \$2.5 million-dollar endorsement deal with Nike, before entering the National Basketball Association (NBA). The deal was the largest basketball endorsement deal at the time. Michael Jordan's meteoric rise to NBA superstar, was accompanied by hype off of the court.³⁷ When Michael Jordan first entered the league, the NBA dress code and uniform standard, set by then commissioner David Stern, stated that a player had to "wear shoes that not only matched their uniforms, but matched the shoes worn by their teammates". Thus, Jordan's black and red Nike "Air Jordan I's" (Fig. 7) while they obliged to following the team colors, they didn't

³⁵ Bobbito Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those? New York City's Sneaker Culture 1960-1987*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publisher, 2013), 37.

³⁶ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 97.

³⁷ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 39.

not meet the guidelines of following the league-wide consensus of wearing mostly white shoes.³⁸ Thus, the NBA banned the Jordan shoes and levied a steep \$1,000 fine on Michael Jordan for each game where he wore the shoes. Nike responded by paying Jordan's fines and publishing advertisements that showed Michael Jordan wearing blacked out shoes and played into the fact that they were banned. This sent fans into a frenzy as they lined up in malls to buy Jordan's shoes since they were the epitome of being rebellious.

Hip-Hop culture singlehandedly fueled the rise and popularity of sneakers as a tool and means of cultural expression. As sneaker historian Bobbito Garcia states, "New Yorkers in the basketball and hip-hop community changed the perception of sneakers from sports equipment to tools for cultural expression. The progenitors of sneaker culture were predominantly...kids of color who grew up in a depressed economic area."³⁹ Garcia states that it was young kids of color, in New York's inner-city that birthed the sneaker culture that would go on to engulf the entire nation. As David T. Friendly, producer and director of documentary *Sneakerheadz* (2015) states of sneaker culture in the 1980's and 1990's, "The boom of signature kicks in this era provided the necessary elements to birth a community, where the goal was to wear the freshest, hardest-to-find, limited edition models that have grown to almost mythic proportions."⁴⁰ Some believe that this community was starting by the growing rise of basketball culture in the 1970's though 1980's. Fans and aspiring athletes alike saw the shoes their favorite players were wearing on the court and would go

³⁸ Chris Danforth, "True Story Behind Michael Jordan's NBA-Banned Sneakers," *High Snobiety*, October 20, 2014, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2014/10/20/michael-jordan-air-jordan-1-nba-banned/>.

³⁹ Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long,".

⁴⁰ David T. Friendly and Mick Partridge, dirs., *Sneakerheadz*, Gravitas Ventures, 2015.

to stores to buy the same model shoes that their idols donned. The culture surrounding basketball birthed the modern sneaker culture, but hip-hop propelled sneakers and carried the evolution from a subculture to a style staple.⁴¹

At the same time as Michael Jordan, Run-D.M.C. was creating their own path to the sneaker hall of fame. In 1984, when their debut, self-titled album *Run-D.M.C* released and went gold—which means they sold over 500,000 copies of their album—Run-D.M.C. took rap music mainstream.⁴² As they skyrocketed to fame and stardom, fans were keen to copy their unique fashion sense. Run-D.M.C was famous for wearing fedora hats and track suits with gold chains and unlaced sneakers. In 1986, Run-D.M.C. released their hit single “My Adidas,” which cemented the white Adidas Superstars (Fig. 8) in history. After “My Adidas” soared to the top of the charts, Adidas was interested, but reluctant to sign Run-D.M.C. to an endorsement contract, making it the first of its kind. Upon inviting an Adidas executive to a concert at Madison Square Garden, before playing their hit song, the rapping-trio persuaded the entire crowd to take off their Adidas shoes and wave them in the air. Mesmerized by the sight of twenty-thousand screaming fans waving their shoes in the air and singing along to “My Adidas,” the executive from Adidas immediately got on the phone with his co-workers in Germany and prepared to offer a lucrative contract for the rap group. Run-D.M.C. were the first nonathletes to sign a contract with a sneaker company.⁴³ Adidas viewed its new contract with Run-D.M.C. as an opportunity to explore new urban markets that they hadn’t been able to reach before. This contract paved the way for other

⁴¹ Thibaut de Longeville and Lisa Leone, dirs., *Just For Kicks*, Canal+, 2007.

⁴² Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 40.

⁴³ Smith, *Kicks: The Great*, 155.

sneaker companies to recognize the opportunity that other non-athletes have to endorse the footwear and apparel from athletic companies.

2.2.4 The Birth of “Hype”

Much of the 21st Century industry, is dominating by hype, limited edition, and limited release sneakers. But all of these practices started during the 1980’s and 1990’s when the competition between sneaker companies started to heat up. It’s unclear when Nike started doing this, but around the late 1980’s, early 1990’s Nike needed to do product tests with their shoes. Nike representatives would travel to inner-cities parks and playgrounds in major US cities and give out free sneakers to children and teens at the park. This concept, which would go on to be called “bro-ing” was actually adopted from the skiing and snowboarding industry, where representatives from ski or snowboard companies let top skiers and snowboarders try out new gear for free.⁴⁴ By giving out shoes for free, Nike was able to see which shoes the consumers gravitated towards. Nike would then pick the sneakers that were newest, and most favored by the children from the park and release them in limited quantity at “well-hyped” events that were often attend by famous athletes or celebrities. People responded to the hype that Nike created by showing up in herds, even becoming eager, aggressive, and more often than not fighting to be first in line at sneaker stores to buy new Nike’s or Air Jordan’s. The increase in hype and demand for Air Jordan’s result in Nike increasing the price. Air Jordan’s, which previously costed \$65 began to cost as much as \$100.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 42-43.

⁴⁵ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 42.

As the quantity of shoes being released diminished and prices and demand increased, Nike and Air Jordan started to shift the culture around shoes. The introduction of releasing limited quantities led to extreme violence resulting around coveted Nike and Air Jordan models. Some people would even skip meals to save money for new shoes. And others would risk their lives by waiting in line for shoes and then risk their life even more by wearing them on the street. The social issues surrounding shoes got so bad that civil organizations, like Operation PUSH from Chicago, urged Americans to boycott sneaker companies until they stopped the violence surround sneakers.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, for Operation PUSH the boycott never gained traction and teens continued to buy new shoes from Nike and Nike continued to profit off of teenagers. In fact, by the end of the 1980's Nike's sales had reached over \$12 billion dollars, more than doubling their sales figures in a ten-year span.

In the 1990's, we saw the continued success and flourishing of basketball silhouettes as the game became increasingly popular across the United States. With the advent of many famous basketball players and household names, more and more sneaker companies attempted to flood the market in the hopes of signing a rising NBA superstar to wear their product. Shoe companies from local markets and across the globe were sprouting, seemingly out of nowhere, for the to play their hand in the basketball sneaker market.

Italian brand, Fila, which was a powerhouse in the global tennis market got its start in the US basketball market in 1992, with the introduction of the High Fila 7 (Fig. 9). Just

⁴⁶ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 43.

three years later, Fila made their first big push at obtaining some the market share that behemoths Nike and Adidas possess by signing a future hall of famer, in Grant Hill, to an endorsement contract. Grant Hill's shoe line was considered a success, given the publicity, attention, and profits that the bigger brands were pulling in.⁴⁷ While some claimed Hill was going to be the next Michael Jordan, other Fila signees such as Jerry Stackhouse, Jamal Mashburn, and Chris Webber helped the brand reach a credible status amongst the basketball community. Additionally, we saw even smaller local brands such as Avia, out of Oregon, and New York City's own British Knights and Product of New York (PONY). Each of the companies was successful in their own right based on the attention they were able to draw with their endorsements. Avia was able to sign NBA players Clyde Drexler, John Stockton, and even Scottie Pippen.⁴⁸ British Knights, which started as a casual shoe company inspired by hip-hop and rap, started their basketball division in 1991 after signing New Jersey Nets star and NBA Rookie of the Year, Derrick Coleman.⁴⁹ PONY rose to prominence on the basketball court with the signing of major NBA players like David O'Neil Thompson and Darryl Dawkins, but they didn't truly reach their peak on the court until 5'7" Spud Webb won the 1986 NBA Dunk Contest.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Complex Media Inc., "Fila," Sole Collector, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://solecollector.com/sd/00163/fila/>.

