The Reinvention of the Sneaker

In the preface to *The Sneaker Book: the Anatomy of an Industry and an Icon*, freelance writer and self-proclaimed “sneakerhead,” Tom Vanderbilt, describes the first pair of sneakers he purchased that inspired “fetishistic enthusiasm”:

The mere fact that I should have felt so transformed by the purchase of a pair of ‘gym shoes’ (as they were called in the Midwest), when none previous had registered on my consciousness, was a harbinger of a new feeling sweeping the country: sneakers were no longer simply sneakers. (viii)

The pair were Nike Cortez, which according to *Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide* were first released in 1972 - the very same year Nike adopted its infamous “swoosh” logo (117). The modern Nike-dominated era of male-dominated sneaker culture had begun, but the sneaker itself was born over a century prior in Industrial Revolution era America.

Inventor Charles Goodyear unknowingly made the modern sneaker possible when he patented vulcanized rubber in 1839. Manufacturers would use the excess rubber from producing other products to make soles and the idea took hold. American etymologist James Greenwood defined “sneaks” as “shoes with canvas tops and india rubber soles” in 1870, and in 1897, the Sears catalog offered $0.60 pairs of “tennis shoes” (Vanderbilt 9). Keds and Converse were among the earliest brands to form in the early 20th century, however, the industry remained relatively inconsequential until post-WWI America when fitness and sport entered the national consciousness. The industry grew steadily over the next several decades with the establishment of many modern brands from Puma to New Balance. And by 1962, *The New Yorker* was compelled to comment on “a revolution that seems to be taking place in footwear,” noting that sneaker sales had more than doubled in
the six years prior (qtd. Vanderbilt 13). By the mid-1960's, the sneaker was well on its way to becoming a fetishized cultural icon.

But why? The evolution of the sneaker into a 20.4 billion dollar a year global industry as of 2004, according to an *Athletic Footwear Industry Analysis* released by Tufts University, has in many ways mirrored the 20th century development of America’s consumer-driven capitalistic economy. In its transition from a manufacturing-minded product to a marketing-centric, multinational industry, the sneaker is no longer simply a shoe but a statement of one’s cultural and personal status. Specifically, the industry’s finely tuned and well honed use of unrequited demand, celebrity endorsements, and emotional branding to promote ideas of individuality and exclusivity in its consumers has driven the so-called reinvention of the sneaker.

Sneaker brands are extremely sensitive to the whims of their consumer base and their success depends on their ability to balance these demands with a limited supply to create a sense of exclusivity. This balancing act is called unrequited demand and is the hallmark of many fetishized consumer brands, such as Apple and Tiffany's. The sneaker industry, however, has the unique task of creating a sense of individuality as well. One sneakerhead, quoted by Elliott C. McLaughlin in a *CNN.com* article entitled “Sneakerheads pay big bucks for rare kicks,” describes it best: “It’s a feeling you get when you know you’re the only one that has something. Even if you’re not, it’s the way you walk it.” It is about status and style, and the sneaker industry would not be the fetishistic phenomenon it is with just one or the other.

The sneaker industry accomplishes status and style - individuality and exclusivity - with variety and scarcity. Issuing an unheard of four product-lines a year, the industry
provides a mind-numbing array of sport and style-specific brands, models, and color combinations, all offered in limited quantities in limited locations. “All of this makes the serious sneaker fan’s obsession grow, with some shoes developing an almost mythical identity – rumour and hearsay, sometimes deliberately fostered by the brands, is very much part of the sneaker collectors’ world” (Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide 8).

Acclaimed marketing consultant, Scott Bedbury, describes an instance when Nike lost sight of this strategy in the mid-1990’s in his marketing guide entitled A New Brand World. With an enhanced distribution base, the so-called “swooshification of the planet” resulted in a 40% drop in Nike’s stock price over the course of the three-year debacle (92). Nike has since recovered and will not soon forget the value of scarcity. After all, scarcity, in terms of sneaker culture, is virtually interchangeable with exclusivity and individuality, which is created by the industry’s intentional creation of unrequited demand.

