"The Intersection of Sneakerhead Culture and Racism in the United States of America"

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Sneakers are an omnipresent force in our modern world. Sneaker culture is effectively an encompassing platform that breeds self-expression and creativity. They have been a continuous presence throughout history, evolving in accordance to societal and cultural changes. Today, sneakers symbolize material status and wealth. However, this has brought on an abundance of sneaker-related violence within the United States, generally geared toward Black youth. The reasons for this type of violence can be attributed to several different components. Sneaker companies create artificial scarcity during sneaker releases, which maximizes product anticipation, consumer excitement and profit projections. This, closely coupled with significantly increased resale prices and glamorized advertisements (which can indirectly promote violence due to poor product naming), can transform sneakers into a dangerous commodity. However, it is one-sided to only place blame on an individual group. Rather, there are many other forces at play, representing a complex network concerning sneaker consumption and associated violence. Through extensive research and interviews, the exploration of the robust theory of consumption, in terms of class distinction theory and the transmission of taste, stimulated further investigation into racial social membership and consumption habits. This theoretical proposition has been used to explain that sneaker-related violence is a result of societal imbalance of values and social class, and racial inequality. In addition to statistical figures, it will be demonstrated through a qualitative measure that sneakers have the potential to bridge the gap between socioeconomic and racial groups across the United States, by acting as a medium for cross-cultural understanding.

Introduction

American poet Mary T. Lathrap coined the common phrase "walk a mile in my shoes" in her original poem *Judge Softly,* published in

1895 (Stanton et al., 1997). In her time, shoes were replaced with the term "moccasins," but this quote nevertheless embodies how shoes can be a means of transportation into another individual's life. Needless to say, shoes in general have always personified some sort of magic. From Cinderella's glass slipper to Dorothy's ruby shoes in the *Wizard of Oz*, and even Nike's Air Jordan campaign in 1989 explaining that the source of Michael Jordan's talent has "gotta be the shoes" (Diaz, 2018), shoes, and more recently sneakers, demonstrate a dynamic force of ever-changing styles that allow for different expressions of thought and diversity. While sneakers have created divides among races and social classes with the birth of specialty and designer sneakers, they have the authority to potentially act as a medium to bridge this gap, if harnessed correctly, demonstrating collective understanding and appreciation for other cultures. Throughout this thesis, I will look at the complex intersection of sneaker culture and racism in the United States by investigating how sneakers have become the epitome of self-expression and expand upon a robust theory of consumption, coined by Norwegian-American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen.

History of the Sneaker

The sneaker began exclusively as a luxury item, enjoyed by the elite in the 19th century as athletic shoes, primarily worn for tennis, as only the wealthy had time to exercise. After the destruction generated by World War I, the government had to accept that not only was there a significant loss of life, but also that the nation was physically unprepared for war. This subsequently promoted a large-scale interest in the fitness industry and, by connection, activewear (Alleyne, 2015). When more people began frequenting the gym, auspicious industrialists started mass-producing sneakers. The prices came down and the government democratized sneakers in order to promote physical health (Alleyne, 2015). Ironically, sneakers became "the most democratized forms of footwear at the height of fascism" (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). At that time, the sneaker was stripped of its affiliation with wealth and became the preferred footwear of everyday people (Luqman, 2015). The sneaker had officially become synonymous with American identity. During World War II, the United States suffered a shortage of rubber production. While there was still access to naturally occurring rubber from Africa, South and Central America, most rubber was exported from Asia. However, in the course of WWII, Japan (an opponent of the US), had authority over much of Asia's rubber and therefore restricted rubber exports to the United States. As a result, companies were forced to switch

to use of synthetic rubber, which was more durable although more expensive than its counterpart, natural rubber (*Synthetic Rubber*, 2005). Throughout the war, many sneaker factors in the United States were alternatively used for military equipment production and the rubber was allotted for military purposes ("The History of the Sneaker," 2002). Effectively, between 1943 and 1945, the United States placed rations on footwear, allowing each individual to purchase three pairs of shoes each year to avoid rubber scarcity (Bell, 2018). Once the ration ban was lifted, rubber production continued to increase in post-World War II era. At this point, the commercialization of sneakers to a range of different consumers was able to maximize access to this commodity. In 1917, the Converse Rubber Shoe Company produced its first basketball shoe, using basketball players and coaches as brand ambassadors (including Chuck Taylor, the first athlete to have a sneaker named after him). However, it was only in the 1970s that sneakers developed into a signature element of pop culture, designed and worn more as a fashion statement and symbol of status (Keller, 2018).

It can be argued that race and culture were factors in predetermining the societal status of the sneaker. Starting at the beginning when sneakers were viewed as a symbol of wealth, this was primarily during the Jim Crow era, where the wealthy citizens, those who had access to the public gym, where White. Similarly, during this time, King Leopold II of Belgium led the ruthless rubber exploitation in the Congo, which was a prime exporter of natural rubber for the United States (MR, 2017). When the United States began its own synthetic rubber production, it was Black Americans who were given the "lowest-paying, dirtiest, and most hazardous jobs" across many industries, including the rubber industry (Jones, 2000). This predominant divide between racial and societal classes echoed into modern-day, and while the sneaker was universalized to become the "every-man" shoe, it was still intertwined with racial and cultural divides.