⁴⁸ J-Swift, "Throwback Thursday: Do You Remember Avia?," *Sole Theory: The Sneaker Lifestyle Guide* (blog), entry posted May 29, 2014, accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.soletheory.com/articles/throwback-thursdays-do-you-remember-avia/>.

⁴⁹ British Knights, "Our Story," British Knights, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://britishknights.com/our-story/>.

⁵⁰ Claire Carusillo, "A Visual History: Basketball Through its Sneakers," *The New Republic*, March 2, 2014, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116549/basketball-history-through-its-sneakers-curated-slam-magazine>.

In the late 1990's, the sneaker industry continued to undergo a process of change and improvement. In 1996, the first ever "sneaker collab" occurred. A collab is very different from an endorsement contract, in that it is a one-time occurrence, when an outside brand, company, or even artist or designer designs a limited-edition colorway of a shoe. Today, in a world of hyper-social media, a collab is the best way to generate buzz for both companies.⁵¹ But back then, as James Jebbia—founder of skating company and streetwear kingpin Supreme New York—will state, a collab was about bridging two different worlds that seemed far apart from each other on the surface. Jebbia first got the idea of doing a collab when he noticed that skateboarders were wearing outfits that consisted of more "blue collar" brands like Carhartt and Levi's with high-fashion brands such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton. Jebbia soon noticed that skateboarders and hip-hop enthusiasts alike were willing to pay premium prices for collaborative pieces like sneakers or clothing from brands like these.⁵²

In the early 2000's, the popularity of Hip-Hop started to bleed into the sneaker industry, as popular Hip-Hop artist started to carry more weight in the industry than athletes. The Nike Air Force 1 (Fig. 10), was originally a basketball shoe, but it's now listed as a casual shoe on Nike.com. The Air Force 1 gained more popularity in Harlem because it was the choice footwear of "ghetto celebrities" like drug dealers.⁵³ The shoe was so popular

⁵¹ Peter Verry, "Making Money on Sneaker Collabs Isn't Why They Exist - Here's Why They're Important," *Footwear News* (New York, NY), February 18, 2019, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://footwearnews.com/2019/focus/collaborations/sneaker-collaborations-important-1202745498/>.

⁵² *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*, "Supreme," episode 5, Netflix Inc., March 10, 2019 (originally aired November 18, 2018), hosted by Hasan Minhaj.

⁵³ de Longeville and Leone, *Just For Kicks*.

in Harlem that it quickly gained the nickname “Uptowns.”⁵⁴ Udi Avshalom, a sneaker salesman from famous NYC sneaker store Training Camp, says that guys bought Air Force 1’s because it provided instant street credibility because the only people who wore Air Force 1’s were “major hustlers.”⁵⁵ With over 2000 different iterations and colorways since it was first released in 1982, but practically no structural or design changes, the Air Force 1 has continually been one of the best-selling shoes since the 2000’s.⁵⁶ In fact, in 2002, Nike sold over 15 million pairs of Air Force 1’s, while the Air Jordan XVII only sold 250,000 pairs.⁵⁷ This statistic speaks to the true volume and influence that Hip Hop had on the sneaker industry. Even further, it shows the important of celebrity influence.

2.2.5 Sneakers vs. The Internet

The last major change to the sneaker industry is the invention of the World Wide Web, which made sneaker hunting and sneaker collecting infinitely easier. Before the Internet, certain colorways sneakers were released in certain cities and states. This meant that in order for sneakerheads to stand out from their friends or strangers they may see in passing on the street, you had to physically travel to stores in different cities or states to purchase your shoes. For some dedicated sneakerheads, this meant waking up early on a Saturday morning to catch a train to Philadelphia or Boston just to get a different colorway than the one releasing in New York. Sneakerheads also had to “know some place, someone,

⁵⁴ Marc Richardson, "A Cultural Force: A History of the Air Force 1," *Dry Clean Only*, last modified December 5, 2017, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.grailed.com/drycleanonly/air-force-1-history>.

⁵⁵ de Longeville and Leone, *Just For Kicks*.

⁵⁶ Richardson, "A Cultural," *Dry Clean Only*.

⁵⁷ de Longeville and Leone, *Just For Kicks*.

or know something to get their hands on certain releases.”⁵⁸ This has changed dramatically with the Internet. The sneaker community, at large, has taken to the web to create places where they can post, discuss, and share information and images about shoes. Some argue that the “art of buying sneakers” is dead, as most people can sit on Twitter now and wait for companies like Nike or Adidas to tweet out links to previously hard to find products.⁵⁹ Some technological-advanced sneakerheads have created automated software that buy limited-release sneakers seconds after they release online, because a robot can enter credit card information faster than humans.⁶⁰

The Internet’s most important contribution to the sneaker industry, however, would be its facilitation of secondary markets. Before the invention of the internet, secondary markets were relatively small, unknown, and only existed via word of mouth or people’s social networks. While the resale market started via interpersonal relationship, slowly brick and mortar stores and consignment shops started to specialize in only reselling sneakers.⁶¹ The introduction of the internet gave way to websites like eBay, and Facebook groups dedicated to buying and selling sneakers. The internet allows people to go on websites such as eBay and put their shoes up for sale. For many years, eBay was the central, online marketplace for people to buy and sell shoes in a secondary market. That

⁵⁸ Friendly and Partridge, *Sneakerheadz*.

⁵⁹ Matt Welty, "How Sneaker Culture Was More Fun Before Social Media," *Complex Magazine*, April 7, 2015, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.complex.com/sneakers/2015/04/sneaker-culture-was-more-fun-before-social-media/>.

⁶⁰ Cam Wolf, "The War Against Sneaker Bots Peaked at the End of 2018," *GQ Magazine*, December 26, 2018, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/war-against-sneaker-bots>.

⁶¹ Nathan McAlone, "Dan Gilbert cofounded StockX, a 'stock market for sneakers,'" *Business Insider*, June 29, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/dan-gilbert-cofounded-stockx-a-stock-market-for-sneakers-2016-6>.

was until 2016, when former Quicken Loans executive, Josh Luber, launched StockX—a comprehensive “stock market of things” that started with sneakers and has evolved to streetwear, handbags, and even fine watches.⁶² StockX, which conducts over \$2 million dollar in gross sales per day, offers fluid pricing that reflects the market price unlike competitors such as GOAT or Stadium Goods, which both offer fixed prices.⁶³ On StockX, sneakers are trading like a commodity or a stock. Each shoe model has its own unique stock ticker, Bid/Ask spread, 52-week Highs/Lows, 12 Month Trade range, volatility, and complete 12 Month Historical Pricing (# of sales, price premium, average sale price).⁶⁴

Outside of StockX, there are now Instagram pages, like @Resellology, that provide “resell estimates and release information,” per the company’s Instagram bio.⁶⁵ Their Instagram page holds up-to-date information on the most hyped shoe releases complete with information such as retail price, predicted resale price, most profitable sizes, and in some cases the total stock of shoes available.⁶⁶

⁶² Cam Wolf, "StockX Gets \$44 Million--and Wants to Become the Biggest Resale Site in the World," *GQ Magazine*, September 12, 2018, accessed September 15, 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/stockx-44-million-investment>.

⁶³ Bee Shapiro, "How Much Is That Sneaker in the Window?," *New York Times* (New York, NY), May 12, 2018, Business, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/12/business/how-much-is-that-sneaker-in-the-window.html>.

⁶⁴ Cam Wolf, "StockX Want You to Treat Sneakers Like an Investment, Stock Ticker and All," *GQ Magazine*, October 17, 2017, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/stockx-sneaker-streetwear-stock-market>.

⁶⁵ Resellology, "Travis Scott x Nike Air Jordan 1 releasing May 3rd, 2019 for \$175. Available on the Nike SNKRS app and at select Jordan Brand retailers. Additional release details will be posted shortly!," Instagram, March 31, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvsM-OgBCTn/>.