Sneaker companies additionally use celebrity endorsements of certain brands or certain shoes to further the fetishtic tendencies of sneaker culture as endorsements allow consumers to selectively connect with their favorite athlete, or even musician or other cultural icon, on an exclusive and personal level. According to Sneakers by Neal Head, the first celebrity sneaker endorsement dates back to 1923 with the Converse Chuck Taylors. Initially issued in 1917 as the Converse All Star, the shoe only became popular with the addition of Taylor’s name several years later. So-called “Chucks” are now the best-selling sneaker of all time with an astounding 30,000 pairs sold each day (42). Converse’s endorsement efforts with the retired basketball star were followed by several other rudimentary sneaker endorsements: some were intentional while others were coincidental and fortunate for early shoe manufacturers, such as when American Olympian Jesse Owens
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wore Dasslers in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and consumers took note (Vanderbilt 3). By mid-century, the advertising world was beginning to catch onto the undeniably effective method of celebrity endorsements with tennis stars, track stars, and even badminton stars.

These early efforts culminated in 1971 when the Adidas Jabbar, sponsored by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, became the first modern celebrity-endorsed basketball shoe. According to Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide: “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s signature Adidas model was the basketball shoe to have. The memorable advertising campaign for the model included shots in Sports Illustrated, featuring a goggle-clad Abdul-Jabbar performing his trademark ‘sky-hook’ shot” (22). It is the Nike Air Jordan, however, that is the embodiment of modern celebrity endorsements.

David Ogilvy, one of the true revolutionaries in the history of advertising, professes in his magnum opus of advertising principles entitled Confessions of an Advertising Man: “The manufacturer who dedicates his advertising to building the most sharply defined personality for his brand will get the largest share of the market at the highest profit” (120). While Ogilvy was not directly referencing celebrity endorsements, picking one individual to represent everything about a brand is certainly the easiest way to “sharply define personality” and who better to define a basketball shoe brand than high-flying Michael Jordan, widely recognized best basketball player to ever live?

(“Not Mean To Fly” - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Obj5eoSpu8)

Released in 1985, the Nike Air Jordan brand is one reason that Nike, then a young, struggling new entrant to the athletic footwear industry, now leads the industry, controlling nearly a third of the entire athletic footwear market (Athletic Footwear Industry Analysis). The Air Jordan I was the first of its kind as its bold red and black colors were a
far cry from traditional, all-white basketball shoe styles. In fact, the NBA initially banned the Air Jordans, however, Jordan continued to wear them and Nike gladly paid his $5,000 per game fine in exchange for the resulting publicity. Nike even produced commercial playing on the controversy, snidely concluding: “Fortunately, the NBA can’t stop you from wearing them” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj-sssMEo58&feature=related).

Basketball had not seen a shoe like Nike’s Air Jordans just as the world had never seen a basketball talent like Jordan’s. The combination has resulted in one of the longest-running and most successful sneaker brands in history. Nike has released one shoe a year under the Air Jordan name since 1985, not including reissues and special editions, with the 2010 Air Jordan XXV marking its 25th anniversary (Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide 148).

The use of celebrity endorsement allows customers to identify exclusively and individually with the celebrity in question, and the opportunity to wear the same shoe and to use the same technology as the best is a connection that continues to captivate consumers.

The careful and strategic use of unrequited demand and celebrity endorsements fall under the cutting edge advertising concept of emotional branding. Most simply defined as “Loyalty beyond reason” (66) by Kevin Roberts, CEO Worldwide of revered advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi, in his industry guide entitled Lovemarks: the Future Beyond Brands, emotional branding is what every advertising campaign strives for and few accomplish. Roberts explains that emotional branding, i.e. creating “lovemarks,” goes far beyond a reasonable attachment to a simple object (42).

We are consumers by nature. For virtually all the world’s citizens, our possessions add meaning to our lives. That’s why we buy, exchange, give, treasure, and possess them. The things we have chosen to live with are not inert objects. We wrap our
impressions around them. We express ourselves through them. We make them into what we care about. (50)

This explains why a collector will spend thousands of dollars to collect thousands of pairs of sneakers that he may never actually wear. The sneaker is not an object of utility but one of love to the devoted sneakerhead. It is definitively a fetish.

