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# Sneakers as A Subculture: Emerging From Underground to Upperground

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A review of the literature on footwear studies, which mostly focuses on historical shoes, offers us some insights into sneakers. It shows that studies on contemporary shoes, especially on men's shoes, are limited and that there are no groups of people who are united by one type of shoes and who can be called a subculture.

Subcultural theorists find the pattern, tendency, and commonalities across different subcultural groups as a community and among the members of that community. In that way, we can begin to make a theoretical interpretation about subcultures in general. In order to investigate a subculture as a social group as well as an agent of male socialization, we can focus on their social communications where meanings are negotiated through dialogues and interactions. We must be careful not to be monolithic about subcultures because they produce different interpretations around themselves as individuals and as a collective group. While many do share similarities and commonalities, no two subcultures are identical.

In this chapter, I treat a community of sneaker enthusiasts as a subcultural group and explore to what extent it can be explained by various social theories including subcultural theories. Sneaker enthusiasts call themselves "sneakerheads," "sneakerholics," or "sneaker pimps." A group that is formed by and with sneaker fans and collectors can be another case study in subcultural studies since they share many, but not all, of the determinants and variables that other youth subcultures consist of. At the same time, they are also unique in that they are bounded by one object, that is, sneakers. They worship and celebrate sneakers as an object of desire, which contain a great deal of social information.

Subcultures can be constructed around any beliefs, attitudes, interests, or activities. Every subculture has its own values and norms that the participants share, and that gives them a common group or organizational identity. Wearing the right pair of sneakers, however it is defined, gives them a title of "a true sneakerhead."

The sneaker subculture that originally emerged from a hip-hop culture which emerged from a street-produced community uses their own language, and they have their own verbal communication methods, using distinct jargon, phrases, slangs, and idioms to explain various types and sneakers which outsiders would not understand (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1. Sneaker Glossary and Commonly Used Abbreviations**

Abbreviation	Terminology
3M	Reflective Material

Abbreviation	Terminology
ACG	All Conditions Gear
AF1	Air Force 1
AJ	Air Jordan
AM	Air Max
AZG	Air Zoom Generation
B-Grade	A shoe that is produced in the factory that may or may not have flaws. A certain amount has to be marked as "B-Grade" even if nothing is wrong with the shoe and usually found in outlet stores.
Beater	A shoe that is worn without care, usually a shoe that you wear all the time. This is also the same shoe you do not mind getting stepped on, scuffed, or dirty.
Bred	Black/Red Air Jordan colorway
BRS	Blue Ribbon Sports
Camo	Camouflage
CG	Cool Grey, usually used when talking about the Air Jordan III, IV, IX, or XI.
CO.JP	Concept Japan
DMP	Defining Moments Pack
DQM	Dave's Quality Meat (a shoe shop in NYC)
DS	Dead stock
DT	Diamond Turf
FT	Feng Tay (Nike Factory in Asia) usually seen on the box tag of sample or promo shoe.
G.O.A.T.	Greatest of All Time
GR	General Release
GS	Grade School
Heat	Hard to find shoes usually older models but can also be newer models.

Abbreviation	Terminology
HOA	History of Air
Holy Grail	Your most wanted shoe that may be very expensive or extremely rare.
HTM	A set of shoes designed by Hiroshi Fujiwara, Tinker Hatfield, and Mark Parker. HTM is the first letter of each designer's name.
Hyperstrike	Ultra limited and available at Nike shops with a Tier 0 and 1 account. Not many shops have these accounts because they are very hard to get. Also, some people may call shoes numbered at 500 pairs or less a "Hyperstrike".
ID	Individually Designed
ISS	Instyleshoes.com (Forum)
J's	Jordans
JB	Jordan Brand
LBJ	Lebron James
LE	Limited Edition
LS	Lifestyle which is a Jordan product that is usually associated with matching clothing and is geared toward trendy fashion than toward athletic performance.
NDS	Near dead stock
NIB	New in Box
NL	No Liner
NSB	Nikeskateboarding.org (Forum)
NT	Nike Talk (Forum)
NWT	New with Tags
OG	Original
P-Rod	Paul Rodriguez (a skater for Nike with a signature shoe line)
PE	Player Exclusive
Premium	Usually made with high-quality construction or material and will most likely cost more

Abbreviation	Terminology
Quickstrike	Only released at special Nike account stores, in most cases may pop out of no where in limited numbers
Retro	Re-Release
Retro +	Not an original Jordan colorway
SB	Skateboard
SBTG	Sabotage (the world famous custom designer)
SE	Special Edition
SVSM	Saint Vincent Saint Mary (Lebron James' High School)
UNDFTD	Undefeated (a shoe shop in Los Angeles, CA)
Uptowns	Air Force 1
VNDS	Very near dead stock
X	Usually stands for "and".

Based on information sourced from "A Beginner's Guide to Sneaker Terminology", a list compiled by Nick Engvall, Brandon Edler and Russ Bengtson (<http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2012/09/a-beginners-guide-to-sneaker-terminology/>) and Sneaker Slang Glossary (<http://osneaker.com/glossary.html>)

There is a great deal of influential and important subcultural studies that have come out of the United States and the United Kingdom focusing on specific social groups that distinguish themselves from the so-called mainstream society. The Chicago School which refers to the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago produced major research studies in urban sociology using ethnographic fieldwork as a research method, and they made a major contribution to the development of a micro-level social theory, symbolic interactionism, in explaining marginal groups of people. As early as 1918, W.I. Thomas and Florian Witold Znaniecki published their book on Chicago's Polish immigrants (1918); Nels Anderson wrote a book on *The Hobo* (1922) which was about homelessness in Chicago; Frederic Thrasher's study was on gangs that breed in a particular neighborhood (1927); Edward Franklin Frazer's work was on *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939). Their research subjects were often poor immigrants and racial minorities who were detached from the mainstream, or the deviant groups such as homeless people or gang members, many of whom lived on the social periphery.<sup>[1]</sup> It was not until the 1940s that the term "subculture" was beginning to be used to account for particular kinds of social difference in a pluralized and fractured United States (Gelder 2005: 21).