⁶⁶ Resellology, "Travis Scott," Instagram.

Table 1: Timeline of the History of the Sneaker Industry

1861	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charles Goodyear invents rubber vulcanization, altering its chemical properties • Source: <i>Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers</i> by Nicholas Smith
1897	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sears Roebuck & Company start producing rubber-soled shoes • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1908	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Converse Rubber Company starts producing "galoshes" • Source: <i>Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers</i> by Nicholas Smith
1916	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States Rubber Company started producing "Ked's" • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1917	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Converse decides to shift focus towards producing basketball shoes; the Converse "All-Star" was born • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1933	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jack Purcell becomes the first celebrity endorser for B.F. Goodrich • Source: <i>Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers</i> by Nicholas Smith
1936	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jessie Owens wins four gold medals at the Berlin Olympic Games wearing Adidas track shoes • Source: <i>Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers</i> by Nicholas Smith
1943	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sneakers become exempt from World War II rations, due to public outcry • Source: "The Long Political History of Sneaker Culture" by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell
1955	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actor, James Dean, serves as a sneaker-wearing icon for America's rebellious youth • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Ribbon Sports partners with Onitsuka Tiger to become the sole United States distributor of Onitsuka Tiger shoes • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1966	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Van Doren Rubber Company (Vans) opens its first store in Los Angeles, CA; they become the first company to manufacture and sell shoes in store • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1967	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill Bowerman, CEO of Blue Ribbon Sports, releases his book on running/jogging, which incites a jogging craze across the nation • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1972	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Ribbon Sports changes its name to Nike, following a fractured relationship with Onitsuka Tiger. Nike releases its first shoe featuring the iconic "Swoosh" logo • Source: <i>Sneaker Century</i> by Amber Keyser
1973	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walt "Clyde" Fraiser becomes the first National Basketball Association (NBA) player to have a shoe named after him, the "Puma Clyde" • Source: <i>Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport</i> by Jason Coles
1984	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NBA rookie, Michael Jordan, signs a sneaker endorsement deal with Nike. His potential stardom earns him his own line of sneakers called "Air Jordan's" • Source: <i>Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport</i> by Jason Coles

1985

- Continuing their sibling rivalry, Puma poaches rising tennis player, Boris Becker, from Adidas; he was the perfect fit for the launch of Puma's new line of tennis racquets and shoes
- Source:** *Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport* by Jason Coles

1986

- Hip-Hop/Rag group, Run D.M.C., signs the first ever endorsement deal between a non-athlete and an athletic apparel/footwear company when they signed a contract with Adidas
- Source:** *Kicks: The Great American Story of Sneakers* by Nicholas Smith

1989

- Reebok releases its signature shoe, "The Pump," which featured a one-of-a-kind manual pump that controlled the inflation of the air bag in the midsole. The shoe sparked controversy at the time because of the \$170 pricetag.
- Source:** *Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport* by Jason Coles

1992

- The "Dream Team" wins gold at the Barcelona Olympics, but superstars players and Nike athletes, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, refused to attend the gold medal ceremony wearing Reebok uniforms
- Source:** "Sports of the Time; On Loyalty to Company, or Country?" by Dave Anderson

1994

- Italian sportswear brand, Fila, enters the US sneaker industry by signing Duke University standout, Grant Hill. Hill was projected to be Michael Jordan's replacement following his retirement to play baseball.
- Source:** *Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport* by Jason Coles

1996

- NBA rookie, Allen Iverson's flashy play made him stand out on the court, but more people notice his vibrant Reebok "Question" signature sneakers
- Source:** *Golden Kicks: The Shoes that Changed Sport* by Jason Coles

1999

- Nike introduces NikeiD, which gave customers full customization of features like the materials, color, and laces of their favorite sneaker models.
- Source:** NikeiD by Nice Kicks

2002

- Nike sells over 15 million pairs of the "Air Force 1," while the most recent pair of Air Jordan's sold under 250,000 pairs. Spending \$0 on advertisements for the "Air Force 1" Nike shows the popularity and influence Hip-Hop has over sports
- Source:** "Just for Kicks" by David T. Friendly

2003

- Following an elaborate pitch meeting that involved a dedicated team of over 100 employees, NBA prospect and high school superstar, LeBron James, signed a lucrative endorsement deal with Nike.
- Source:** *The Undeclared* by Aaron Dodson

2008

- Rapper, Kanye West, debuts, the "Air Yeezy I," his second signature shoe, but first that would be released to the public, during his performance at the Grammy Awards.
- Source:** *The Official History of the Nike Air Yeezy* by Complex

2012

- The highly anticipated Air Yeezy II releases for \$250, but prices soared as high as \$89,000 in resale markets on eBay.
- Source:** *The Official History of the Nike Air Yeezy* by Complex

2015

- After severing ties due to creative differences, Kanye West leaves Nike for Adidas, where he was able to have complete creative control of designs.
- Nike resigns LeBron James' endorsement contract, this time with a lifetime deal worth an estimated \$1 billion dollars
- Source:** *The Undeclared* by Aaron Dodson

2018

- NBA sophomore Kyle Kuzma signs an endorsement deal with sneaker reselling platform, GOAT. The first ever deal of its kind, will keep Kuzma laced with the coolest sneakers, new and old.
- Source:** *Kyle Kuzma's New Sponsor is a Sneaker Reselling Platform* by Cam Wolf

2019

- Sneaker reselling platform receives a valuation of \$1 billion dollars following a new round of investments making StockX the first billion-dollar resale platform.
- Source:** *A Giant New Investment will make StockX the First Billion-Dollar Sneaker Reseller* by Theodore Schliefer

Chapter 3 – Historical Gender Bias in Motivating Social Factors of Sneaker Industry

After thorough examination of the history of the sneaker industry, we find three major motives that have advanced the sneaker industry and broader culture surrounding the industry. The three social factors responsible for the sneaker industry as it is today are physical exercise, professional sports and Hip-Hop. In short summary, sneakers were originally created as an alternative footwear to wear during exercise. Over time, physical exercise and sports became increasingly competitive in nature, and professional leagues were created. During this time, shoes evolved to fit the needs of the elite athletes that wore them during competition. And lastly, basketball and Hip-Hop became the ideological choice of vehicle for young African-Americans in northeastern cities to escape from the less fortunate circumstances that they grew up amongst. As the crucial part of basketball and Hip-Hop, sneakers were catapulted to reach a status as a mainstream accessory. In this chapter, I will explain how these three areas provide a bias against women that deters them from the consumption of sneakers.

3.1 Physical Exercise Excluded Women

Physical exercise or activity is a very broad term because by definition it incorporates everything from light, informal exercise to intense, high-level training, competition, and even professional sports. This section will focus on the former. In the 21st Century, the link between mental and physical health has become common knowledge because it has become conventional and widely publicized that physical health is an important component to strong mental health. Regular routines of exercise have been

linked to improved cardiovascular health, relieved depression, reduced blood pressure, and osteoporosis.⁶⁷

Women's physical activities vary based on time period, world region, and social class. During colonial times, Native American women partook in dances and games related to spiritual rituals, meanwhile female, European settlers enjoyed things like horseback riding and a game comparable to badminton.⁶⁸ In the 19th Century, we see an expansion of physical exercise for women. Women who lived on farms and in the frontier hiked and rode horses for physical exercise, while women in urban, northeastern cities attended gyms, dancehalls, and public parks to exercise. Meanwhile, female college students learned gymnastics and tennis and upper-class women played sports like golf and croquet.⁶⁹ The 20th Century, gives the birth to ideas of women competing and partaking in organized sports, as part of an exercise renaissance that included a boom for women and girls. Aerobics, jogging, even weight-training and even high-level professional and collegiate sports competitions became a common occurrence after the 1960's.⁷⁰ One of the most important developments was the passing of Title IX in the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which opened the door to women for more opportunity.

While this message, of regular exercise, is so important to all Americans, it is important to note that scientists, nutritionists, and fitness gurus and freaks alike

⁶⁷ Martha H. Verbrugge, "Gender, Science, & Fitness: Perspectives on Women's Exercise in the United States in the 20th Century," *Health and History* 4, no. 1 (2002): 52, <https://www-jstor-org.ezprox.bard.edu/stable/40111421>.