In A New Brand World, Bedbury describes the phenomenon in terms of Maslow: “A more skillfully marketed product will appeal to emotional states ranked higher on Maslow’s scale of human needs” (93). Advertising tactic since the Industrial Revolution and essentially the introduction of consumer goods have more or less climbed Maslow’s hierarchy in their appeals to customers. Sneakers were initially an outlet for spare rubber: an object born of convenience. Then they were marketed as a utility: a safer shoe for athletic endeavors. Slowly sneakers became an object of style and self-esteem, culminating as an object of obsession, love, and fetishism. While it is admittedly not a strict interpretation of Maslow, it is difficult to deny that love is perhaps the greatest and most definitively human appeal. It is outlandish to think this sort of connection, rarely found in a single object or a single brand, could pervade an entire industry but that is what makes sneaker culture so incredibly unique.

While some sneaker manufacturers naturally do it better than others, the midcentury reinvention of the sneaker is a testament to the effectiveness of unrequited demand, celebrity endorsement, and emotional branding as a whole. In the words of Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide: “What all of these fans have in common is a love of sneakers, not only because they are ‘cool’, but because the brands and designs are an indelible part of their identity – you are what you wear” (9).
The Sneakerhead Psyche

“What all of these fans have in common is a love of sneakers, not only because they are ‘cool’, but because the brands and designs are an indelible part of their identity – you are what you wear” (Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide 9). The sneakerhead psyche, in its appeal to exclusivity and individuality, is inherently linked to the concept of group and personal identification. Sneaker culture’s so-called “urban tribes” and their commodity fetishism for specific, identifying sneaker styles are fundamentally no different from the anthropological fetishism of primitive tribes. Emile Durkheim’s century-old study of Australia’s Aborigines, who divide themselves into clans according to the worship of specific, identifying totem animals, demonstrates this same fetish-centric group identification found in urban sneaker tribes. According to Group Dynamics by psychiatrist Stephen Gisalson, humans are social animals who possess an innate tendency, “buried deep in the human psyche,” to gather in like-minded groups in order to define norms of conduct, meaning, and context. Urban tribes, which are largely defined ethnically, geographically, and stylistically (fig. 1), do not stray far from this social Darwinist model of group identification.
The reinvention of the sneaker in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s occurred simultaneously with the formation of urban tribes. As a multitude of recently established sneaker manufacturers competed for market share, the product became increasingly athletically technical, aesthetically pleasing, and socially segmented (fig. 1). Eventually each brand found its niche audience and the sneaker became a cultural symbol and visual icon capable of distinguishing any given sneakerhead as a member of an specific social grouping. As the sneaker industry and the sneakerhead psyche have coevolved in the decades since, the sneaker has become increasingly focused on individual identification in addition to group identification, feeding the sneakerhead psyche invaluable meaning and self-esteem. An exploration of the past, present, and future of sneakerhead culture reveals this trend towards increasing individual expression within the group context.

According to Sneakers author Neal Heard, the three original, influential urban tribes of primitive sneaker culture are the casuals, hip-hop, and skate. The casuals movement began in the late 1970’s and represents the European football trainer scene. (“Trainer” is the United Kingdom equivalent of “sneaker”). The term casuals encompassed Liverpool’s “Scallies,” Manchester’s “Perries,” and London’s “Chaps.” Vanderbilt continues, “The Casuals were mainly groups of young men who attached themselves to their local soccer side. The emphasis was on smart and sporting dress in various forms, and preoccupation with trainer footwear that was obsessional, to say the least” (14). Adidas was the initial shoe of choice but would be replaced with Reeboks in the late 1980’s by the ever-evolving casuals. This tribe in its various current forms still revolves around the European football scene whose fans are infamously brutal and remarkably loyal to their teams’ allegiances and stylistic norms.
The largely African American hip-hop urban tribe finds its roots in hip-hop music, break dancing, and to a lesser extent, street basketball. According to Charlie Ahearn’s article, “The Gangs of New York City, Hip-Hop, & Sneakers,” reprinted in Heard’s *Sneakers*, DJ Kool Herc gave birth to hip-hop when he began looping James Brown drum breaks in the mid-1970’s to enthuse South Bronx bboys or break dancers (20). Also tied to graffiti art and OG (original gangster) culture, hip-hop sneaker tribes, past and present, differentiate themselves through an emphasis on style over sport. In fact, hip-hop rap trio Run DMC became the first non-athlete sneaker sponsors, once declaring “Everybody wearing adidas wave your sneakers in the air!” (qtd. 25) to a largely compliant audience of over 30,000 sneakerheads in New York City’s Madison Square Garden. Tom Vanderbilt, author of *Sneakers: The Complete Collectors’ Guide*, claims that this mid-1980’s moment was when “The hip-hop ‘kicks’ fetish reached its pinnacle” (32). Suburban whites, however, soon began emulating hip-hop culture and began buying hip-hop style sneakers. This seemingly subversive influence invading mainstream America resulted in a period of sensationalized headlines tying hip-hop to the drug trade and gangster culture, even alleging that sneaker companies would purposefully market gang-color coordinated sneakers to the Crips and Bloods of Los Angeles. Hip-hop has persevered as has its following in the form of ethnically and socially distinct derivative groups. Even the white suburbanites, who to their credit are genuinely rooted in and inspired by hip-hop music among other influences, still take their style cues from current hip-hop culture.