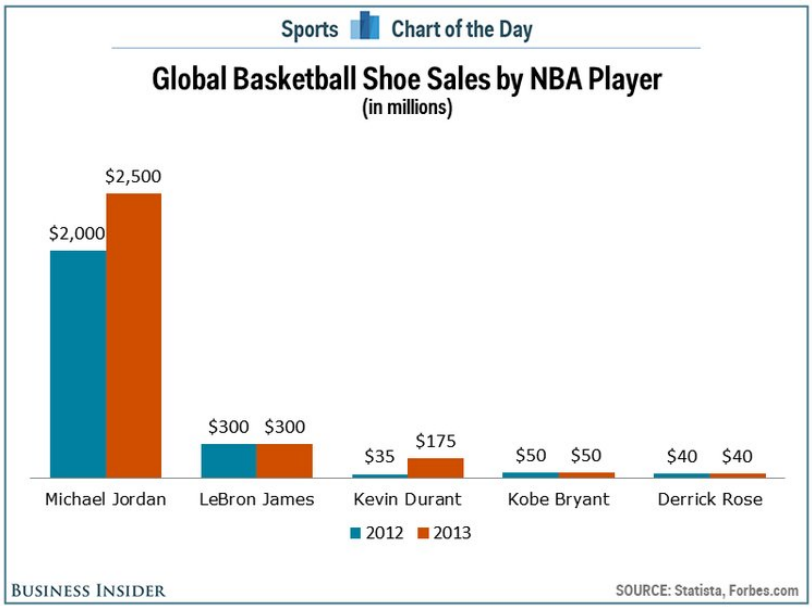

FIGURE 1: Global basketball shoe sales by NBA player (Gaines, 2015)

Sneaker historian Bobbito Garcia explains that it was during the 1970s that basketball and hip-hop communities transformed the perception of sneakers from solely tools used for sports to mediums of cultural expression; it was "Black street culture" that became the forefathers of modern-day sneaker culture (Chertoff, 2012). In fact, in 1977, *Vogue* advertised sneakers as no longer being made for running only but rather as fashion statements and symbols of status (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). The most famous example of a basketball star's sneaker endorsement was Nike signing Michael Jordan, who remains the highest paid basketball player in shoe sales, as seen in Figure 1. Violating league rules, Jordan wore his signature Air Jordan #1s to every NBA game, while Nike gladly paid the $5,000 fine for each game. Nike took advantage of this opportunity, advertising "The NBA can't keep *you* from wearing them." Air Jordans first hit stores in 1985 and they became a movement: anyone buying the shoe felt like they were "sticking it to The Man" (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). To this day, Nike remains the most-worn shoe brand among basketball athletes, as seen in Figure 2. The hype of the "sneakerhead" craze has also been attributed to hip-hop music and the Spike Lee-directed commercials.

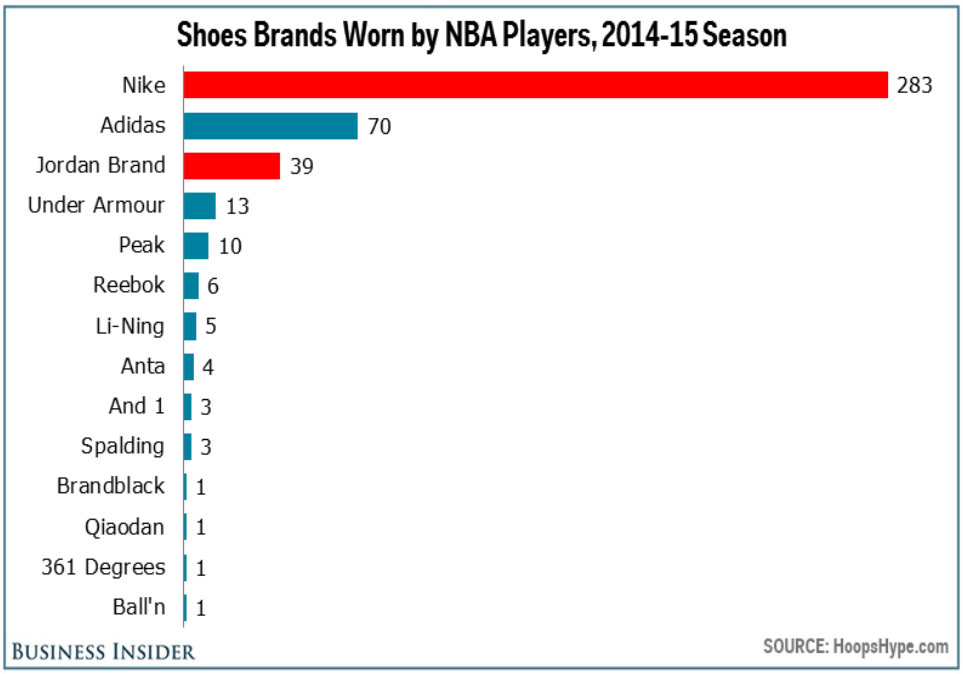

FIGURE 2: Shoe Brands worn by NBA players during the 2014-2015 basketball season (Gaines, 2015)

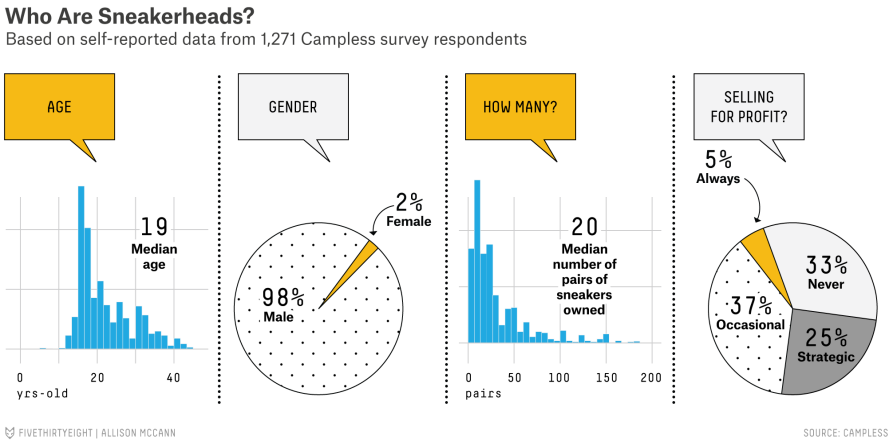

FIGURE 3: Statistics of typical sneakerheads (Chow, 2014).