⁶⁸ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 54.

⁶⁹ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 55.

⁷⁰ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 59.

particularly preach this message to women and girls because the health benefits of regular exercise are especially compelling for women. In their book *Health by Stunts* (1938) written by US Army Captains N.H. Pearl and H.E. Brown, they detail the importance of a more robust and “intelligent” system of physical education for boys after the 1914 draft revealed lackluster results for the physical fitness of men drafted to the armed services. However, as Staurowsky et. al point out, in a book that dedicated to the importance of physical activity and education among young men, the final chapter of the book stated that women deserve equal attention in physical education.⁷¹

Thus, as Verbrugge points out, how is it the case the scientific and sociological studies and even popular media have published reports that state that exercise will have adverse risks in women and girls. There are crippling examples of misinformation that seem to have the targeted purpose of discouraging young girls and women from partaking in extensive physical activity. Women were viewed as fragile and dainty, which created “perceived [notions of] biological naturalness of female inferiority.”⁷² Thus, because of their perceived inferiority it was deemed unfit and counterintuitive for women to participate in physical activities.

Verbrugge points out two separate articles published about seventy-five years apart in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine that both suggests links between athletics and sterilization.⁷³

⁷¹ Ellen J. Staurowsky et al., *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity Through Education*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations, 2014), 383, accessed April 22, 2019, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=b2KhAwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA381&ots=Jlv_F38IMg&sig=8ruVNL80gWzvv2gjiHo4Yd2tD-I#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁷² Staurowsky et al., *Handbook for Achieving*, 384.

⁷³ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 52.

Shortly after the invention of basketball in the 1890's, separate rules were created for women because doctors believed that arduous physical activity would dislodge a women's uterus. Special lines were drawn on basketball courts and women were confined to these small zones and new rules were created that stated women could only dribble once. Even today, doctors and coaches believe the anatomy of the female body— "the oblique angle between the knee and the pelvis precludes jumping"—results in more torn knee ligaments for women than men.⁷⁴ In the early 20th Century, it was common courtesy for young women to be excused from gym class during their menstrual cycle. While today aspiring, female athletes receive additional counseling on the importance of not overtraining, eating disorders, and amenorrhea.⁷⁵ All in all, Verbrugge shows and proves a general anxiety about the physical activity of women. Due to American standards, of the difference in sex, people hold reservations over women's place in physical exercise because they believe it may blur the line between genders.

3.2 Gender Asymmetry in Professional Sports

Playing and watching sports is an American pastime. Some may even claim that sports are as American as apple pie, the quintessential, stereotypical American dish or delicacy. Unfortunately, the world of sports is dominated by males. The most popular sports in the US, in order, are American football, basketball, and baseball (See Table 2 for full list of top 10 sports).⁷⁶ These statistics are the result of television viewership, and the

⁷⁴ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 53.

⁷⁵ Verbrugge, "Gender, Science," 53.

⁷⁶ Thomas Torr, "Most Popular Sports in America," *Pledge Sports*, last modified February 19, 2019, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.pledgesports.org/2018/03/most-popular-sports-in-america/>.

overwhelming reality is that these sports and their publicity on television and social media has increased emphasis on male athletes rather than female counterparts. Of the top nineteen all-time most watched television broadcasts, eighteen are Super Bowls—the one outlier is the season finale of the television show “M*A*S*H”.⁷⁷ The unfortunate reality is that women’s professional sports leagues have existed in some compacity since 1974 when the Women’s Professional Football League was formed.⁷⁸

From the mid-19th Century to mid-20th Century, sports for women were far more recreational than competitive. In fact, sports were informal and often had no rules. Instead they just had an emphasis on minor physical activity. This stems from a common belief, at the time, that people, especially women, had limited energy and mental capacity. As a result, women were limited in the tasks they could complete in a single day, as fear they could overexert themselves would be “hazardous”.⁷⁹ Thus to prevent from being to taxing exercise was light and easy on the mind. Through the 1870’s, as more and more women gained access to higher education, people started to realize that women had more capacity for physical exercise than the previous perception.⁸⁰ In the early 1900’s, as participation amongst women in physical activity increased, sporting events featuring women slowly

⁷⁷ Nielsen Staff, "Historic Super Bowl Viewership," table, Nielsen, February 4, 2019, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2019/super-bowl-liii-draws-98-2-million-tv-viewers-32-3-million-social-media-interactions.html>.

⁷⁸ Ohio University Online Master of Athletic Administration Department, "The Evolution of Women's Sports," infographic, *Ohio University*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/the-evolution-of-womens-sports/>.

⁷⁹ Richard C. Bell, "A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX," *The Sport Journal* 20, <http://thesportjournal.org/article/a-history-of-women-in-sport-prior-to-title-ix/>.

⁸⁰ Bell, "A History,".

started to become more and more competitive. Many women started to create athletic clubs for sports like tennis, croquet, archery, and bowling since many men's club either didn't grant women full membership or denied them the opportunity to play.⁸¹

Starting in the 1920's, physical educators, particularly the few women who held positions as physical educators, started to preach the idea that women should be allowed to exercise in "moderation". The idea of moderation was a compromise that encourage girls and women to play sports without violating societal, gender role norms that had been set in place. The philosophy of moderation was the foundation to plays days for high school girls and sports days for female college students.⁸² In 1927, J. Anna Norris, the director of physical education for women at the University of Minnesota, organized a one-of-a-kind event called, Play Day. The event is heralded as one of the first ever intercollegiate competitive events between colleges, however to appease other school officials, Norris described the event as "purely for recreational purposes."⁸³ Throughout the 1920's and 1930's, Norris and her counterparts at other colleges and universities found that women enjoyed competing in extracurricular sports, but these activities only existed on an intramural level and not at a varsity-sport level.⁸⁴

In the 1920's, the women's division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF), was formed to organize and promote intercollegiate athletic events for women. However, contrary to their goal, the NAAF ended up doing more harm than good to the

⁸¹ Bell, "A History,".

⁸² Staurowsky et al., *Handbook for Achieving*, 384.

⁸³ Martha H. Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2012), 102.

⁸⁴ Verbrugge, *Active Bodies*, 102.

cause as participation numbers actually went down.⁸⁵ The first feminist movement of the 1930's and the passing on the 19th Amendment would prove to be valuable in pushing the agenda forward. However, the Great Depression would suppress these efforts for nearly a long period of time, as the US workforce was depleted women were needed to specialize in the home.⁸⁶ However, World War II and the newfound attitude of the "Rosie the Riveter" moniker would prove to be the most successful social movement for physical activity amongst women. During the war, many women joined the workforce and some served in the military. This gave many women needed self-confidence and self-esteem that helped propel the movement for equal rights.⁸⁷ Many women believed that if they could successfully join the workforce or military, they could also compete in sporting events. Because of the success of the "Rosie the Riveter" moniker and the necessity for entertainment from sports, the All-American Professional Girl's Baseball League was started. The league, while incredibly short-lived, had to adhere to a prearranged "femininity principle," in order to preserve baseball as "America's game".⁸⁸

During the 1960's, there would be two major events that propelled the introduction of female college sports. The first was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination based on sex, gender, or race unconstitutional. Additionally, the Division for Girls and Women in Sports (DGWS) amended their mission statement that intercollegiate

⁸⁵ Bell, "A History,".

⁸⁶ Bell, "A History,".

⁸⁷ Bell, "A History,".

⁸⁸ Staurowsky et al., *Handbook for Achieving*, 384.

sports for women “may” exist to intercollegiate sports for women are “desirable”.⁸⁹ In 1969, DGWS set a timeline for national championships in several women’s sports.

However, women’s intercollegiate sports still didn’t have recognition from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Even after the passing of Title IX legislature in 1972, the NCAA attempted to offer its own interpretation of the US legislature, that excluded athletic departments from the scope of the law. The NCAA viewed Title IX legislature as a potential weakening to its empire on college sports since it would put women at equal status to the men, the NCAA believed this would deter their profits.⁹⁰ Finally, by 1982 the NCAA adopted women’s championships for intercollegiate sports and started to properly promote women’s involvement in intercollegiate sports.