In contrast, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, UK, established in 1964, paid attention to the Marxist concept of social class as their central theme in reference to the emergence of subcultures, youth subcultures in particular. The researchers at CCCS explicitly state that subculture is essentially a working-class phenomenon. Based on this idea, if one belongs to an elite class, there is no need for him or her to be a member of a subculture. The two most important books that were published by the CCCS scholars are *Resistance through Rituals* (1976) edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson and *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige (1979). They examined skinheads, mods, and teddy boys (Hall and Jefferson 1976), and punks (Hebdige 1979), all of which have distinct stylistic expressions. In terms of their methodological research strategies, they moved away from ethnography and applied semiotics in their analysis of youth subcultures.<sup>[2]</sup>

Clark explains the definition of subculture mainly includes young people:

It [subculture] has come to signify the twentieth-century category for youth groups who possess some sort of marked style and shared affiliations. Whereas sociologists use the term to describe an infinitely wider array of groups—sport fishermen, West Texas Baptists, or toy train hobbyists —“subculture” is more popularly used to characterize groups of young people. (Clark 2003: 223, footnote 2)

These two traditions in the United States and the United Kingdom have laid the foundation of all the subcultural studies that emerged afterward. In both of them, subcultures exist in opposition to mainstream and dominant culture, although the degree of resistance may vary from community to community.

However, recent scholars move beyond these traditions. As Bennet and Hodkinson explain:

This interpretation is out of step with research emerging from the field of youth transitions, in which a range of theorists have drawn attention to the apparently increasing diversity, complexity and longevity of youth and the porous nature of the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. (2012: 1)

Post-subcultural theorists see limitations of the traditional understanding of subcultures, especially the CCCS framework (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Hodkinson 2002; Muggleton and Wienzierl 2003) because their approach with a focus on class tended to be age-specific and age-limited examining only people in teens and early twenties (Muggleton and Wienzierl 2003). Instead of the term “subculture,” many post-subcultural theorists find it more appropriate to use the term “scene” proposed by Bennett and Peterson (2004). Bennett (2006: 223) points out that the concept portrays individuals as more reflexive in their appropriation and use of particular musical and stylistics resources. It also does not presume that all of a participant’s actions are governed by subcultural

standards (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 3). The relationship between style, musical taste, and identity has become progressively weaker and articulated more fluidity (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 11).

My research on sneakers is both empirical and theoretical, and I lean more toward the CCCS in placing sneaker enthusiasts within a sociological framework while reading the meanings of sneakers as a text but at the same time incorporating ethnography and face-to-face interactions with sneaker enthusiasts. Unlike post-subcultural theorists, I prefer to use the term “subculture” in my exploration of the sneaker community because I wish to show the disappearance of the underground and the hidden nature of a subculture and the emergence of an “upperground” subculture implying the social exposure of the community as the result of commodification. Unlike other contemporary youth groups, sneaker enthusiasts do not temporarily take part in a “scene.” Sneaker fans almost never part with sneakers and are constantly with them. Their involvement in and commitment to the sneaker world is not transient, and that is manifested through their shoes.

I have conducted fieldwork attending sneaker events and conventions where sneaker collectors buy and sell their sneakers. At the same time, I have paid attention to different types of sneakers that they wear, observing how they are worn, what each type indicates, and what it means to be the insider members. Youth subcultures are becoming so complex and diversified that it is not just about a subculture versus a mainstream culture which is too simplistic a classification. As Weinzierl and Muggleton explain:

The subculture concept seems to be little more than a cliché, with its implications that both “subculture” and the parent culture against which it is defined are coherent and homogenous formations that can be clearly demarcated. But contemporary youth cultures are characterized by far more complex stratifications than the suggested by the simple dichotomy of “monolithic mainstream”—“resistant subcultures”. (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 7)

I argue that there is an “underground subculture” and an “upperground subculture,” and the sneaker subculture that used to be underground is now on the upperground and becoming increasingly apolitical, although it is still labeled as a subculture. As Weinzierl and Muggleton further point out:

Certain contemporary “subcultural” movements can still express political orientation, the potential for style itself to resist appears largely lost, with any “intrinsically” subversive quality to subcultures exposed as an illusion. Thus, while the analysis of the CCCS can still be regarded as pioneering scientific work, they no longer appear to reflect the political, cultural and economic realities of the twenty-first century. (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 4)

## Three waves of the sneaker phenomenon

I broadly classify a phenomenon of the sneaker collection and popularity into three periods and name them as different stages of “waves” borrowing the concept of different stages and waves that feminism has gone through:<sup>[3]</sup>

- 1) The First Wave Sneaker Phenomenon: This occurred locally in New York in the 1970s, and it is the pre-Jordan era which is prior to the introduction of Nike Air Jordan sneakers. This was the beginning of an underground sneaker subculture with the growth of hip-hop culture. The sneaker subculture was considered a hidden community that originally came out of the poor neighborhoods dominated mostly by racial minorities.
- 2) The Second Wave Sneaker Phenomenon: This is the post-Jordan era that started with the launch of the Nike Air Jordan sneakers which were produced in 1984 and released to the market in 1985. It was named after legendary American basketball player Michael Jordan. The post-Jordan era is the start of the commodification and the massification of sneakers which were intensified year after year. The sneaker phenomenon spread further and more widely to the world while gradually transcending cultural, racial, class, and national boundaries. It is no longer as underground or hidden as it used to be, although it is still a subculture. I would call it an “upperground subculture,” which is a subculture that has appeared on the social surface and has become recognizable by the masses.
- 3) The Third Wave Sneaker Phenomenon: This began with the advent of the Internet and the development of smartphones and tablets in the twenty-first century in the West, American society in particular. We see the global spread and diffusion of the sneaker popularity in the fragmented postmodern age with an increasing usage of the social media as a communication tool. The new technological trend drastically transformed the sneaker enthusiasts’ communication process and competition in speed. The trend that started during the Second Wave is now accelerated at a more rapid speed.