Today, sneakers are designed by athletes, high-end designers like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Prada, and hip-hop artists. They have become a mainstream obsession, crossing various socioeconomic, racial and ethnic borders. The American public has transformed from needing only one pair of sneakers, for comfort

and exercise, to wanting a whole closet. The increased popularity of sneakers has led to the coining of the term "sneakerhead," which describes individuals who collect and trade sneakers as a hobby. As seen in Figure 3, sneakerheads are generally male, with a median age of 19 years old; they own a median number of 20 sneakers. Roughly 67% of sneakerheads resell their sneakers in some way at high resale prices, in an attempt to make a profit (Chow, 2014).

Popularity of Sneakers in Modern Culture

In 2015, the National Purchase Diary (NPD) Panel showed that the millennial-driven sneaker market experiences an 8% annual growth, and was estimated to have $17.2 billion in total annual sales that year (Glazman, 2016). By 2020, the global footwear market is expected to reach a value of $220 billion a year (Glazman, 2016). Figure 4 highlights the increase in sales among the top three sneaker companies: Nike, Adidas and Puma. The concept of the sneaker, specifically, has had significant increases in popularity and importance throughout American culture. Sneakers have been the topic of many songs, movies, and exclusive fashion lines for decades, as they have an immense history depicting not only their continuity but also, how they adapt in accordance with notable changes in culture.

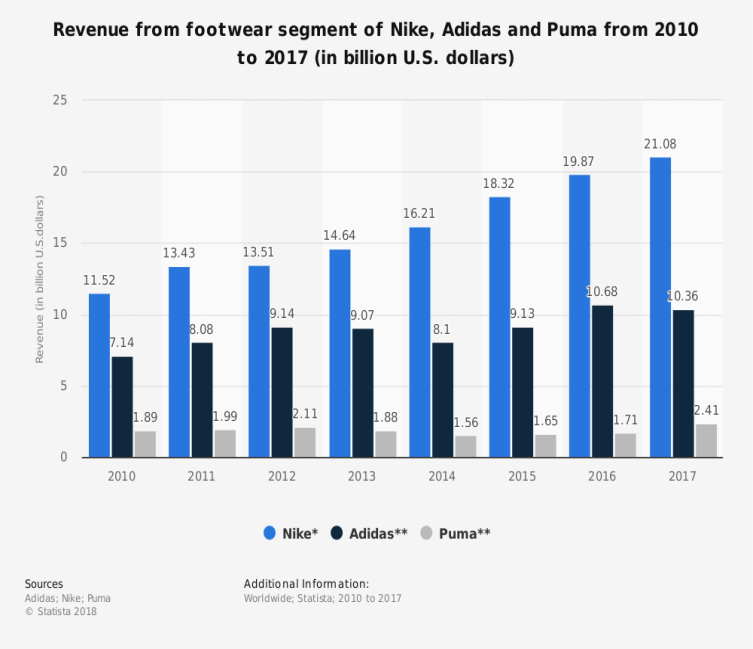

FIGURE 4: Revenue of footwear from top three selling sneaker companies (Nike, Adidas and Puma) ("Footwear / shoe revenue

Furthermore, sneakers have been used to impart positive messages, as many designers have used sneakers as a platform to make political and racial statements. For example, artist Jimm Lasser designed the "Obama Force One" in 2008 with etched profile portraits of then-President Obama, promoting his image. Likewise, NBA star Dwayne Wade released sneakers with "Black Lives Matter" political statements (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016).

Theory of Consumerism

The neoclassical theory of consumption was critiqued by Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class,* from which he created a framework that posits preferences are determined socially, dependent on the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy of status. Specifically, he declares that the consumption patterns of people will mimic those of consumers at a higher point in the hierarchy (Trigg, 2001). As societies begin to evolve, they become more mobile and their consumption habits focus less on leisure activities for engagement (possibly because they are less informed about it) and more on materialistic goods, in order to demonstrate their wealth. In such, Veblen labelled this type of consumeristic behavior as *conspicuous consumption*; consumers would rather spend money on goods rather than experiences, to publicly demonstrate their wealth to other members of society. Effectively, as wealth increases, so does one's apparent social status. The search for ever-increasing status is a never-ending product of our wealth-hungry societies. People have the desire to "always try to acquire new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others" (Trigg, 2001). Focusing back on Veblen's theory, he declared that each social class attempts to mirror the consumption behavior of the social class above it. This happens to such an extent that even the poorest social classes feel the burden and desire to match the spending habits of the wealthy; however, they do not share the same means to do so.

Similar to Veblen's theory is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class distinction. In his 1979 work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* Bourdieu elaborates on how social ranking is based on taste. Through such ranking, consumers with a large amount of cultural capital (this does not include monetary goods but rather education that elevates them to a higher class) are the pioneers in determining what constitutes good taste in a community. Subsequently, those with less cultural capital must accept the taste preferences dictated for them by those with more cultural capital (Allen & Anderson, 1994). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that the blatant compliance with the accepted form of taste

is in a way "symbolic violence," in the sense that people become so acclimated to this type of taste that they are unable to define their own type of taste, making them greatly disadvantaged (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Ultimately, Bourdieu argues that while the lower class thinks that they have their own ideas of taste, it is all within the confined, pre-determined constraints of what the upper class has decided. The taste preference is cultural hegemony of how class fractions, social groups based on class, are determined. Bourdieu explains how children can be predisposed to certain tastes but they are still class-specific, not necessarily individual. This leads children to habitat into their "appropriate" and respective social positions and internalize these preferences (Brisson & Bianchi, 2017).