Before continuing on, we must first understand what Title IX is and why it is so important. Title IX was included in the Education Amendments that were an extension of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁹¹ Today, Title IX is commonly known as sexual discrimination or sexual harassment law. While this may be true, Title IX encompasses far more than just that. The lettering of the law states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”⁹² Title IX ensures that any educational program or activity that may receive

⁸⁹ Bell, "A History,".

⁹⁰ Bell, "A History,".

⁹¹ U.S. Department of Education, "Title IX and Sexual Discrimination," U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, last modified September 25, 2015, accessed April 15, 2019, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/tix_dis.html.

⁹² U.S. Department of Education, "Title IX and Sexual," U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

any sort of funding from the Department of Education will operate and exist in nondiscriminatory manner.

While the Title IX law, is well developed and enforced in recent years. The unfortunate reality is that in the years soon after it passed as a law, the level of care and effort put towards managing men's sports versus women's sports was atrocious. Some colleges only provided team doctors and insurance to men's teams and not to women's teams. In some cases, women were only allowed to use the gym when the men didn't want to use it anymore. At other schools, men's travel was incorporated into the budget and men's teams received chartered buses, while women's teams had to fund raise money for uniforms and travel.⁹³ Despite the implementation of Title IX law, there continues to be a disproportionate representation and compensation of women in sports. Statistics show that while women make up more than half of the aggregate student body at NCAA schools, women account for just 44%. Women receive a measly 4% of all sports media coverage. Some studies of ESPN's "SportsCenter" and Fox Sports 1's "Fox Sports Live" found that women's sports actually receive less than 1% of media coverage.⁹⁴ The few times or opportunities when female athletes do get coverage, they are often trivialized or sexualized. Studies have found that the athletic achievements of female athletes are never taken with the same regard and respect as male athletes. At the same time, female athletes

⁹³ Olivia B. Waxman, "She Exposed the Discrimination in College Sports Before Title IX. Now She's a Women's History Month Honoree," *Time Magazine*, March 1, 2018, accessed April 9, 2019, <http://time.com/5175812/title-ix-sports-womens-history/>.

⁹⁴ Ohio University Online Master of Athletic Administration Department, "The Evolution," infographic.

are often sexualized and their roles as wives, mothers, or girlfriends are often mentioned when discussing their athletic ability.⁹⁵

This last statistic about representation and media coverage of professional women's sports points out the common reality that has come to plague women's sports for no reason other than what seems to be an implicit, historical bias. Type "professional athlete" into Google and you will see the results for yourself, three of the top twenty-two names were female. With the exception of supreme female athletes such as Mia Hamm or Serena Williams, few female athletes and sports garner the same attention that their male counterparts draw.

3.3 Gender Bias in Hip-Hop

Hip-Hop is the culture responsible for turning sneakers from athletic footwear to fashion staple. Hip-Hop's relationship with sneakers began, as previously mentioned, in 1985 when Hip-Hop/Rap trio Run-D.M.C. signed an endorsement deal with Adidas.⁹⁶ The landmark deal with Adidas proved to other sneaker companies that Hip-Hop artists and rappers commanded as much attention, if not more, than the professional athletes they were currently paying to wear their products. The connection between Hip-Hop and sneakers is clear, but we must now understand how Hip-Hop, as a culture, is biased against women.

Hip-Hop as a genre of music is known for being predominantly male and filled with sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic undertones. While there have been many successful

⁹⁵ Staurowsky et al., *Handbook for Achieving*, 387.

⁹⁶ Keyser, *Sneaker Century*, 34.

women in hip-hop, many scholars and hip-hop enthusiasts alike have pointed out that it seems most women in hip-hop need a cosign from a male rapper in order to receive the respect they deserve. Many discussions of women in hip hop, often focus on their gender and not their rhyming skills.

From its beginning, hip-hop was a form of vocal expression about the plights of living in the urban ghettos of the Bronx, New York. At a time, when the city of New York had gone bankrupt, hip-hop emerged from people emceeing house parties and block parties in the Bronx.⁹⁷ These parties were held in locations that were previously known for being gang territories. Previous battles between gangs over turf or superiority that were previously fought with weapons became battles that were fought over microphones and turntables, says DJ Kool Herc.⁹⁸ Hip-hop provided black youths who experienced hardships with poverty and racial injustice, on a daily basis, their own American dream, one different from the mainstream White American dream, which was inaccessible and unrelatable. Therefore, hip-hop is more than a genre of music, it became a culture of self-expression.

The glaring issue that women face in hip-hop is their objectification. A study of Hip-Hop and rap lyrics from 2002-2003, found that when women are referred to in rap songs, they are only referred to in two different regards. In both instances, women are only seen as serving and acting towards the gratitude of men. The first category is women whose sole purpose is the sexual arousal of men. These women are often portrayed in degrading light as sex workers through stripping, exotic dancing, pimping, and prostitution. They are often

⁹⁷ Yuniya Kawamura, *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 45.

⁹⁸ Kawamura, *Sneakers: Fashion*, 45.

referred to as the “bad” girls of Hip-Hop.⁹⁹ In the forty-nine songs analyzed in Hunter and Soto’s study over one-third of the songs contained explicit references to women participating in sex work. Women in hip-hop are often treated as sex symbols and this becomes apparent through the choice of lyrics and female appearance in music videos. A jarring example of women being highly sexualized comes from rapper Nelly’s music video for his song “Tip Drill” (2003). In the video, the rapper swipes a credit card in the backside of a woman, which for obvious reasons gives her the appearance of an object and sex symbol rather than a human being. This video sparked controversy when a 2004 Nelly concert, in the Atlanta, Georgia area was cancelled after widespread protests throughout the city by college students from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Spellman and Morehouse.¹⁰⁰

Another notable example is 50 Cent’s hit song, “P.I.M.P.” (2003) in which the lyrics glorify the life of a pimp. In the song, pimps are portrayed as sophisticated, well-dressed men that partying in clubs every night and collect money from the women who work for them. While prostitutes are painted as foolish, poor, and stupid for lusting for items from the same brands that pimps wear.¹⁰¹ Additionally, 50 Cent’s lyrics contain overt references to sexual violence against female sex workers and normalizes sex work as a respectable job in poor black communities.¹⁰² Even further, “Dirty South” is an entire genre of Hip-

⁹⁹ Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto, “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze,” *Race, Gender & Class* 16, no. 1/2 (2009): 175, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41658866>.

¹⁰⁰ Kris Ex, Aya De Leon, and Bakari Kitwana, interview by Farai Chideya, NPR HQ, Washington, DC, June 6, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Hunter and Soto, “Women of Color,” 176.

¹⁰² Hunter and Soto, “Women of Color,” 177.

Hop/Rap that emerged out the likelihood and enjoyment that many southern artists find in going to strip clubs. “Dirty South” is the result of strip club culture turning mainstream and being fused with rap lyrics.¹⁰³

The other common portrayal of women in Hip-Hop comes from what is commonly referred to as “Bonnie & Clyde”. Bonnie Elizabeth Parker and Clyde Champion Barrow were a killer, criminal couple that gained notoriety for their crimes committed following the Great Depression.¹⁰⁴ Naturally, the Bonnie & Clyde genre of Hip-Hop/Rap stems from songs whose lyrics portray women as loyal, subservient subjects of men. The women mentioned in these songs are constantly compared to sex workers because the Bonnie’s are constantly called the “good” women of Hip-Hop.¹⁰⁵ These women are considered good because of their undying loyalty towards their men, unlike the “bad” women who only long for money from men or are only useful for sexual purposes. In Jay-Z’s song “03 Bonnie & Clyde” (2003) his choice of lyrics presents the dichotomy that some women are only viable for sexual relations and should be treated as so, while other women are loyal to a man, which makes them applicable for marriage.¹⁰⁶ Hunter and Soto claim that the Bonnie and Clyde theme is so captivating because it makes listeners believe that women will be appreciated based on their loyalty as girlfriends, wives, and partners in crime.¹⁰⁷ The Bonnie and Clyde theme can be viewed as a positive relationship between women and Hip-Hop/Rap culture. But

¹⁰³ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 178.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Government, U.S. Department of Justice, "Bonnie and Clyde," Federal Bureau of Investigations "Famous Cases & Criminals," accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/bonnie-and-clyde>.