These three waves of the sneaker phenomenon are explored in-depth in this chapter as well as in the subsequent chapters.

### The First Wave pre-Jordan Phenomenon as an underground subculture

To understand where a sneaker subculture started from and why, we must put sneakers within a larger historical framework of hip-hop which is of African American cultural aesthetic traditions and movements (Chang 2005, 2006; Price 2006; Rabaka 2011). A youth subculture is about a lifestyle which includes their preferences for music, books, arts, and fashion among others. Typical sneaker enthusiasts share a similar lifestyle, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, a baseball cap, favoring street art, such as graffiti, and listening to rap music. Sneakers were very much part of the music scene that originated in the African American community in New York.



In order for us to understand the origin of a sneaker subculture, we need to know about a hip-hop culture which is male-dominant, and in order to understand the origin of the hip-hop culture, we need to trace back the economic and social situations of New York City in the 1970s. Material objects, including dress and sneakers, are never independent of their social and cultural contexts and surroundings. The way we dress is consciously and subconsciously imposed on us by external factors. As long as something or someone belongs to a society, social influences are unavoidable.

The First Wave Sneaker Phenomenon has roots in the South Bronx, NY, which was the most impoverished neighborhood in the 1970s, and it was probably the worst times in the history of New York. This was when the city officially declared bankruptcy which led to the deterioration of people's living standards and the increase in the number of homeless people. The economy declined, the poverty rate soared along with the increasing crime rates in mugging, killing, drug dealing, and prostitution, among others. New York with a tarnished image was an extremely dangerous place to visit or live in. People lost jobs and were forced to live below their means. As a result, "Street gangs marked walls in local neighborhoods to claim their territory, then individuals began spraying their names on the subways" (Aheran 2003: 20). At the time, there was a strong correlation between race and class since the majority of the poverty-stricken households were racial minorities, especially the black families. Unlike the recent decades where people celebrate and encourage diversity, racial pluralism, and multiculturalism, race was a class problem, and class was a race problem in the United States, and the city was clearly racially and socially divided.

Hip-hop culture and rap music, as a completely new music genre, were born under these circumstances. As DJ Kool Herc, who is known as the founding father of hip-hop, says (in Chang 2005: xiii): "Hip-hop is a family .... This culture was born in the ghetto," and it was the solution to many of the social problems that the black people were facing. At the time, there was a political agenda in the hip-hop community that was definitely anti-mainstream. Price also explains:

Hip hop was ... the product of self-determination, self-realization, creativity and pride .... Former gang territories became prime locations for block parties and outdoor jams. Prior gang warfare turned into aggressive competitions or turntable jousting by DJs, joined by countless male and female street dancers, often called "b-boys" and "b-girls," and the colorful artistic presentations of graffiti artists. (Price 2006: xi)

DJ Kool Herc explains how it all started:

When I started DJing back in the early '70s, it was just something that we were doing for fun. I came from "the people's choice," from the street. If the people like you, they will support you and your work will speak for itself. The parties I gave happened to catch on. They became a rite of passage for young people in the Bronx .... To me, hip-hop says, "Come as you are." We are a family. It ain't about security. It ain't about bling bling. It ain't about how much your gun can shoot. It ain't about \$200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal .... It brings white kids together with Black kids, brown kids with yellow kids. (DJ Kool Herc in Chang 2005: xi)

Aheran explains how DJ Kool Herc and this new type of music culture attracted different members who all made a major contribution to the start of the culture:

DJ Kool Herc, wanting to excite his b-boy dancers, developed technique in the mid-1970s of looping the drum break of a James Brown record, or other selections, to create a super hot, new percussive sound. DJ Afrika Bambaataa transformed the huge Blade Spades gang into The Mighty Zulu Nation centred around DJ parties and afrocentric cultural events. Grand Master Flash experimented with perfecting his cutting techniques and invited his b-boy squad to try flexing their style on the mic, which led to the formation of the Furious MC's. Hip-Hop was born. (Aheran 2003: 20–21)

It became extremely popular among the black youngsters who experienced poverty and racial injustice on a daily basis, and they had no motivations or dreams in American society where there was not enough affordable housing, adequate health care, decent employment, and high-quality education available to them. Hip-hop gave them an alternative and exciting lifestyle that was distinct and different from the mainstream White culture which was inaccessible and unreachable to them.

## Sneaker fashion as hip-hop aesthetics from the street

Therefore, hip-hop is a not just a music genre but a culture by itself, and that includes a particular type of style. There are four foundational elements in hip-hop culture: DJing, graffiti, b-boying, and MCing, and each serves as a method of self-expression, and each intersects with the prevalence of gangs and the gang lifestyle during the 1960s (Price 2006: 21). Then the widespread popularity of the culture offered other opportunities for other elements to spread, such as fashion and language, all of which are part of hip-hop aesthetic (Price 2006: 21).

Danny Hoch (in Chang 2006: 349) investigated hip-hop aesthetics in graffiti, DJ, b-boy, and rap. He does not include clothing and footwear, but we can add sneakers to them since they have been an integral part of hip-hop aesthetics, and that is the reason why rap

musicians almost always wear sneakers, and their fans and followers pay attention to them. While hip-hop was never viewed as legitimate “art,” it has changed over the years.