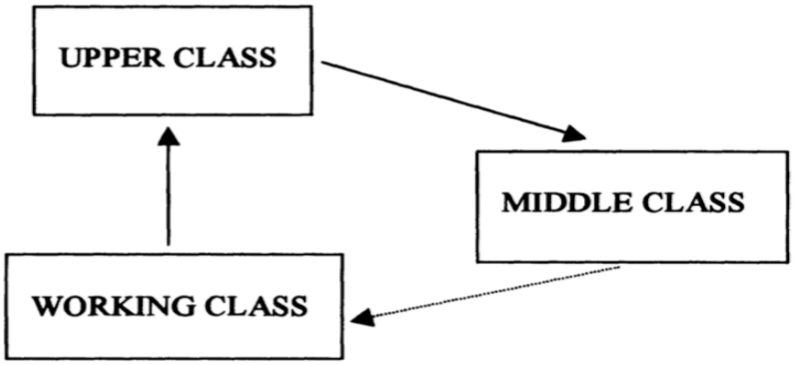

FIGURE 5: Alternative model for the transmission of taste between social classes (Trigg, 2001).

Nonetheless, there are some issues that have been raised against these theories, mainly directed at Veblen's approach. Firstly, the main criticism is that it is too restrictive to say that preferences and consumption habits only "trickle down" from top to bottom. Such an assertion does not consider the possibility that the trendsetters could be of a lower social class. Additionally, consumers no longer explicitly display their wealth, and expressions of affluence have become more sophisticated and increasingly subtle. AsBourdieu mentions, wealth can encompass more than just material or economic goods but also educational and cultural status. Lastly, another prominent critique is that "consumer behavior is no longer shaped by positions of social class but by lifestyles that cut across the social hierarchy" (Trigg, 2001). Figure 5 shows an alternative model for the transmission of taste between social classes. Instead of having the traditional, unidirectional model of top to bottom (upper to middle to working class), this circular flow still embraces the trickle-down effect but

also allows for a trickle-up effect. In the case of sneakerheads, I believe that this is significantly more relevant because it is in fact Black males (who historically have been in a lower social status) that dominate trends and buying habits (Granderson, 2013). As previously discussed, white individuals (historically in higher social statuses) attempt to emulate these trends. Simultaneously, poorer individuals see these coveted sneakers endorsed by their favorite celebrities and worn by individuals in upper classes and their desire for them intensifies. This example illustrates an interconnection of the social classes that contrasts with Veblen and Bourdieu's theories that it is a simple, linear trickle-down phenomenon. Ultimately, all social classes play a significant role in the robust theory of consumption and goods like the sneaker present complex forces at play that encourage consumers to buy them.

However, it was scholar Stuart Hall who disregarded the hierarchy of class and argued that culture is *not* what the upper class necessarily preferred but instead their "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined" (Hsu, 2017). This can be linked to the idea of representation. Hall destabilizes the notion of representation symbolizing a distortion or reflection of reality, as consequently, understanding representation would solely involve connecting the dots between the supposed true meaning of an event and how it is actually demonstrated. Alternatively, he argued that representation is "slippery," always dynamic. In other words, representation is constitutive: creating meaning through existing. The process of representation is mutually inclusive with reality (Leve, 2012). Therefore, while both Veblen and Bourdieu argued for the theory that the upper class impose onto the lower classes, Hall declared that power cannot be defined as simply. Instead, there are "pockets of resistance for undermined dominant media narratives" within each class that exude powerful political and racial messages, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (*Stuart Hall—Race, Gender, Class in the Media*, 2017).

Furthermore, Richard Jenkins, a professor of sociology, highlighted the strong interplay of internal and external factors that play a role in social identity. By extension, not only do individuals feel the desire to be different from others in their community, they also find points of commonality in order to create belonging and acceptance to a particular group. Additionally, they must feel accepted by outsiders within that group, to form a stronger sense of unity and collective identity. Jenkins formulated these two phenomena as "group identification" and "social categorization," respectively, referring to individuals recognizing *themselves* as citizens and other external figures recognizing them as citizens as well (R. Jenkins, 1996). Forming a collective identity is an innate

need because humans recognize the importance of it in defining their place in society. Consumption has frequently been a means of individual expression of social and collective identity, as well as social membership and status. Particularly, Black Americans have used consumption to heighten their status in society and to claim their right as equal members of society. In today's consumeristic world, mainstream society and elite society have become synonymous, mainly because individuals use the purchase and sporting of expensive and luxury items as a quantification of social membership and status. High priced items often correlate with higher wealth. Subsequently, marketing experts "view 'buying power as a true mark of personal worth and racial equality, and as a powerful rebuttal to racism" (Lamont & Molnár, 2001). After the 1980s, marketing focus shifted gears toward ethnic or multicultural groups and this pushed to divide the market into different demographic segments, such as the Black and Hispanic market. After the rise of "ethnoconsumerism," the Black market segment has been receiving more attention worldwide, as a direct target of products (Venkatesh, 1995).

Empirical evidence has shown that a core aspect of the normative model of social membership marketed to the Black segment is effectively that consumption by Black Americans is a way of proclaiming and increasing awareness of their complete societal membership in the United States. In other words, it is a method to display their complete integration with society, on levels of equality, acceptance, and status. Interestingly, White people view the rise of their social wealth as an individualistic feat but for Black Americans, achieving social membership is a collective act, that raises the social standing and recognition of *all* Black Americans, as a whole (Lamont & Molnár, 2001).