The American skate movement places perhaps the greatest emphasis on sport over style. “The Skate Story” by Aaron Hawkins, reprinted by Neal Heard in *Sneakers*, identifies skateboarding as an “individualistic, athletic art form” (27) representing a group of
energetic and rebellious adolescents. “Skateboarders by their nature are the present-day, concrete-jungle urban guerrillas. They need good shoes to survive” (28). This mid-1970’s west coast movement found its first defining shoe in the Vans ‘deck’ shoe. A small Southern California operation at the time, Vans’ low price appealed to the hardcore skater who would require a new pair every few weeks, according to Hawkins. As skating evolved from its infancy and as new tricks were introduced, requiring different kinds of support, skaters began to explore other options. The shift from skate parks to street skating and the resulting need for better ankle support in the mid-1980’s pushed skate tribes towards Nike and adidas hi-top basketball shoes. When Mark Gonzales, skating god, wore Air Jordan 1’s, Nike was secured a market share for several years. In the end, however, some entrepreneurial skaters, including those who started Etnies, DC Shoes, Duffs, and Dukes, have taken hold of the skate urban tribe market. “By now, the ‘skater-owned’ brands had staked their claim in the shoe world and whole game would never be the same again” (Vanderbilt 30).

In the years since the rise of urban tribes, sneaker brands have continued to evolve and further define themselves, not only as footwear but also as lifestyle philosophies. Largely due to the populist effect of the Internet, the so-called “shrinking of the world,” and the explosion of the consumer-driven goods economy, there is an unbelievably vast array of products available to consumers today. In fact, according to Roberts, the average person comes in contact with 1,500 brands every day and an astounding 35,000 if they happen to go to the grocery store (27). The contemporary sneakerhead is a discriminating consumer whose psyche fiends to make his or her purchasing and stylistic choices stand out amid this onslaught of branded products crowding the human consciousness. Consumers are making
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more significant, informed, and personal lifestyle connections with their carefully chosen belongings and their sneakers in particular.

Humans do not want to be defined by their possession but rather to give those possessions, especially those that adhere to some group norm, personal meaning. Christian Fiene, Indiana University student, former Kern Brother’s Shoe employee, and sneakerhead, says his collection of over 15 pairs reflects his personal history and maturation. He points to the navy and orange Nike waffle trainers on his feet. Christian recalls that he bought them freshman year of high school when he worked for a shoe store and was able to pick them out specifically from the his then-employer’s Nike ordering catalogue. The pair, once a reflection of Christian’s “fresh” style, now illustrate his devotion as the heavily worn waffle soles more so resemble pancakes and his big toe peaks out from a hole in the left shoe (fig. 2). Sneakers are not mere material possession but rather lifestyle items that stick around, through thick and thin, pavement and mud, most literally every step of the way.