¹⁰⁵ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 182.

¹⁰⁶ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 182.

¹⁰⁷ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 182.

Bonnie and Clyde should be characterized as a fallacy because being a man's partner in crime or loyal soulmate does not preach women the same independence and self-expression that Hip-Hop imparts on men, especially when it can be detrimental to the health and safety of said woman.

The overarching theme is that Hip-Hop glorifies a lifestyle that is biased and discriminatory towards women. Hip-Hop has always been a form of self-expression and an art of storytelling. Unfortunately, it seems that Hip-Hop puts a constraint on what women can be. Even worse, it seems the general voice of women in Hip-Hop has become complicit in preaching these ideals of being loyal to men and providing sexual pleasure to men.¹⁰⁸ Many Hip-Hop scholars claim that this is the result of the mass commercialization and search of large profits in rap that turned a previously underground phenomenon into a mainstream genre. Early Hip Hop was considered profound in its forms of self-expression and discussion of political uprisings, and in some cases, it even spoke positively, against the use of drugs. After all, this was near the rise of the crack epidemic. But when corporations and record labels found Hip-Hop and turned it into mainstream music the lyrics of the entire genre shifted towards the promotion of the highly fetishized "gangsta" lifestyle.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 183.

¹⁰⁹ Hunter and Soto, "Women of Color," 184.

Chapter 4 – Goodbye “Shrink it and Pink it”

In recent years, there’s been a shift in the trajectory of the sneaker industry. There’s been a shift towards the inclusion of women in the sneaker industry. Sneaker companies are no longer relying on the “shrink it and pink it” business strategy. “Shrink it and pink it” is a mantra that was created by advertising agencies that best describes the fallacious philosophy for creating and marketing products for women.¹¹⁰ The fundamental problem with “shrink it and pink it” is that women don’t like to choose the color pink or other pastel-like colors when it is the only option given to them by retailers. Research conducted in December 2016 found that at any given time, anywhere from 60-70% of the athletic apparel and sneakers offered to women were pink.¹¹¹ It’s not that women don’t like the color pink, in fact, when given the choice, some women will pick the color pink.¹¹² But overall, women like to make their own choices and prefer to not be confined in a box dictated by societal norms. This idea has come to life through many products that were created with women in mind as target consumer. Dell produced a computer called, “Della”

¹¹⁰ Jessica Contrera, "The end of 'shrink it and pink it': A history of advertisers missing the mark with women," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C., USA), June 8, 2016, accessed April 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-end-of-shrink-it-or-pink-it-a-history-of-advertisers-missing-the-mark-with-women/2016/06/08/3bcb1832-28e9-11e6-ae4a-3cdd5fe74204_story.html?utm_term=.378eb07ec53f.

¹¹¹ Sonia Van Gilder Cooke, "Seeing pink: why is sports gear for women still so gendered?," *New Statesman* (London, England), January 3, 2017, Politics, accessed April 23, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/sport/2017/01/seeing-pink-why-sports-gear-women-still-so-gendered>.

¹¹² Contrera, "The end of 'shrink,'".

that promised to help women look up recipes and Bic released a line of pens for women that came in purple and pink and featured a grip specially made for female hands.¹¹³

While many companies throughout almost all industries have fallen victim to the antiquated marketing strategy, the sneaker industry is particularly concerning given the anatomical differences between male and female feet.¹¹⁴ The problem with the “shrink it and pink it” model in the sneaker industry is twofold. Given anatomical differences, the “shrink it and pink it” strategy left women struggling to find comfortable sneakers that they also enjoy the color of.¹¹⁵

Like any industry, success is predicated on expansion and growth. Throughout the history of the sneaker industry, expansion and growth has been obtained and established through the marketing of sneakers to new, prospective consumers. As previously noted, the sneaker industry underwent massive growth after Adidas bit the bullet and realized the possibilities of partnering with the Hip-Hop artists and other musical talents who brought sneakers from the court to the stage. The previous expansion involved a full embrace of brands marketing sneakers and collaborating with predominantly Black youths. The current, ongoing expansion revolves solely on marketing and producing shoes for women.

The recent expansion dates back to 2014, when Rihanna signed a multiyear contract with Puma establishing her as a Global Ambassador to the brand and Creative Director of

¹¹³ Contrera, "The end of 'shrink,'".

¹¹⁴ Reggie Wade, "Why sneaker companies are ditching 'shrink it and pink it' for women's kicks," Yahoo Finance, last modified March 28, 2019, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/why-sneaker-companies-are-ditching-shrink-it-and-pink-it-for-womens-kicks-185325084.html>.

¹¹⁵ Wunderlich RE and Cavanagh PR, "Gender differences in adult foot shape: implications for shoe design," *National Center for Biotechnology Information* 33, no. 4 (April 2001): 605, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11283437>.

women's collections. The singer, pop culture icon, and fashion icon, while not known as an elite athlete quickly catapulted to high ranks as Puma's most recognizably sponsor.¹¹⁶ Surpassing her predecessors, like Jamaican, sprinter Usain Bolt and British fashion designer Hussein Chalayan, Puma quickly gained newfound popularity amongst consumers that leveraged them into a better position amongst competitors like Nike or Adidas. Rihanna's collaboration with Puma shined a light on the problem with finding female athletes to market sneakers. As Puma Global Brand and Marketing Director, Adam Petrick stated in an interview with the *New York Times* about the company's search for a female brand ambassador: "We were looking for someone who draws women [and] the world over, and that is hard to find in sports. Women's basketball is big in one country, but not another, for example."¹¹⁷ In their search for a female athlete to be a brand ambassador, Puma found two shocking realizations: the world of female sports is fragmented and many of the female athletes who have gained global recognition were already under contract with other sneaker companies. Thus, Puma turned to Rihanna, whose body positivity, confidence, determination, and bravery are traits that any elite athlete will have and made her a keen target for Puma to sign. In the short span since signing Rihanna, Puma saw a near full return on their investment. In just a few years after signing Rihanna, Puma's earning had increased by 98%.¹¹⁸ Of course, it's important to note that Puma also added big

¹¹⁶ Vanessa Friedman, "Puma Explains Its New Creative Director: Rihanna," *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 17, 2014, On The Runway, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/puma-creative-director-rihanna/>.

¹¹⁷ Friedman, "Puma Explains," On The Runway.

¹¹⁸ Helena Yeung, "Puma's Q3 Sales Show Extraordinary Growth, Net Earnings Doubled From 2015," *Hypebeast*, November 16, 2016, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2016/11/puma-q3-earnings-report-rihanna-fenty-cara-delevingne-kylie-jenner>.

name celebrities, and models Cara Delevigne and Kylie Jenner, names that have collectively helped boost sales by double digit percentages across the globe.¹¹⁹

The recent uptick extends beyond Puma and their work with Rihanna. During Nike's most recent earnings call in March 2019, CEO and President, Mark Parker, and CFO Andrew Campion talked to correspondents about the brand growth overseas, possible opportunities and ideas for expansion, and mobile apps and e-commerce. But the overall theme and reoccurring topic throughout the entire call was Nike's renewed focus on the women's market.¹²⁰ Nike, as of late, has been on the forefront of the recent trend towards incorporating women into sneaker culture. In December 2018, Nike released the Air Max Dia (Fig. 11). The shoe was the brainchild of a team of four, female Nike employees. The design, engineering, development, and management of the shoe were all overseen by female employees at Nike, making the shoe one of a kind and historic. The Air Max Dia is one of the first shoes designed exclusively by women and made for women.¹²¹ The Air Max Dia is the mainstay amongst a full sweep of sneaker models Nike has released for women. Nike's new female-centric project titled, "Unlaced" will be a medium for female sneakerheads and sneaker fans. Unlaced is the start of an industry-wide correcting of bias against women by creating a one of a kind "curated destination for female sneaker

¹¹⁹ Patrick Montes, "Puma Releases Quarterly Earnings, Shows Positive Gains on Nike and Adidas," *Hypebeast*, October 25, 2017, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2017/10/puma-quarterly-earnings-rihanna-nike-gain>.