The Gentrification of Sneaker Culture

The consumption of sneakers has become significantly gentrified as a subculture of sneaker savants has evolved into a society of millennials that are all eager to wear the same shoe. It is primarily the consumers of color that have influenced sneaker fashion, styles and sales, followed by its subsequent appropriation and gentrification by Whites (S. Jenkins, 2015). Dallas Penn, Internet personality and sneaker master, stated that part of Black culture is the art of sneaker presentation, "The idea that a white/unworn/clean sneaker is better than one that has been worn/used played in" (Diaz, 2018). Arguably, sneaker culture has the potential to unify race and break down racial hate if marketed and advertised correctly: for example, by serving as canvases for positive racial and political statements, and for vessels of cultural appreciation. However, over recent years, the opposite has been

true and sneakers have acted as an instrument to further divide, rather than unify, races. One hundred twenty-eight years since its birth, the sneaker has become the mecca for political and social commentary, uniquely differentiating it from other footwear. Two recent examples that feature sneakers through a political lens are the newly branded New Balance sneakers and the Kaepernick Nike ad. Beginning with the former, after the public support of Donald Trump's protectionist trade policies by the vice president of New Balance, a white supremacist blogger declared New Balance sneakers as the "official shoes of White people" and further urged all his followers to buy a pair "so we will be able to recognize one another by our sportswear" (Popken, 2016). New Balance sneakers are known for a large and recognizable "N" on the side of the sneaker, which led to a neo-Nazi acronym connection. Similar to how some criminal gangs identified themselves with sneaker brands, political groups were now following suit and using footwear as a means of branding and arguably creating political isolation and racial division. This led other owners of New Balance shoes to publicly boycott the company by throwing away their sneakers or setting them on fire. The sneaker company quickly issued a statement against this sneaker-related hate, declaring that they "[do] not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form" (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). This is a prominent example of how an individual used this sneaker as a tool to propel racial divide; the sneaker was turned into an instrument of hate. While New Balance released a statement against this divisive position, the idea of white supremacy will forever be linked to this brand. Essentially, this example has demonstrated how consumption can be racially constructed, which is the root of Veblen's theory of consumption.

Following a similar theme from a different political standpoint, in mid-2018, Nike released a controversial global advertising campaign that featured Colin Kaepernick, a civil rights activist and American football player. Since 2016, Kaepernick has been a relatively polarized public figure as he refused to stand for the national anthem when playing for the San Francisco 49ers. This protest was aimed at bringing awareness to the police killings of Black individuals. Following this protest, Kaepernick was removed from the National Football League. Nike used this brave stance and powerful demonstration as a medium for a campaign that featured a close-up of Kaepernick's face with the compelling caption: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." (Kelner, 2018) Nike used this moment of kneeling as a justice campaign that advocated for civil rights. In such a way, they managed to market their sneakers as also embodying justice and equality. In essence, wearing these Nike sneakers can give *the consumer* the *power* to take a stand and do what is right.

Nonetheless, Nike's share price dropped roughly 2% the week after the campaign was released. While some were supportive of the advertisement, including famous athletes like LeBron James and Serena Williams, other consumers decided to boycott the brand by burning Nike sneakers, cutting out the Nike logo from the brand's socks or sharing on social media devoted to the destruction of Nike products with the use of hashtags #JustBurnIt and #BoycottNike (Kelner, 2018).

Crime Associated with Sneaker Culture

On the one hand, many examples of sneaker design illustrate how artists and celebrities have used sneakers as a medium for positive political and racial statements in an attempt to unify people; on the other hand, we also cannot ignore the crime associated with sneaker culture. Sneakers have also been used as a tool to deepen racial discord in America. In 2014, it was estimated that sneaker-based conflict was roughly responsible for over 1,200 deaths per year, more than 20 per week. These deaths can be attributed to the marriage of sneakerhead hype and the rise in resale prices that predictably resulted in the increase of this dark side of sneaker culture (Friendly, 2015a). Many of the sneakerhead-related crimes were a result of envy and "desperation of the youth" (Friendly, 2015a). Sneakers have been tied to criminality even through their name: *sneak*ers were coined for their noiseless tracks. For example, Run-DMC's song "My Adidas" (1986) featured lace-less Adidas Superstars, which were associated with "felon shoes" — shoes worn by criminals. However, the rappers defended their lace-less shoes by rapping "I wore my sneakers, but I'm not a sneak" (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). After this song, the group was endorsed by Adidas with a million-dollar contract, which was a first for a musical group. Similarly, Nike Air Force 1 (AF1) sneakers became a symbol of pride for street drug dealers (Chrisman-Campbell, 2016). Sneakers have also been used as markers in various cultures around the world. For example, both in Europe and in the United States, sneakers thrown over a telephone line indicate that drugs are being sold in that neighborhood and gang territory (Clifford, 2016).

Criminal gangs have used sneaker brands as a label to represent their organizations (Kozlowska, 2017). Brand distinctions were also used as a means of intimidation and recruitment. Gangs were originally a collection of neighborhood "clubs" that began forming as early as the 1920s, but these were not territorial and unorganized groups. With far fewer members, their goal was to give off a "tough guy" image (Hoover, 1999). It was only in the late 1960s that larger gangs started to form, originally for protection from other rival gangs. These gangs, like

the Bloods and the Crips, were significantly more territorial, were much larger in size and were more violent. By 1980, there were roughly 15,000 gang members in both the Bloods and the Crips (Hoover, 1999). Therefore, for identification purposes, the gangs used trademarks of color, hand signals, graffiti, etc.

In 1972, the gang Original Blood Family (The Bloods) was founded in Los Angeles and it was predominately Black and Latino; they were identifiable by wearing the color red. They primarily wore red Reeboks, which they believe stood for "Respect Each and Every Blood, OK?" The main rival of The Bloods were The Crips, founded in Los Angeles in 1969, who were identified by the color blue. Because they referred to themselves as the "Blood Killas" (BK), they typically wore blue British Knight (BK) athletic shoes (Dunn, 1999). Unfortunately, many sneaker companies have used gang rivalry to increase their sales and for promotion of their sneakers. For example, in 1990, at the peak of gang conflict and violence between The Bloods and The Crips, it was rumored that a shoe company would release a Christian Knight (CK or "Crip Killa") shoe, to combat The Bloods BK's. While the shoe never actually got released, even the ideation of creating such a sneaker made the sneaker company complicit in this gang violence at a time when conflict between rival gang members was at its heights. However, some rappers have worked in collaboration with sneaker companies to alleviate the gang violence and rivalry. Kendrick Lamar teamed up with Reebok and in 2016 released a pair of Reebok sneakers with *both* red and blue elements in an attempt to unify the two gangs.