In Jeff Chang’s interview, DOZE, a b-boy and a graffiti artist says (Chang 2006: 321–330):

When you’re talking about hip-hop, when you want to get a broader sense of the world, you’re talking about poor people. Cause most of the fashion comes from the street- and who’s the street? Usually working-class people who create style in fashion. So would that be hip-hop, or would that be urban influence? It has to do with poor people .... It has to do with a person who got creative and couldn’t afford f\*cking Bally’s and created his own designer label on his pants, or cut his shirt in a certain way, or her shirt in a certain way, or tied it up in little knots. Because she couldn’t afford to buy haute-culture top, she made her own. That’s what hip-hop is in fashion: people creating what they like, creating the look. People used to pain on clothes, not go to the store and get something painted. They do it themselves. It’s not authentic when you buy it off a shelf. It’s just not. (DOZE in Chang 2006: 328–329)

Similarly, there is a strong correlation between hip-hop and street. Vogel also explains the meaning of “street” and “streetwear” which sneakers are a part of:

There is no formula to make something “street” ... streetwear is a combination of attitudes, aesthetics and activities that binds a group of people with similar interests together. It isn’t something that can be analyzed from the outside, learned, reproduced and then packaged to be sold to the undeserving public. In order to be successfully involved in the streetwear industry, many would argue, including myself, that it is essential to have been a part of the subculture in the first place. (Vogel 2007: 8–9)

It is not an exaggeration to say that sneakers have been a part of rap musicians’ uniform or their dress code in the past and today. Those who claimed that they were part of this group always wore sneakers which were an important part of their style and identity. Since hip-hop is directly correlated to a black culture, sneakers were associated with black people, especially during the pre-Jordan era.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of hip-hop culture, and with it a new-found attitude to the wearing of sneakers .... Sneakers were now being preserved in pristine condition for that all-important fresh-out-of-the-box look- and rising prices also ensured that looking after your sneakers guaranteed getting your money's worth. This trend was seen the world over; whether sneakers were initially worn for skateboarding, playing football or just wandering the streets, it was hip-hop culture that turned them into objects of desire. Just think back to Run-DMC's "Walk This Way" promo; it's a much-cited example, but those box-fresh adidas Superstars had a lasting impact on the youth culture of the day. (Intercity 2008: 6)

Individuals, especially the lost youths, may have higher chances of joining marginal groups due to their dissatisfaction and discontent about their lives when they do not see anything positive about their future. There is no way they can achieve what the elites can, in terms of wealth, prestige, and power, and it may result in forming an underground subculture with its own value system, and a group of sneaker enthusiasts in the 1970s may largely fit into this model. Joining a subcultural community gives them an option to receive the recognition, attention, and respect that they could not otherwise receive. The participation in subcultures may come from their hopeless social environment, and these factors lead youths to create their own versions of aesthetics which may appear to be deviant from the mainstream perspective. Subcultural membership provides a physical, virtual, and symbolic space to those who feel that they are marginal.

## Rejection of a legitimate aesthetic taste

Therefore, the First Wave Sneaker Phenomenon was the outcome of the young minority youths resisting against the mainstream American society, and it was mostly dominated by racial minorities. Bobbito Garcia, a sneaker connoisseur, said to me explicitly in a phone interview: "Sneaker subculture came out of the people of color."

Ken Gelder defines subcultures as groups of people that are in some way represented as nonnormative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practice, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it (2005: 1).<sup>[4]</sup> He explained that subcultures are social with their own shared conventions, values, and rituals. He described different forms and practices of subculture and explained that the members' negative relations to work and class; a specific geographical territory, such as the street, the hood, and the club, and excessive exaggerated stylistic expressions are some of the identifying points of a subcultural participation (Gelder 2007).

In the 1970s, fashion was synonymous with European luxury brands, such as a French Haute Couture dress or a tailor-made Savile Row business suit which most of the youngsters in the South Bronx had no access to and which they would have resisted, and a style that was functional used to have no place in fashion. But just like the punks, they created their own definition of fashion and aesthetics. The practice of sneaker painting and decoration, which still continues today, came out of the streets during the First Wave

Sneaker Phenomenon (Plates 2.1 and 2.2). There was no institutional participation in promoting it as a trend or fashion. As Haenfler points out, a subculture as a social subgroup is distinguishable from mainstream culture by its nonnormative values, beliefs, symbols, and activities, and often, in the case of youth, styles and music (Haenfler 2014: 3).

Sneakers, especially during the pre-Jordan era, were never considered as mainstream fashion or a type of footwear with aesthetic function, but among the enthusiasts, they knew precisely which sneakers were considered a good taste. As time went on, sneakers were worn for adornment purposes, which will be elaborated in Chapters 3 and 4.

In the earlier studies of youth subcultures, deviance and resistance were the key concepts. They formed a subculture to go against the conventional society and thus marginalized themselves as a deviant group that resisted the dominant culture. There are different pieces and elements in a society, and each has its own function to make a whole. This is how social order becomes intact. But there are those who cannot achieve the society's conventional cultural goal through conventional means that many can take. Then they create distinct values and means of achievement, and thus, it becomes a community of its own. According to Robert Merton's Strain Theory (1938), those who have no or limited social opportunities and the means to attain the conventional goals come up with alternative means to attain those goals. Some could even substitute conventional goals that may be antisocial and illegal. This is seen as a reaction against status frustration (Cohen 1955).

Max Weber (1968) had treated social classes as status groups with special lifestyles, and Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1957) and Herbert Gans (1975) had offered accounts of the relation between social classes and culture. Aesthetic taste, such as fashion, is not a matter of individual choice but is determined by one's class position. As early as 1961, Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang questioned in their *Collective Dynamics* (1961) whether public taste is first manufactured and then disseminated through organized channels and foisted upon the mass, or whether changes in the moods and life conditions lead to irrational and widespread changes of taste even without promotion (1961: 466). Using Christian Dior's New Look of 1947 as an example, they explain that the collective change in taste which is an objective trend is dictated not by an organized fashion industry but by the capricious nature of fashion itself which is resisted and accepted by people (Lang and Lang 1961).

