Sneaker Culture Has Given Black Men Fashion Freedom While Creating Restriction

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Sneaker Culture Has Given Black Men Fashion Freedom While Creating Restriction

Sneakers have become far more than a sport accessory when it was first introduced to the world over a century ago. They’ve become a part of pop culture—fashion, movies, television shows and music. Youths waiting in line for hours, days, even weeks near storefronts in oversized camping tents and sleeping bags has become the norm in the consumer industry.

It’s the ultimate score to be one of the first people to acquire “that” sneaker. The sneaker that has been marketed for months with endless television and Internet ads is finally here. An accessory geared to materialistic teenage boys and financially struggling college-aged men, giving them an individual style of their own and above all, endless praise. Sneakers have led to the creation of a culture driven by freedom of expression and economic success. The trend also raises questions about the implications of race and masculinity.

“I love them, those are my babies,” says Brooklyn resident Chad Jones, about his 300+ sneakers collection. Jones, 38, has been a sneaker collector since grade school, even surprising his mother at one point when he won a competition for having the best sneaker collection. This pastime followed him to adulthood where Jones often camped out of stores, left work early, and even used his vacation days from his job as an Operations Director to fly across the country to find limited edition sneakers. “At the height when I was really buying shoes when I was a single bachelor, [I bought] sometimes two to three pairs a week,” he says. Now with less space as he currently shares an apartment with his fiancé, Jones has decided to keep most of his sneakers in a rented storage unit over an hour away from his home, far away because of safety. “I don’t want to open up the possibility for something to happen to my stuff. I feel more
comfortable when less people know the whereabouts of my storage, he says.”

But over five years ago in 2012, Jones almost lost his life when he was stabbed in the chest while waiting in line of a Harlem, New York shoe store for the Kobe Black History Month edition sneakers. “It happened so fast and so crazy,” he says. “There was blood everywhere and it didn’t hit me how serious it was, till my sister was with me in the hospital and she could literally hear me screaming.” Since then, Jones says that he has slowed down on sneaker buying and collecting because the incident has made him “more focused on things that matter” such as family and friends.

Violence--deaths, stabbings, and fist fights have been associated with sneaker culture since its success, igniting catchy media headlines and thought provoking articles such as Sports Illustrated’s 1990 “Your Sneakers or Your Life” article which highlights the brutality within the culture. According to GQ’s 2015 SneakerHeadz video, 1,200 people die a year over sneakers. However, the video did not provide any further data or statistical evidence. Therefore, Michael Jefferies, an associate professor of American studies at Wellesley College says that the numbers and media attention are overrated. “I don’t get that this is a frequent occurrence, it’s intended to make readers and viewers feel that these kids are so far gone that they are undeserving of our help,” he says. Jefferies continued to say that if there’s violence in other communities, the media treats it differently. “The problem with their fight is that we won’t hear about them in the same way because the media does not want to portray wealthy white neighborhoods in the same way,” he says.

To many in the community, African-Americans are credited to starting trends within sneaker culture. “African- Americans determined which sneakers were the one to wear, which one determined you as a G,” says Dallas Penn. But many African Americans felt the media such as New York Post columnist Phil Mushnick depicted them negatively in regards to sneaker deaths and sneaker culture. This spawned Run DMC’s hit song, “My Adidas” which focused on the negative stereotypes many had on African Americans. “It came from the place of people would look at the b-boys, the b-girls and go, 'Oh, those are the people that cause all the problems in here, says group member, Darryl McDaniels in a 2011 MTV News interview. “So they was judging the book by its cover, without seeing what was inside of it,” said Mc Daniels. In a 2010 study conducted by
People-Press.org, nearly six in ten African-Americans said that news coverage of blacks are generally negative. A direct correlation is due to the small of people of color in high ranking newsroom positions.

A lack of diversity of minorities/African Americans in newsrooms and media organizations is one reason, some experts think. According to a 2016 survey/study by the The American Society of News Editors (ASNE), of all supervisors, only 13% were minorities, minorities comprised about 17 percent of employees at daily newspapers and 23% at online-only news websites. Emmy winning journalist and Professor at Columbia University, June Cross says the reason is because “they [publishers and editors] hire people who are like them and most people who are not like them are people of color.” Cross says that publishers and editors often use euphemisms that often limit people of color to high power positions. “A lot of times those people of color don’t get into the newsrooms because they are judged as lacking something, judged as lacking writing skills, judged as lacking cultural fit,” Cross says.

However, Senior Curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, Elizabeth Semmelhack, says that sneaker companies are also at fault for the violence in stores, “by creating desire and limiting production, you serve two purposes. One is creating incredible desire so that itself captures social media, people’s attention…and it makes people aware that some sneakers are more desirable than others,” she says.

Craze, manias, and outright hype have been closely aligned with sneaker culture as the cost of production reduced and it became available to the masses. The enthusiasm for sneakers is warranted by media attention as well as the athlete used as the face as the product, often a player dropping huge numbers at the on the court, setting world records, and if not the number one player, then as close to the spot as possible.

This strategy was used early on by Converse who endorsed basketball star, Chuck Taylor to create the All-Star sneaker still wildly successful today. The sneaker sells more than 270,000 pairs a day, according to former Vice President and Manager, Geof Cottrill.

Figure 3: Converse All-Star High Tops
Six-time NBA champion, Bob Cousy helped popularize the PF Flyers in the 1960s after being endorsed by the company. Former track and field coach and Nike co-founder, Bill Bowerman highly influenced release the Nike Cortez sneaker in 1972, the first shoe created by Nike which became a bestseller, solidifying the company’s billion-dollar following.