Potential Causes for this Violence

The potential causes for sneaker-related violence are not easily defined and expand across many possibilities. For decades, the United States has been dependent on the wealth and status linked to material goods. The marriage of sneakerhead culture to a form of currency maximized its hype and subsequently the violence associated with it. The currency defined is less so through a means of monetary value, but rather the visibility through the social and cultural status and credibility it offers. Therefore, one of the potential causes is the supposed success that sneakers symbolize. Sneakers are worn by rappers, athletes, and celebrities, all figures who are idolized by consumers. The sneakers act as emblems that "things are all right" says a *Sports Illustrated* sociologist (Tang, 2015). This further encourages consumers to purchase sneakers and mimic the lifestyles of the famous, giving the impression that the two communities are being brought closer together. Additionally, today's youth face a new sort of desperation: a desire

to be seen in something highly coveted, generating an abundance of jealousy and envy.

A wealth of violence is associated with sneaker releases, and while some shoe companies have realized that they can take part and help change sneakerhead-related crime by changing the release date from nighttime to the morning (as people are found to be less aggressive in the morning), it has helped but not nearly eliminated the problem (Friendly, 2015a). Furthermore, sneaker company marketing strategies, in many countries, also play a crucial role and are potential *contributors* to the violence. Sneaker-related violence is comparable particularly in the United Kingdom, where their sneaker culture, known in the UK as "trainers," was predominately molded by football (American soccer), British grime rap, and club and rave culture (Warnett, 2014). The violence in the two countries potentially has similar inter- and intra-racial implications. A prominent example of poor marketing occurred in 2008 in London. Nike was set to release a new sneaker known as the "Air Stab," in reference to the shoe's stability. While the shoes were originally sold in 1988, a limited, retro edition relaunched in 2008 with the marketing phrase "Runnin' 'n' Gunnin'" in one advertisement (Tibbetts, 2008). In that year alone, 53 people were stabbed to death in London, many of them teenagers, and while Nike refuted that the sneaker glorified and promoted street violence, the shoes were originally pulled from release due to the sensitivity of its name. However, the shoe ended up being re-released in London, which led to several knife-related shoplifting incidents, including several stabbings of Nike staff. As a result, Nike discontinued the sneaker's production altogether (Gonzalez, 2012). While Nike insists that it was not their intention to trigger violence, Crimestoppers, a British crime fighting charity, declared that Nike was "naïve and act[ed] so irresponsibly with its marketing…with the current gun and knife epidemic…we would expect retailers to be taking a more sensitive approach to promoting products to a young and impressionable market" (Tibbetts, 2008). This is a prime example of the grave responsibility that these shoe companies have, to carefully construct their marketing, which could potentially aid in reducing the amount of sneaker-related violence. While it is not *only* their responsibility, they can attempt to alleviate this problem.

Shoe companies have successfully fabricated status from inexpensive pieces of leather stitched together, using a collaboration of high-priced products and expensive advertisements studded with superstars (priced at more than $200 million annually). Subsequently, most of these advertisements are geared toward malleable millennials. This sense of status "feed[s] those who are starving for self-esteem" (Telander, 1990).

Sociologically, it can be explained that people are motivated by peer pressure based on what they see on the media, with celebrities and with their friends. By repeated advertisements of sneakers as a trendy necessity, sneakers and indispensability have become closely linked. While shoe companies claim that their advertisements are directed toward sports and not fashion trends, interestingly enough, more than 80% of sport shoes sold in the United States are not used for athletic purposes (playing sports) (Telander, 1990). This begs the question, will companies jeopardize their sales by reducing successful advertisements (that ultimately leads to peer pressure, elevated sales etc.), even if it means that it has the potential to stop violence? Highly doubtful.

Sneakerhead-associated Violence

As mentioned above, there has been a long-standing, historical association with violence and sneakers. In 2014, it was estimated that roughly 1,200 people a year are killed due to sneaker-related violence (Friendly, 2015a). These phenomena of violence and crime have typically involved Black youth, through both inter- and intra-racial confrontations. What was once a subculture now has become pervasive. Sneakerhead culture is everywhere and has been expanded as consumers began looking for third-party validation. Consumers want to emulate their idols and represent them through the purchase of their shoes (Friendly & Partridge, 2015). Subsequently, robbing someone of their shoes has been equated to stripping them of their status. The most prominent example came from the 1990 *Sports Illustrated* article, "Your Sneakers or Your Life" that highlighted the death of 15-year-old Michael Eugene Thomas in 1989. He was murdered by then 17-year-old James David Martin, who took him to the woods, strangled him and then stole his just two-week old Air Jordans. While it was later discovered that Martin was a serial killer and Michael was not his only victim, this story created nationwide shock and was labelled a cautionary story for the rising crime associated with street culture and sneakers. Even though this incident happened more than 20 years ago, there is still an ongoing violence in connection with sneaker releases. In December 2011, two days before Christmas, Nike released Jordan XI sneakers, also known as the Concord. All over the United States, violence ensued. In Richmond, California, shots were fired that cancelled the release of the shoes. Objects were thrown and riots followed in Seattle, forcing the police to use pepper spray to subdue the crowds. Four arrests were made in Baltimore mall. One woman left her two toddlers unattended in the car while she went to purchase the Jordans. In Jersey City, a 20-year-old was stabbed seven times during the chaos of customers rushing into the store, just to get

their hands on a pair of sneakers. These are just some examples of violence that ensued after release of sneakers (Gonzalez, 2012). It is important to note that today there is relatively less sneaker-related crime, because there is less overall crime in general (Tang, 2015). In terms of violence after purchasing, in 2018, a teenager was robbed of his $2,000 Air Jordans by three men (Amanda Woods, 2018). In Massachusetts, a home invasion was organized to steal two trash bags worth of expensive shoes. Additionally, in August 2014, a teenager was left with no shoes, beaten up and bloodied, robbed of Nike Air Force One's by four men (Paulin, 2014).