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) analyzed tastes in painting, books, food, and fashion, among others. For fashion, he put forward a theory regarding the aesthetic and functional components of dress. For the working class, dress does not serve more than a utilitarian function among them. It may have an aesthetic function, too, but it is a different kind of aesthetics, one that is often dismissed by the dominant class, according to Bourdieu.

The taste for sneakers, rap music, graffiti art, and other artistic preferences can also be analyzed within Bourdieu's theoretical framework of class and taste. Bourdieu showed for France what Herbert Gans (1975) had found in the United States. There are coherent social-class differences in the consumption of culture. Bourdieu argued that people's class positions and aspirations are closely connected to how they lead their lives and what they

consume. Fundamental ways of living and social environments, which Bourdieu called *habitus*, are what determines one's taste preferences. It is often inherited materially from the previous generations and also through socialization. *Habitus* is not innate or inborn.

It has been repeatedly implied that whatever taste that is appreciated by the wealthy dominant class is the legitimate taste and considered as the right, sophisticated taste. During the First Wave Sneaker Phenomenon up until the mid-1980s when there were limited and scarce structural opportunities for the minority youngsters, they found opportunities in the sneaker subculture which allowed them to express their versions of aesthetics. An obsessive sneaker collection is not inherently deviant, but it is not something people in the dominant culture do or aspire to do since they are able to take conventional means to attain status and prestige. Members of the subculture are said to reject conformity, but they are constantly looking for another group where they can conform to and find alternative ways.

As early as 1970, John Irwin wrote: "American people are becoming aware of the subcultural variation in their society and are experiencing subcultural relativism" ([1970] 2005: 76). This trend has intensified even further in this day and age, especially in New York. There is a shift in people's ideas about values and norms. There are variations in aesthetic taste in different cultures and subcultures. There is no such a thing as one legitimate taste or dominant taste. It is not about taste being good/bad or sophisticated/unsophisticated, it is different in every "subcultural context."

## The Second Wave post-Jordan Sneaker Phenomenon

The Second Wave starts with the release of a new sneaker brand called Nike Air Jordan 1 (often abbreviated as AJ1) in 1985, which was named after an NBA (National Basketball Association) basketball player, Michael Jordan. This shoe changed the sneaker phenomenon completely, brought the subculture from underground to upperground, and made the group of sneaker enthusiasts more visible, while the old-timer fans are disappointed with this large-scale diffusion because the gatekeeping function has now shifted from the collectors to the sneaker industry. Ben Osborne, editor of SLAM, the basketball magazine, writes (2013: 9): "The sneaker-collecting game of today has blown up beyond anything I ever imagined, and trust me when I say that even the most optimistic Jordan brand employees never expected all this either."

Osborne further explains that there are pros and cons for the worldwide sneaker popularity (Osborne 2013). The old-time collectors do not consider today's "sneakerheads" as real and authentic because the inauthentic ones spend all their disposable income on sneakers and post them on social media and go to sneaker conventions that take place in different cities in the United States or Europe. But at the same, as the sneaker popularity spread to the world, having a job that is related to sneakers, such as publishing a sneaker magazine, puts one in the center of the world. Whether one likes the current sneaker phenomenon or not, the market has changed drastically as we entered the Second Wave Sneaker Phenomenon and even the Third Wave.

# Nike, basketball, and Michael Jordan

Not all sneaker enthusiasts are basketball fans, but those who choose to wear Nike Air Jordan sneakers are. They are Michael Jordan's signature sneakers. Jordan is a former American professional basketball player. He joined the NBA's Chicago Bulls in 1984 and later Washington Wizards. His prolific scoring made him a huge NBA star. Because of the height of his leap in the air, he earned a nickname "Air Jordan." He won the championship with the Chicago Bulls three years consecutively in 1991, 1992, and 1993. He then retired abruptly but came back and rejoined the Bulls in 1995. He once again led the team to the championship in 1996, 1997, and 1998. He retired the second time in 1999 and came back to NBA with the Wizards for two seasons from 2001 and 2003.<sup>[5]</sup>

Nike initially signed a five-year deal with Jordan for 2.5 million dollars, and they unexpectedly made about 1.3 million dollars in the first year. Jordan started wearing his own signature sneakers on the basketball court in 1984, which grabbed basketball fans' attention with a unique color combination. The first AJ shoe in the black and red model was initially banned by the NBA because it was against the league's color rules, but he still wore them three times not conforming to the rule. His fans and sneaker collectors loved his sneakers even more because of the rebellious and the anti-conformist attitude of Jordan who did not obey the NBA rules. Nike took this opportunity and generated a hype by promoting "Banned by the NBA" commercials, and by paying his \$5,000 fine at every game.

AJ1 is the only model that has a swoosh, the most recognizable Nike logo and also had the greatest number of colorways, twenty-three in total. It was sold with two sets of shoelaces to match the different colors. Because of its phenomenal commercial success, a series of AJ sneakers are produced every year in multiple colorways and designs for each model, and they give the collectors the reasons to purchase new pairs every season (Plates 2.3–2.5). An iconic mark of a Jumpman logo started with Air Jordan III in 1988.

It created mainstream consciousness on a global scale, and with the start of the AJ shoes, sneaker collection began to slowly receive the attention of the mass audience. As one of his fans said to me: "it was always exciting to see which pair Jordan was going to wear in his game. It was just as exciting as watching him play basketball."

Endorsement of famous athletes existed before Michael Jordan, but it had never been this successful. Jordan personified power, status, wealth, and everything that boys and young men strive to achieve during their life time. "To this day, no player's line comes close to Nike's Jordan-branded footwear, sales of which reached \$2.5 billion last year. Over all, basketball sneaker sales made up \$4.5 billion of the total \$21 billion athletic shoes business, according to Princeton Retail Analysis" (Glickson 2014: A3).