![Sneaker](image)

(fig. 2)

The sneaker gives its owners a sense of group identification, but beyond that, sneakers are lifestyle items that hold personal meaning to those who wear them. This is not to imply that group norms are obsolete or outmoded, but rather that consumers today
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strive for uniqueness and personal meaning within their group setting. There is the extreme freestyle skier who seeks the loudest, brightest, *dopest* pair of neon hi-top sneakers to set herself apart as a pedestrian off the slopes (fig. 3). There are the white suburban teenage boys who wear colorful, untied Nike Air Max 90’s out of reverence for hip-hop music and urban culture. Then there is the IU sorority girl who owns over ten pairs of Converse Chuck Taylors which she infamously wears with sun dresses (fig. 4), skirts, and even formal wear: “I rock Chuck’s and people *love* it” (McNelly).
This trend towards fringe consumerism has not gone unnoticed by sneaker brands that have adapted to the evolving customer by realizing that not everything can be controlled or predicted. Even Nike, who consistently positions itself as the hardcore athletic brand, learned to accept unexpected customers as early as the 1980's. Nike did not intend on selling hi-top basketball shoes to skaters, but they did. It was not as if the high-performing Nike lifestyle was inconsistent with their newfound customers, but it was certainly an unexpected yet welcomed consumer base. Scott Bedbury, author of *A New Brand World* and former head of strategic marketing at Nike, says of brands: “They become psychological concepts held in the minds of the public, where they may stay forever. As such you can’t entirely control a brand. At best you only guide and influence it” (15).

Contrarily, some brands have made attempts, with limited success, to anticipate and even invite unexpected fringe demand with strategically inclusive advertising campaigns.
In a February 2005 USA Today article entitled “New Theme for Reebok”, Michael McCarthy discusses the launch of Reebok’s “I Am What I Am” campaign. Costing over $50 million, Reebok used endorsements from athletes, rappers, and even TV and film stars, including Andy Roddick, Allen Iverson, Yao Ming, Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Lucy Liu, to assert that Reebok is for everyone, everyone is different, and difference will be embraced by Reebok. Intended to contrast Nike’s athletes-only approach, the campaign saw some commercial success but failed to boost Reebok past Nike as the leader of the sneaker industry as Reebok had hoped. They were trying too hard to control their brand perception by purposefully appealing the fringe. To include the fringe is to lose the benefit of fringe thinking. When brands outwardly and specifically define their consumers and their relationship with the brand, as Reebok attempted with this campaign, they deprive consumers of a personal and unique interaction with the product.

In the future, this trend towards personal identification through one’s footwear will become increasingly prevalent. While there will always be trendsetters and trend followers, the trendsetters will almost always come from the fringe of the existing groups or tribes. Roberts agrees: “I believe ‘edge cultures’ will have even higher value in this millennium. Great idea can come from anywhere, but most of them turn up on the edge” (18). Take for instance the latest trend towards mass customization. Back when the skate urban tribe was in its infancy, Vans offered customers the opportunity to customize the colors of their sneakers for a one-dollar fee. When skate idol and “original Z-boy” Wentzle Ruml chose a navy and red combination, everyone went out and got navy and red Vans (Heard 27). That edgy, skate tribe idea is now a mainstay of the industry as nearly every sneaker company website includes a “Design-it-yourself” option. Consumers can customize
the colors and sometimes even add words to their sneakers before purchasing their
original creation. Unlike skaters of the 1980’s, consumers today are not using mass
customization to copy preexisting styles, but using this tool to create a personal version of
popular styles. Undoubtedly born in the once marginalized skate culture, mass
customization is used to achieve and insure the greatest possible level of personalization: a
feat that will undoubtedly continue to evolve and develop in the future.

According to Roberts, “Intimacy [with brands] will meet a tough new challenge in
the coming decades: the single-persona household. And traditional ways of dealing with
people as members of coherent groups is just not going to play” (134). People in today’s
world are striving for independence and self-sustaining lifestyles evident in the increasing
number of people, including the middle-aged, living on their own. As sneakers have
progressed since the Industrial Revolution, so too has the role of consumer goods in
modern civilization and the role of the individual within society. The psyche of the
sneakerhead, once seeking acceptance in a group, now desires personal expression within
the group context. As consumer consensus on branded products has progressed from
novelty to mass-produced nuisance, achievement of self-esteem and meaning through
these products now emphasizes personal preference over mass appeal. In sum: “The
journey from products to trademarks to brand is one of the great stories of the last century.
It is a story that has profound effects on how businesses deal with consumers. And how
people deal with businesses” (Roberts 24).
Works Cited