It is also possible that the way in which the media reported these sneaker-related crimes helped sensationalize the issue further by creating an artificial hype associated with buying sneakers in person. This explains why many consumers avoid online purchases and instead line up, sometimes nights before sneaker releases, to buy sneakers, subjecting themselves to the potential risks of sneaker-related violence. Sneaker companies, like Nike, generate artificial scarcity by only releasing a limited number of shoes, creating a type of raffle system for consumers. Effectively, Nike could produce a substantial number of shoes in a very short period of time, but a limited number of shoes through selective and saturated advertising not only maximizes consumeristic hype but also increases the stress that product-driven consumers feel to purchase the sneakers (Tang, 2015). Additionally, if consumers miss the first drop of the sneakers, the resale price can be ten times the original price. For example, in 2007, Nike released a sneaker called the Pigeon Dunk whose original price sold for $69.99 and its resale price was a whopping $5,500 (Friendly & Partridge, 2015). Similarly, Kanye's 350 Yeezy Boost collection sold out in 15 minutes after its initial release, retail price for $220, and hours later appeared on eBay for a resale price of $10,000 (Garber, 2015). These astronomical surges in sneaker price act as a driver for consumers to wait outside in lines and risk violent riots to purchase the sneaker for cheaper and potentially make a significant profit. In such, this consumer mentality and resale optics is one of the main drivers of sneaker-related violence. Sneakers have the potential to create so much product agitation to cause senseless violence and crime. Stealing soles off of a person's feet is the lowest form of crime – you can't get more basic – and yet consumers continue to devalue themselves to a price of a sneaker.

Overall, sneaker-related violence cannot be attributed to one single factor. Rather, it is a combination of various circumstances that has led to the historical outbreak of violence. It runs deeper than materialistic advertisement or celebrity endorsements; societal values are not aligned as shoes are valued

higher than human life. Material status is esteemed higher than personal values.

Intersection between Race and Sneaker-Related Violence

However, it can be argued that the key root of this violence is not the advertisements at all but rather the inherent social issues of class and race. Historically, Nike generally features young, athletic Black men in their advertisements, which makes sense that the demographic more likely to emotionally connect with these advertisements are racialized, young Black men. For example, in August 1992, Nike released an ad that targeted Black Americans with a controversial view on their "family values." It included two young men talking on a basketball court, one of whom is speaking about his absent father who "runs around" (Horovitz, 1992). At the time, Nike's Director of Advertising, Scott Bedbury, mentioned that ads like this "make the brand more relevant to them" by revealing a layer of "honesty" that would specifically appeal to their Black consumers (Horovitz, 1992). On a more positive note, Nike also launched a campaign in 1996: "Griffey for President." This showcased one of the most liked baseball stars, Ken Griffey Jr., in a playful ad that had the semblance of a political campaign, highlighting his winning swing and smile (Luce, 2013). More recently, Nike released an advertisement pledging full support to Black athletes and their stand for social justice activism, built around Kaepernick, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback (Fulwood III, 2018). These last two examples positively portray Black athletes in high positions of power, thereby acting as role models for the Black youth. According to "The Multicultural Economy, 1990-2009" study done by the University of Georgia, the Selig Center of Economic Growth projected that the buying power of Black Americans would increase to $965 billion from $318 billion between 1990 to 2009 (Bailey, 2006). This represented a 203% increase in buying power that surpasses all other ethnic and racial groups, and represents and an ideal market for advertisements.

While it is typically that young Black males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are linked to sneaker-related crimes, low economic status and potentially low education status makes these individuals feel a lack of opportunity or option: "they feel the system is closed off to them" (Telander, 1990). Yet, they are still exposed to the same cultural advertisement of the cool, new, coveted items that the White middle class is. This has potential to be linked to appropriation of Black culture: once sneakers have been commodified in mainstream fashion, originally only seen as "Black" or "urban," but now as cool or popular items. An associate professor of history at Tennessee State University,

Keisha Brown states that "many facets of Black culture, both historically and contemporaneous, have become synonymous with mainstream American culture… People embrace the hip or popular elements of Black culture, but not Black Americans" (Lambert, 2019). This is the essence of cultural appropriation: taking aspects of Black culture, re-packaging and commercializing it, making it more desirable, then selling it back. Effectively, money is made off of Black Americans by using Black Americans. As stated by Elijah Anderson, a sociologist specializing in ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania, these individuals don't have the means to get what they want, but they still have the same desire, viewing these sneakers as a stamp of success (Telander, 1990). Through market research, it has been found that one reason why Black Americans spend disproportionately *more* on goods is to demonstrate their "high-standing" position in society. For instance, 35% of Black Americans are more likely to buy a product if it has been designed by a celebrity (*African American spending path demands marketers show more love, support of culture*, 2019). In effect, they strive to combat the common stereotype of Black Americans being part of a lower standing in the institutionalized social hierarchy of America, with minimal buying power and options. For example, Black Americans spend roughly $1.2 trillion annually, and not only on the products "created specifically to appeal to them" (*African American spending path demands marketers show more love, support of culture*, 2019).