The industry realized that the sneaker enthusiasts were also attracted to the older editions which some could not get, and they started making the "retro" models, which were the original ones with some minor changes in the design. It was easier, more efficient, and less risky than putting out brand new designs. The major sneaker companies became savvy in marketing their products and made a group of athletes into mega stars while suggesting a new kind of lifestyle with sneakers. Even NBA has become a brand along with their players.

## The historical significance of red

Many of the sneakers endorsed by powerful and successful athletes and rap musicians have red in their designs with distinct names, such as Air Yeezy 2 "Red October," Nike Air Penny 5 "Red Eagle," Nike Kobe 8 "Red Camo," Nike LeBron 10 EXT "Red Suede" PE, Air Jordan IV "Red October," and Ewing 33 Hi "Red Suede," among many others.

The "red" color has had significant meanings in historical footwear studies. Red heels in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European courts were also considered a symbol of nobility and status. While we associate contemporary red shoes or red soles with female footwear and rarely with male footwear, red shoes and red heels were favored by men of the upper class. For instance, bright red heels were favored by King Louis XIV of France and during his reign, red high heels, while already an established fashion, became a regulated expression of political privilege: only those granted access to the French court were permitted to wear them (Boucher 1987: 305; Semmelhack 2011: 225).

In her informative study on red shoes "Sex and Sin: The Magic of Red Shoes" (2011: 272–289), Hilary Davidson explains the social power imbued in red shoes:

By combining two potent and ambiguous elements, red shoes assume complex symbolic power. Historically, red shoes conveyed authority, wealth and power, linked to the status-enhancing cost of red dyes such as madder, kernes, cochineal and lac. Red shoes were the prerogative first of Roman senators, and later solely for the emperor. Popes have worn red since the thirteenth century, while both Edward IV and Henry VIII were buried in red shoes as emblems of their monarchical power. In the seventeenth century, Louis XIV wore red heels on his shoes as a symbol of the divine right of the king .... this style filtered down. Through imitation, to the aristocracy of both sexes and by the eighteenth century it had become a sign of aspirational fashionability. The cost and quality of shoes made of fine, red morocco leather meant that they were status symbols. (Davidson 2011: 274)

Then, Davidson discusses the literary allusions of the red shoes in Hans Christian Andersen's story of *The Red Shoes* written in 1845 and connects his use of the shoes within the context of sexuality, magic, and gender. It tells a story of "wildly passionate behavior and untrammelled female sexuality and mobility made possible by a pair of red shoes" (Davidson 2011: 288).<sup>[6]</sup>

## The production of new sneaker technologies

There is no subculture where members are so much in pursuit of adopting something new which is one of the most important characteristics of "fashion" (see Chapter 4), and it is not only the consumers of sneakers but also the sneaker manufacturers that compete in developing the latest technology in the construction of sneakers. This is a subculture made of both the consumers and the producers that explicitly celebrate overt competition in attaining a status. They want the best and the latest sneakers with the most advanced



technology. It is not just the design or the pattern of the shoe that is new, but also the technology embedded inside the shoe. As the subculture begins to surface on the upperground and the popularity begins to spread widely, the competition is accelerated and heated. The companies provide the reasons for them to compete and try to satiate the appetite of the enthusiasts so that they are constantly entertained and not bored by this "sneaker game." When we trace the invention and the development of the first sneakers and the sneaker companies, the emphasis had always been about the construction and the technological advancement of the shoes in order to achieve the maximum performance in sports.

## The invention of vulcanization and sneakers

In his book *Sneakers* (1978), Walker gives a detailed chronology of the development of sneakers and explains that it was Wait Webster of New York who was granted a patent for his process of attaching rubber soles to boots and shoes in 1832 (Walker 1978: 15), but those shoes were still fragile and came apart easily. Then after multiple trials and experiments, Charles Goodyear managed to come up with something more solid, strong, and stable. He developed this process further and invented the vulcanization process which is the process of melting rubber and fabric together. According to Merriam-Webster.com, vulcanization is the process of treating crude or synthetic rubber or similar plastic material chemically to give it useful properties, such as elasticity, strength, and stability. Goodyear patented this process in 1844. This technological breakthrough is the result of the invention of rubber-soled shoes, and thus it revolutionized the sneaker industry forever. This mixture was molded to create a sole for shoes that had a tread design. Thus, Goodyear is known as the father of sneakers.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, companies were eager to create better sneakers. In 1890, Joseph William Foster, the founder of the company Boulton in the UK (now known as Reebok) and also a runner, added spikes to the bottom of the plimsolls and invented the first running spikes. By 1905, he was selling them as "Foster's Running Pumps." He named his company J.W. Foster and Sons, and his grandsons took control over the business in 1958 and named it Reebok (Walker 1978: 15).

In 1916, Goodyear and US Rubber Company which was composed of thirty small companies, decided to manufacture shoes entirely with rubber soles called "Keds," and they were the first true sneakers and an early form of athletic shoes in 1917. Keds launched a line of sneakers called "Pro-Keds" targeted mainly at basketball players. This also later became the company name. They eventually became known as sneakers because of the rubber sole, and they could "sneak" around and "sneak" up on people silently.

Similarly, Converse developed their basketball shoes in 1917, initially known as the All Star and later renamed as the Converse All Star Chuck Taylor. They were also the sneakers made specially for basketball players. Charles H. Taylor, who was a former basketball player with the Akron Firestones, joined the Converse sales team. He traveled around the country promoting them to basketball players. By 1923, he started to get involved in the production and design process of the shoe. They became known as "Chucks." They were initially black, and then off-white ones were made, and a variety of new colors came out

afterward. They remained extremely popular, and by 1968, Converse had dominated 80 percent of the sneaker industry (Heard 2003: 42). And Chuck Taylor was inducted into the basketball Hall of Fame. By 1997, 550 million pairs had been sold. Converse coined the term "limousines for the feet" to describe the added value of fame, prestige, and star status associated with their shoes through endorsement by professional basketball players (Gill 2011: 377).