The modes of sneaker collecting are changing with new technologies such as websites and apps being introduced daily but the core principles to buy, sell, and trade. In the past five years, apps like GOAT, Stockx, Throne, and Frenzy have emerged to decrease problems such as fights when sneakers are released. “The goal with Frenzy is to reduce the amount of friction that consumers and retailers face when they do these sneaker drops,” says Tucker Schreiber, Product Manager of Shopify in a Complex interview. Shopify is a computer company responsible for creating the Frenzy app.

Social media sphere has also helped germinate sneaker culture with the creation of sneaker podcasts, sneaker YouTube channels, and other online platforms (Instagram and Facebook) that are dedicated to sneakers. Social media has helped enthusiasts many like Dallas Penn become well known in the community after garnering thousands of likes and “followers” across each platform. For others, social media has become more of a place to do business, “[On Facebook], I’ve done business with people in Russia, Germany and they’ve paid money for what I have,” says Aaron Andrews, 23, a New York City resident “Facebook forums are diverse for the simple fact that there’s people you can’t physically meet in person because of how far away you are but you can still make a connection, he says.”

Sneaker culture has given black men fashion freedom to explore styles but they’re also restricted by the negative stereotypes associated sneaker killings and stabbings. However, many people like Penn are optimistic for the future, “I’m still excited for sneaker releases. I’m hopeful for sneaker culture, now there’s a sneaker for everybody and more sneakers now than in the history of mankind.”

Other notable sneaker frenzies include The Walt Frazier Pumas, the Adidas Shelltoes, and Stan Smith’s Adidas sneaker, which has increased over 30% in sales due to the company's rebranding and promotion efforts, based on the 2014-2016 Adidas annual reports. However, no sneaker-athlete endorsement deal has come close to Michael Jordan, who has had an economically successful impact on sneaker culture and the Nike brand.
According to Forbes, Jordan signed a $2.5-million-dollar endorsement deal with Nike in 1984, one of the biggest athlete-shoe company deal at the time, resulting in about $100 million in sales for just that year according to Mike Powell’s, *Sneakernomics: Which Basketball Players Sells The Most Shoes*. “Growing up in my neighborhood [Jordans] were like the Holy Grail,” said Spurs forward LaMarcus Aldridge in an interview on ESPN in 2016. Jordan’s consistent on-the-court success, winning 6 NBA championships, 6 NBA MVP awards, 2 Olympic medals, and 14 NBA All-Star awards -- propelled sales of his sneaker line and more editions that Nike subsequently released.

The Air Jordan 2s were released in 1986, two years later the third installment was released, the fourth in 1989 and a slew of other versions were released an average of every two years. “Having Air Jordans numbered numbered created an inherent desire a stroking desire, I need the ones, the twos,” says Semmelhack.

While a slim few are on line to get one pair, the vast majority of hungry “hypebeasts” (or a person who follows a trend to be cool or in style) are buying three or four pairs in every color and edition, incorporating themselves into what we know today as sneaker culture. “Yo, you always buy two pairs, one to rock and one to stock,” says sneaker enthusiasts, Dallas Penn. It has redefined men’s fashion from race to identity. “One of the most profound things I feel about sneakers is that they challenged traditional men’s sartorial expression of self,” says Elizabeth Semmelhack, fashion curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto.
In sneaker culture, the reduction of hypermasculinity have caused gendered styles to dwindle. This then gives men the freedom of individuality to wear “feminine” colors such as pink and extra bright neon colors on their feet. On the other hand, fashion has always been a woman’s playground; an adventure accompanied with all the bells and whistles but also equally menacing. Two women cannot go to the same event in the same outfit, that’s an absolute no-no, probably the first commandment on someone’s fashion Decalogue. There would be dirty looks, attitude, and any other desire to one up each other. Some examples include the “Who Wore it Best” or “Bitch Stole My Look” columns that we read in fashion magazines like *Glamour Magazine* and *US Weekly*. On the other hand, sneakers give men a sense of style and a path to enter the fashion market, not necessarily in the same lane as their female counterparts, but one of their own. “It has positive implications in that it causes men to break out of that herd mentality,” says Semmelhack.
“Men’s fashion distinctiveness spawned in the workplace when casual Friday was introduced,” says Semmelhack. The day was meant for employees to break out of their work attire and show a bit of their personality. Men had a difficult time dressing out of the norm as they were so used to the traditional white-collar business apparel but the popularization of sneakers lead men to turn to footwear as a way to show co-workers their personality and style. “Sneakers have allowed us to dress down a casual suit. “You can take khakis and a sport coat and put on tennis shoes...you can go to brunch somewhere,” says Penn.

Since sneakers were developed as a type of shoe to play sports, men quickly became the targeted audience. They have dominated viewership in watching sports as well as attending sporting events. Based on Gallup’s survey, *As An Industry Grows, Percentage of U.S Sports Fans Steady*, over 60% of men identified themselves as a sports fan compared to the 51% of women who did. This can be seen as a reason that sneaker companies market most of their products toward men rather than women, making it difficult for them to participate in sneaker culture due to limited sizes and less variety. “Nike did not actively direct their marketing campaigns toward women, in many regards, sneakers, as an integral component of athletics, represented a dominant form of masculinity,” says Dylan T. Miner, an Associate Professor of Michigan State University and author of *Provocations on Sneakers*.

The future of the sneaker industry seems to be bright in the coming years, as the market is projected to reach 371.8 billion by 2020, based on the data organization, Global Industry Analysis, Inc. One reason is due to general online shopping which is expected to grow 8-12% in 2017, according to the National
Retail Federation and to many sneakerheads, this has caused a change in how they once obtained fresh kicks. “The game did alter because of the Internet, so guys like me who are great diggers, who loves to be on the ground running around, now I have to get real in depth with the different shoes online from websites,” says Penn.