Unfortunately, Black Americans continue to receive less respect for their purchases and such purchases of luxury items are frequently returned with suspicious accusations of conspicuous consumption or illegal activity. According to a Gallup poll in 2015, 24% of Black Americans felt discriminated against when shopping, compared to 18% feeling the same way during police encounters (Nittle, 2019). In fact, in 2019, there was a racial discrimination lawsuit against Moschino, a high-end fashion brand, for using code words (most notably "Serena") when referring to Black customers, indicating that they need to "closely watch" or even "follow them" (*Moschino Has a Code Word for Black Shoppers, According to Damning New Lawsuit*, 2019). A strategic marketing specialist from Chicago stated that "[Black Americans can] buy their way in, but money does not trump blackness." (Lamont & Molnár, 2001) This quote demonstrates that by showing off their wealth, Black Americans can decrease the preconceived stigmatization of their social identity in hopes to combat masked societal racism. Black Americans are linked to a stigmatized social identity, so through their high-end spending, they can be inaccurately stereotyped as showing off. The problem is the not the ability to acquire money but the acceptance "for

having that ability" (McMeekin, 2002). While social membership and societal integration remain important, why is increased social membership equated with higher buying power? If Black Americans are seen as the "trendsetters" of society, why are they still regarded as having very minimal buying power? To attempt to solve these questions, societies need to strive to be more inclusive. Professor Sabrina Pendergrass, an assistant sociology professor in the Department of African-American Studies at the University of Virginia, noted that there has been an "embrace of hip-hop culture and Black urban fashion by Whites who are often references as the 'mainstream' of fashion," but we have not seen similar integration of "Blacks into the social and economic institutions of society." This highlights a concept of color-blind racism, a theory discussed in Duke University Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's scholarship on race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Interestingly, the Black males have been found to be the most targeted demographic for marketing of sneakers as they are the most influential trendsetters (Granderson, 2013). Based on public market research, young Black males are more likely to experiment with new styles, are the first in their friend group to try new clothing, and are generally asked "for advice before buying new things" by their acquaintances (Granderson, 2013). Companies like Nike have realized this target-market influence and it has become the backbone of their marketing strategy, which explains why a lot of their advertisements include Black men and are geared toward them. While Nike has been hit with some significant racial backlash, the company has nonetheless been experiencing an 8% five-year annual growth rate. Larry Miller, President of the Jordan Brand in Nike, discussed that the brand actively tries to attract young, Black consumers as they are the "trendsetter[s] for America and for the world really" (Granderson, 2013). Nike takes advantage of this as their most profitable brand (Jordan sneakers) is very popular with Black males and they leverage Michael Jordan, who is a hero in the Black community. Therefore, companies must be weary of potentially racist advertisement, as this would significantly defer Black consumers. Through an interview, Professor Pendergrass stated that fashion advertisements can possibly be racist if they "draw on historical and persistent stereotypes about race, specifically about Black inferiority and White superiority, in order to maintain inequality and to make a profit." Such potentially racist advertisements can include depicting Black individuals as prone to criminality, hypersexualized, animalistic, or of low status. As such, companies must recognize that the Black community has a significant influence on the market and engaging with them could be extremely beneficial for their sales. Therefore, placing Black

individuals in a positive light in advertisements would be advantageous to the progression of social equality. The example with Nike and Michael Jordan illustrates the importance of depicting Black men as role models and in a positive light in advertisements. By doing so, marketing companies showcase the diversity of the Black culture, especially in terms of purchasing power by solidifying the image of the valuable Black consumer, which can effectively help reshape the external (at times negative) recognition of Black Americans in our society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, sneakers are continuously becoming more present in our modern popular culture. They have been a platform of expression, creativity, and connectivity. As was discussed, they can have an extremely positive presence in uniting communities through displays of positive messages and as a representation of power and status. However, there is significant connection between sneakers and violence, for example through gang identification or disproportionate consumer hype during shoe releases. What is it about sneakers and their artificial scarcity that has transformed consumer frenzy into violence? We have seen this violence associated with other commodities like iPhone releases or the 1996 "Tickle Me Elmo" doll craze; however, the difference is that the violence with sneakers continues after the purchase, with shoe-related robberies and even killings. Since current consumer pressures can evoke violence, sneaker companies must also effectively resolve the issue of artificial scarcity; do we need more regulation or a shift in consumer marketing related to sneakers from a scarcity model to perhaps a more inclusivity model? Alternatively, why not completely eliminate the need for artificial scarcity? These questions can be further explored through a deeper discussion of capitalism and its effects on our society.

While there are many relevant factors, this research has demonstrated that the violence associated with sneakers extends far beyond sneaker culture and consumption desires; there are fundamental issues of racial inequality and societal imbalance in values and social class. Liz Dolan, Nike's director of public relations, declares that it is an incomprehensible example of "racist hysteria" how society directly assumes that the Black youth is responsible for this violence and that they have the urge to do anything they need to, to get what they want (Telander, 1990). Unfortunately, it boils down to the predisposed opinions and biases society has toward specific racial groups; in this case, that Black Americans are more violent. If this isn't changed, then how can we expect the current environment of violence surrounding sneaker sales to be minimized? Unfortunately, violence is simply a

symptom of desire but the real issues extend deeper than that. We must first tackle societies core issues of racism and inequality before attempting to direct the blame toward artificial advertisements.

This research is important and worthy of attention as sneaker culture is responsible for a large number of *preventable* crimes, many of which are associated with race. More specifically, sneaker-related crimes and death represent an underlying problem in society where materialistic goods are worth more than human life. This research brought to light fundamental issues within society, and should prompt shoe companies to alter how they advertise, market, design and sell their shoes to aid in minimizing sneaker-related crimes. However, can we expect shoe companies to change their successful advertisements to help prevent violence, even if this means it will reduce their sneaker sales? We need to find a way to devalue sneakers to what they are: shoes. Sneakers should not be the epitome of apparel-violence. Rather, they should be used as platforms to bridge the gap across cultural, racial and socioeconomic divides.

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