## Competition in sneaker technology since 1980s

Major sneaker companies continue to produce and enhance their sneaker technology. Before and after the launch of Air Jordans, Nike has produced a number of popular sneakers and is constantly developing and upgrading new technology embedded in the structure of the sneakers. As the competition among sneaker enthusiasts became intense, so did the technological development of the sneakers.

Nike has been a forerunner in the technology competition introducing sneakers with cutting-edge functions. As early as 1974, one of the founders of Nike and a former track and field coach, Bill Bowerman, poured rubber chemicals into his wife's waffle maker to create the sole of the sneaker, coming up with a waffle sneaker. Nike first incorporated the air system in 1979 in the Tailwind, the first shoe within the patented air-sole cushioning system. Then it was used in the Air Force 1 and Air Ace. There is the everlasting fascination with Nike Air Force 1 that came out in 1982 and discontinued for several years and was relaunched in 1986 (Plate 2.6). The name comes from the plane that is used to transport the president of the United States. Garcia explains his first impression on the shoes:

I honestly thought they were hiking shoes upon first glance. I had never seen a bottom so thick for a baseball shoe. It was like a dream come true for someone like myself, who played outdoors so much .... The heel was unsurpassed for comfort, the leather was thick as shit but still supple so I had mobility, and the padding on the ankle was bushy. (Garcia 2003: 119)

It is a simple white pair of sneakers without any decoration, and this could be part of the broader concept of aesthetic minimalism, as Vainshtein points out (2009: 94) that minimalism can be a sign of sartorial understatement manifesting the priority of functional construction and geometry of the basic form stripped of superfluous embellishment.

In 1987, Marion Frank Rudy, an inventor from California, suggested to put air in the sole for better performance and approached Nike with his idea, and the technology was used in Nike Air Max 1. It was the start of the technological development of the air system that used pressurized gas encapsulated in polyurethane in sneakers. The Nike Air Max was the first shoe that allowed one to see its technology inside the shoe (Plate 2.7). Then in 1995, Nike Air Max 95 was released. This time an air unit was visible at the front of the shoe, while Air Max 360 had air all around the shoe. Zoom Air which was released in 1995 had

air which was lighter than Air Max, and the wearer felt much closer to the ground. In 1997, Air Foamposite came out as Penny Hardaway's signature sneakers, which has been relaunched in different colors and designs multiples times ever since (Plates 2.8–2.11).

In the twenty-first century, Nike became even more aggressive in the technology development. In 2000, Nike Air Woven was designed by Mike Avenie which looks like basket weave. This was first released in Tokyo prior to its launch in London and New York, and each country had a different color which meant that for a particular color one would need to fly to the country or ask someone in that country to send it to him. In 2004, a very light sneaker called Nike Free that felt like bare feet was launched. In 2008, Lunarlon Foam, known as Lunar, made out of springy and light material was developed with help from NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). Hyperfuse, which was a combination of mesh and thin layers of plastic and was ultra light, was released in 2010. More recently, in 2012, Flyknit made out of light-weight and seamless knitted fabric was unveiled (Plate 2.12). Nike continues to push the technology boundaries, and that is what fascinates the sneaker enthusiasts because this game never ends.

While Nike is a leader in the current technology competition, Reebok developed Reebok Pump in 1989, which had a chamber with a built-in inflatable mechanism and also had air around the shoe, not under the shoe like Nike's air. The technology was advanced further and they launched Reebok Instapump in 1994 which was a success. It is a shoe without shoe laces and the goal was to customize fit with inflatable air. The first Instapump was designed in neon yellow, red, and black. They also changed the sole design from the conventional full-length sole to having a big dent in the middle of the sole unit. They also used stretchy material to gain a better fit. Sneakers without shoelaces was a creative idea as a wearer simply had to press the pumping unit rubber button to inflate the tongue to fit his foot. Puma developed a similar shoe called Puma Disc Blaze without shoelaces in 1992 (Plate 2.13). Asics Gel, launched by Asics, was a shoe that used soft gel-like compound within the shoe which absorbed impact while adidas had Boost Foam with cushioning system that revolutionized new foam.

While Vans's presence in the industry may not be as strong and prominent as Nike, Puma, or adidas, they have loyal followers and customers because of their specialized sneakers for skateboarders. Their soles were very thick, making them resistant to the ground friction. Steven Van Doren, son of Paul Van Doren, the founder, says (quoted in Palladini 2009: 14): "In order to make the shoes stand out, he [Paul Van Doren] made the soles as thick so they would wear longer. He also wanted to use pure crepe rubber with no filler like a lot of other shoe manufacturers used. That decision ended up changing our company when skateboarders discovered our now famous rubber sole." The popularity of Vans shoes had a major impact on other companies to produce similar shoes. Nike started a new line called the Nike SB (Skateboarding) Dunk with extra-padded tongue for durability, which is necessary for skateboarding sneakers. The major sneaker companies continue to compete, share, and provide new ideas about technology.

## Controversies and debates to strengthen the subcultural bond

There is no shortage of sneakers that created commotion, heated debates, and controversies. The names and designs are offensive, insulting, and demeaning to some groups of people. But what is ironic is that when there are controversies about new sneakers, there are heated exchanges on Twitter and Instagram, and people unwittingly strengthen their bonds with fellow sneaker enthusiasts. Bengtson wrote an online article on "The 25 Most Controversial Things that Ever Happened in Sneakers"<sup>[7]</sup> and listed the sneakers that were controversial to the public as well to the sneaker enthusiasts.