¹²⁰ Wade, "Why sneaker," Yahoo Finance.

¹²¹ "This New Women's Silhouette Brings Modern Elegance to Air," *Nike News*, December 11, 2018, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://news.nike.com/footwear/nike-air-max-dia>.

lovers.”¹²² Through Unlaced Nike will now offer unisex sizing on select classic models for Air Jordan or Nike, and even on select sneaker collaborations such as designer Virgil Abloh’s collaboration with Nike. Unlaced will also feature a unique selection of sneakers created just for women along with exclusive services like personalized styling and “VIP experiences”. And lastly, Unlaced will feature new sneaker collaborations that feature female designers, artists, and collaborators.¹²³ Unlaced is Nike’s response to historical bias in the sneaker industry and the growing trend of the increased popularity of sneakers amongst women. As Mark Parker stated in the March 2018 earnings call, “We see women embracing sneaker culture more and more every day...”¹²⁴

The influx of female sneakerheads has also made its way to the burgeoning sneaker resale market. In an early survey of leading sneaker resale platform StockX, found that just 2% of the its users were female.¹²⁵ Since then StockX is proud to report that more female sneakerheads are using their platforms, with 10% of users on the app and 25% of users on the website being female. StockX CEO, Josh Luber, states the female engagement increased roughly 20% from 2017 to 2018, and they are continuing to see this trend. Additionally, Luber notes that in 2017, women’s sneakers accounted for just 1% of the StockX market share and had an average resale price of \$185 per pair. Just one year later, StockX reported a threefold increase in the market share of women’s sneakers and the average resale price

¹²² Samantha Cooney, "Nike Helped Create Sneaker Culture. Now it's Catering to Female 'Sneakerheads,'" *Time Magazine*, March 27, 2018,

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=128734715&site=ehost-live>.

¹²³ "Nike Redefines Sneakers for Women with Unlaced," *Nike News*, February 27, 2018, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-women-sneakers-unlaced>.

¹²⁴ Wade, "Why sneaker," Yahoo Finance.

¹²⁵ . Chow, "You See Sneakers," FiveThirtyEight.

for women's shoes increased 50% to \$273 per pair.¹²⁶ Additionally, GOAT, another major forum and marketplace to resell sneakers has noted that its user rate amongst females is growing at twice the rate as male users.¹²⁷ This data from StockX and GOAT shows improvements within a second-hand market that was once dominated by males. This also proves that women, like men, will pay premium prices for sneakers. The increase in price in the secondary market reflects increased demand in the primary market. This shows the success of the new products that have entered the market, which are tailored towards women.

As we progress and evolve from the "shrink it and pink it" era, bias is slowly being eradicated from the female sneaker industry. As scholars, researchers, and analysts try to pinpoint the problem and offer new solutions. Many people point to lack of representation among boardrooms and the high-level positions that are in charge of making decisions for firms. As Elizabeth Semmelhack, an adjunct professor of fashion at Ryerson School of Fashion and the senior curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, states: "...a majority of classic shoes within sneaker culture is that they have historically been available only in men's sizes. So, it was hard for female 'sneakerheads' to participate."¹²⁸ Semmelhack alludes to amazing, inspiring female athletes such as Serena Williams, who's dominating play on the tennis court and massive fanbase should earn her a

¹²⁶ Josh Luber, "Just The Facts: StockX Reveals 2018's Top Five Most Popping Women's Sneakers," interview by Snobette Staff, *Snobette*, last modified May 24, 2018, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://snobette.com/2018/05/stockx-top-women-sneakers-2018/>.

¹²⁷ Wade, "Why sneaker," Yahoo Finance.

¹²⁸ Cooney, "Nike Helped,."

contributing role to sneaker culture.¹²⁹ It is important to note that Serena Williams did have a small stay atop the charts of sneaker culture, in Summer 2018, following the drop of her collaboration with Nike and highly-acclaimed designer Virgil Abloh. But Semmelhack's point is that there's no reason that Williams shouldn't be a prominent feature in the sneaker industry.

While Semmelhack cites longstanding cultural bias against women being seen in athletic roles, others, like Reggie Casagrande, a Senior Director of Fashion & Lifestyle, believes that bias in the front offices and boardrooms of sneaker companies is the reason to blame for the lack of inclusion.¹³⁰ There's an ongoing shift, as sneaker companies look to capitalize on the projected multi-billion-dollar market the female sneakerhead potentially represent. There is an immense opportunity for sneaker brands to collaborate and team up with female athletes, musicians, and influencers to market sneakers. Especially with the FIFA Women's World Cup started in June 2019, you can expect sneaker companies to announce new partnerships in anticipation.

Elizabeth Semmelhack warns that history has shown that women a product is "feminized" male consumers tend to leave the market or purchase other goods that have not been "feminized".¹³¹ Semmelhack raises a strong point. True progress would be men adopting to "'female form' of dress" and not the other way around as

¹²⁹ Cooney, "Nike Helped,.

¹³⁰ Reggie Casagrande, "Why Women's Streetwear Will Be Big Business," *Business of Fashion*, March 25, 2019, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/op-ed-why-womens-streetwear-will-be-big-business>.

¹³¹ Cooney, "Nike Helped,.

it commonly goes. However, we already have examples of true progress. The Nike Air Max Dia that I previously mentioned, gained so much popularity among women and men that it is now a unisex shoe. GQ Magazine, one of the leading men's fashion magazine's in the world, published an article titled, "The Nike Air Max Dia is a Women's Shoe—and We Really Want a Pair".¹³² In less than two months, the storyline for the Air Max Dia quickly shifted from a shoe made for women, by women to a unisex sneaker with a sleek silhouette with stylistic detailing that both men and women love. The Nike Air Max Dia isn't the only example, in the past year multiple sneaker releases have been geared towards women but still attracted the attention of male sneakerheads. The Air Jordan 1 Retro High OG "UNC", for example, was a part of Jordan Brand's successful "Season for Her" campaign. Yet, as the sneaker blog, SneakerNews, stated in an article giving details about the release of the shoe: "As it's women's-only, it'll likely have larger-foot Jordan fanatics checking the size conversion chart to see if they can get a pair as well."¹³³ The Nike Air Max Dia and "UNC" Air Jordan 1 teach us that women's shoes aren't exclusively for women the same way men's shoes are not entirely exclusive to women. These shoes, also tell us, that the future success of the sneaker industry lies in offering unisex sizing on shoe models that are generally defined as "for men" and the addition of more sneakers designed with the anatomical structure of the female foot in mind.

¹³² Cam Wolf, "The Nike Air Max Dia is a Women's Shoe - and We Really Want a Pair," *GQ Magazine*, February 14, 2019, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/nike-air-max-dia-sneaker-of-the-week>.

¹³³ Sneaker News Inc., "Air Jordan 1 Retro OG 'UNC' - Where to Buy," *SneakerNews*, last modified January 24, 2019, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://sneakernews.com/2019/01/24/air-jordan-1-retro-high-og-obsidian-blue-chill-white-cd0461-401/>.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

From my research of the sneaker industry, I've learned that the sneaker industry has been plagued by historical biases against women for nearly its entirety. The bias within the sneaker industry stems from biases in the social factors that were determinants of industry growth. As we've seen, women were discouraged from participating in physical activities because of misplaced fears that exercising was actually worse for women's health. Additionally, competitive and professional sports show a historic bias against women because of beliefs that women were not anatomically structured to compete in sports. Lastly, Hip-Hop is a culture that has consistently placed constraints on women and ties their value based on their worth and their offerings to the men in their life.