In 2012, a new pair of sneakers designed by Jeremy Scott and adidas with ankle shackles created uproar on social media. It was scheduled to be released in August 2012, but adidas decided not to produce them. There were intense discussions online that this reminded a particular racial group of slavery. Reverend Jesse Jackson, an American civil rights activist and a Baptist minister, called the sneakers "slave shoes" and released the following comment:

The attempt to commercialize and make popular more than 200 years of human degradation, where blacks were considered three-fifths human by our Constitution, is offensive, appalling and insensitive. (Reverend Jesse Jackson quoted in Considine 2012: E7)

Scott's explanation was that he got his inspirations from his own collection of soft toys, and he posted the pictures of the toys online, although he never publically apologized in person, but adidas canceled its release. Adidas had previously faced another controversy in 2006. A cartoon character of an Asian face on the tongue of the sneaker was criticized by the Asian American organizations as racist. This character was drawn by a cartoonist Barry Mcgee who is half-Chinese and half-Caucasian. He explained that the face is an image of himself when he was young. This was initially a limited edition with only a thousand pairs in production, but the ones that were still unsold were taken off the shelves.

Nike also has had similar share of controversies. In 1997, Nike produced Air Berkin with ketchup and mustard colors with a logo on the heel that resembled the Arabic spelling of "Allah" which created a huge commotion within the Muslim community. It was recalled, and Nike later replaced the design on the heel with the Nike logo. Similarly, the problem of Air Jordan XII Retro Rising Sun in 2009 was an insole design which was similar to a symbol of Japan's Imperialism, and that was offensive to Koreans and Chinese, who at the time were Japan's enemies. Nike decided to replace the insole with a simple design. In 2012, Nike SB Dunk Low "Black & Tan" was released in commemoration for the St. Patrick's Day and named after Ireland Beer that is made from Guinness and Herb named Black & Tan, but it is also the name of a group that was hired by the British government to suppress the Irish by force, so this name was offensive to the Irish people, but Nike decided to continue with the release.

Furthermore, Converse released a pair called Loaded Weapon in 2003. This was a retro version of the pair worn by NBA basketball stars, Larry Byrd and Magic Jackson, called "Weapon" in 1985. But, in 2003, some NBA players were arrested for possession of illegal weapons, so there were concerns about whether the name would encourage gun violence among sneaker enthusiasts. The company explained that Loaded implies the name of the cushion on the bottom and weapon refers to the original model of this pair of sneakers and continued to release the shoes.

Whether these controversial designs are created intentionally or unintentionally is unknown, but they surely create a tumult within the community as communication in the Third Wave Sneaker Phenomenon is extremely rapid. Ironically, problems, issues, crisis, and controversies bind people together (Durkheim 1897) because we, as a collective group, make an attempt to solve that problem and overcome a crisis, and thus looking at the same direction with a common goal to achieve. With today's use of social media, the sneaker enthusiasts discuss, debate, and argue on Twitter and Instagram, and that further strengthens and reinforces the bond among those who are passionate about sneakers.

## Conclusion

A community of sneaker enthusiasts in the 1970s enjoyed their underground status creating their own aesthetic values and norms about sneakers and kept themselves hidden from the mainstream. But with the arrival of a new series of sneakers, the process and the structural mechanism of sneaker collection has transformed. It still remains to be a subculture that binds the members with sneakers, but it has emerged on the upper surface from underground. Sneaker chase and hunting have become a game in which boys and young men compete to acquire exclusive sneakers because that is a way to earn their peer's respect. At the same time, sneaker companies make sure that they continue to provide new models so that the game of sneaker hunting continues. The gatekeepers for the sneaker subculture used to be the collectors themselves, but as the industry began to realize that there is a market for the youths who are thirsty for cool and fashionable sneakers, the industry began to take charge, and they contribute to sustaining the subculture of sneakers.

[1] See "American Traditions I" and "American Traditions II" in *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (2011) by J. Patrick William; "Part I: The Chicago School of Urban Ethnography" in *The Subcultures Readers* edited by Ken Gelder.

[2] See "British Traditions I" and "British Traditions II" in *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (2011) by J. Patrick William. "Part II: The Birmingham Tradition and Cultural Studies" in *The Subcultures Readers* edited by Ken Gelder.

[3] The traditional feminist thinking begins with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjugation of Women* (1869). But feminism as an organized movement began as the first-wave feminism took place in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The

second wave refers to the period between 1960s and 1970s which took place within the context of civil rights and antiwar movement. The third wave begins in the 1980s and 1990s. Some are now even talking about the fourth wave. See more in *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* (2001) by Marlene Legates.

[4] The earliest use of the term "subculture" in sociology seems to be its application as a subdivision of a national culture by Alfred McLung Lee in 1945 and Milton M. Gordon in 1947 (Brake 1980: 5); they stressed the significance of socialization within the cultural subsections of a pluralist society. Chris Jenks (2004: 7) says that definitions and versions proliferate, and origins are obscure, and it has been argued by Marvin E. Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti in 1967 that the term subculture is not widely used in the social sciences literature until after the Second World War. Phil Cohen (1972) defined subculture as a compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents and the need to maintain the parental identification.

[5] For Michael Jordan's life and accomplishments, see *Michael Jordan: The Life* (2014) by Roland Lazenby; *There Is No Next: NBA Legends on the Legacy of Michael Jordan* (2014) by Sam Smith.

[6] Davidson also refers to other literary works by Andersen, such as *The Little Mermaid* (1836), *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* (1859), and *The Snow Queen* (1844), in which he makes literary allusions of the red shoes.

[7] See <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2013/07/greatest-sneaker-controversies> ("The 25 Most Controversial Things that Ever Happened in Sneakers" by Russ Bengtson).