The case of historical bias against women in the sneaker industry is applicable to other industries in the United States. For example, the National Football League (NFL)—ignoring the continued examples of racism—once had a problem with historical gender bias. Less than five years ago, the NFL was a 100% male dominated league but now has two female coaches, two female referees, and three female majority owners.¹³⁴ These numbers are not impressive at all, in fact, they are dismal, but they show that the NFL is moving in the right direction. Even better, the NFL is proud to boast that nearly half of its viewership and fanbase is females.¹³⁵ In the period from 2009 to 2013, NFL viewership among women

¹³⁴ Liz Hampton, "Women Comprise Nearly Half of the NFL Audience, but More Wanted," *Reuters* (London, UK), February 4, 2017, Sports News, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nfl-superbowl-women/women-comprise-nearly-half-of-nfl-audience-but-more-wanted-idUSKBN15J0UY>.

¹³⁵ Van Gilder Cooke, "Seeing pink," *Politics*,.

grew by an astounding 26% according to Athletic Business.¹³⁶ In 2017, with female viewership accounting for 45% of total viewership the NFL is still longing for more participation from female consumers. The NFL has made minor improvements but its growth from zero shows initiative and the first step in the decision to correct a historic wrong.

In 2016, the NFL launched the inaugural NFL Women's Summit in Houston, Texas. The event focused on encouraging young women to play sports to achieve success on and off the field. In 2017, the NFL hosted the second annual event, but this year they focused on the importance of mentorship and achieving one's goals.¹³⁷ While the 2018 summit didn't achieve the same success as its predecessors because of missed opportunities to talk about sexism. The NFL Women's Summit shows that the league is trying to command the attention of female viewers and obtain more in the process.¹³⁸ Thanks to concerted efforts by the NFL women have been the top purchasers of NFL apparel. As Rhiannon Madden, the Director of Apparel and Vice President of Consumer Product for the NFL, states: "As we got smarter and more engaged with our fans, and learned more about what they were looking for, we expanded our offering."¹³⁹ Thanks to collaborations that included Victoria's Secret loungewear or the new Nike jerseys that feature a tailored look for women the NFL has seen a continued increase in its female fanbase.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Hampton, "Women Comprise," Sports News,.

¹³⁷ Hampton, "Women Comprise," Sports News,.

¹³⁸ Melissa Jacobs, "NFL's Women's Summit Misses the Mark," *The Football Girl* (blog), entry posted February 2, 2018, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://thefootballgirl.com/nfl-womens-summit/>.

¹³⁹ Van Gilder Cooke, "Seeing pink," Politics,.

¹⁴⁰ Alicia Jessop, "How New Marketing Approaches Helped The NFL Achieve Triple-Digit Growth In Women's Apparel Sales," *Forbes Magazine*, November 26, 2012, accessed April 25, 2019,

In the nine years since the NFL decide to overhaul production of its women's apparel line they have experienced serious growth. It's time for the sneaker industry to learn from the NFL. The sneaker industry is at a critical junction and it could be a turning point in the history of the sneaker industry. It's time for more shoes like the Air Max Dia that are styled and contoured to the structure of a women's foot. It's time for more sneakers made and designed by women, for women. Now is the time for sneaker companies to incorporate more women in the decision-making process and the design process. It's time for the sneaker industry to make a conscious decision to correct a historic wrong.

Whether one buys sneakers to rock, to stock, to collect, to beat, to invest, or to trade, whatever your intentions might be, one fundamental flaw of the sneaker industry is that sneakerheads will eventually run out of space. History has shown that the industry has come as far as it as by adding new possible consumers to the market. The growth and the expansion of the sneaker industry is the result of the popularity of professional basketball in the 1970's through the 1980's. Additionally, cultural movements like skateboarding and Hip-Hop leveraged sneakers has a staple in fashion. At each of these points, the sneaker industry has grown and welcomed new consumers that were primarily male. Thus, in 2019, we're in the middle of the next cultural movement that will drive the sneaker industry. In this case, the future of the sneaker industry will be predicated on the inclusion of female consumers and the introduction.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/aliciajessop/2012/11/26/how-new-marketing-approaches-helped-the-nfl-achieve-triple-digit-growth-in-womens-apparel-sales/#59adbe554434>.

Figures and Graphs

Figure 1: The Under Armour Curry 6 “United We Win”

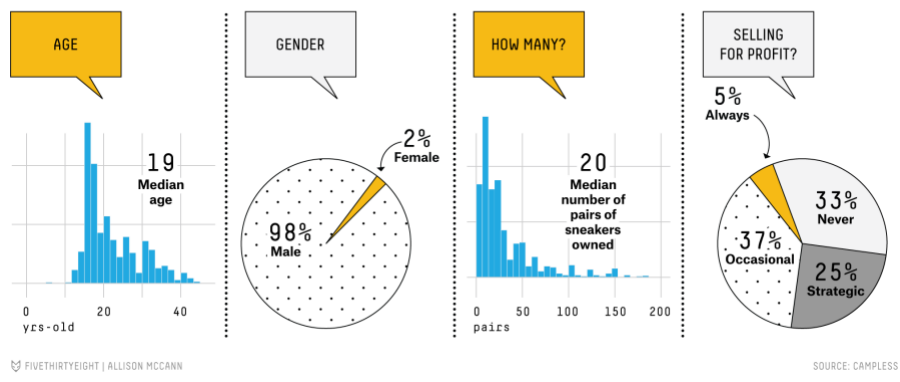


Source: StockX.com

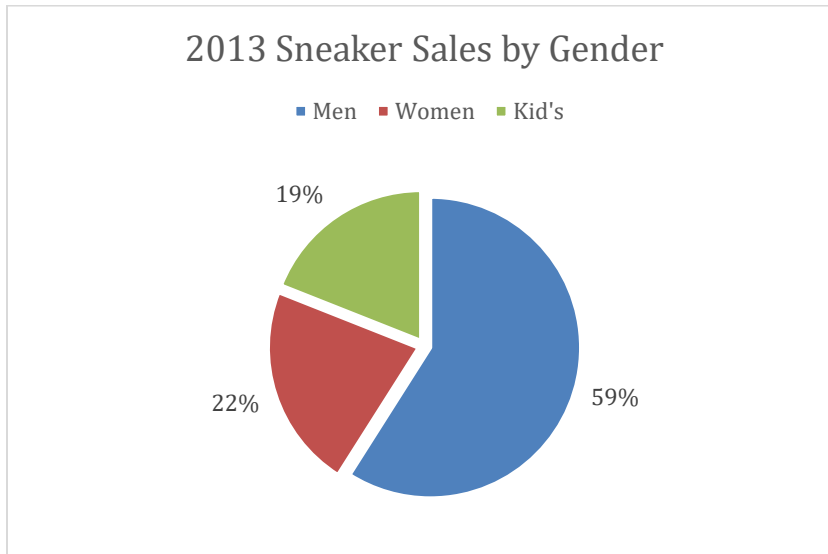
Figure 2: Demographics of Sneakerheads

Who Are Sneakerheads?

Based on self-reported data from 1,271 Compless survey respondents



Source: FiveThirtyEight.com

Graph 1: Gender Breakdown of Sneaker Sales (2013)

Data: Adapted from Matt Powell, NPD Group

Figure 3: Ked's Champion Canvas

Source: Keds.com

Figure 4: Converse “Chuck Taylor All-Star” High-top in White



Source: Nike.com

Figure 5: Jack Purcell Canvas Low Top in White



Source: Nike.com

Figure 6: Nike Classic Cortez "OG"



Source: Nike.com

Figure 7: Nike Air Jordan I "Banned" (2016)



Source: StockX.com

Figure 8: Adidas Superstar



Source: Adidas.com

Figure 9: Grant Hill Wearing Fila Basketball Shoes



Source: Pinterest.com

Figure 10: Nike “Air Force 1” Low in White/White



Source: Nike.com

Table 2: Top Professional Sports in the United States by Television Viewership

Ranking	Sport
1.	American Football
2.	Basketball
3.	Baseball
4.	Ice Hockey
5.	Soccer
6.	Boxing
7.	Tennis
8.	Motorcar Racing (NASCAR)
9.	Mixed Martial Arts
10.	Golf

Source: Pledge Sports

Figure 11: Nike Air Max Dia



Source: News.Nike.com

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