

### Author Biography

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Aidan Berman is a third-year History major. He wrote his article on the rise of sneaker culture across the United States as his HIST 303 paper. Some of his research interests include the history of fashion and consumerism in America throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Aidan completed his bachelors in history at Cal Poly and is now preparing for law school.

## The Explosion of Sneaker Culture

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In 1985, Nike released the Air Jordan I, kickstarting an exponential growth in footwear sales and creating the sneaker subculture in the United States. Initially, buyers consisted of primarily urban male basketball fans, but quickly expanded to include suburban and older men captivated by the Air Jordan's popularity. After Nike's success in the mid-1980s, volatile trends drastically fluctuated the desirability and popularity of sneakers. Nike Foamposites, Reebok Questions, and Adidas Crazy Eights cemented their status as the "it" shoe one year and collected dust the next. However, multiple developments since 2008 marked massive changes in sneaker demand that solidified the reputation of the subculture among American men. First, the fourth iteration of basketball star Kobe Bryant's signature line with Nike, the Kobe IV, shattered the tension of using sneakers for either athletics or fashion. Sneaker designers Pharrell Williams, Kanye West, and Virgil Abloh incorporated Black masculinity into their designs, thus creating new standards in a community previously dominated by White designers. Regarding profitability, Nike posted positive revenue margins amidst a sharp economic downturn, showcasing male consumerism centered on footwear. By exploring race, gender, and economics, the rise of sneaker subculture can be explained by the explosion of multi-functional fashionable and athletic sneakers as well as the robust footwear market, whose sales increased despite the state of the economy.

"The Explosion of Sneaker Culture" encompasses history, race, gender, and economics to analyze how the American sneaker market increased in demand and value since 2008 despite a major economic crash. American newspaper articles, popular sneaker advertisements, and financial reports chronicled the sneaker phenomena sweeping the nation and illustrated the meteoric rise of the sneaker cultural phenomenon. Journalism between 2008 and 2019 further illustrated the "hype" behind the sneaker culture, and footwear companies

filled pop culture magazines with advertisements persuading readers to purchase the recently released and popular shoes.

At the beginning of 2008, the American economy displayed signs of instability, and consumerism plummeted as a result. As consumerism declined, banks issued loans to real estate purchasers, creating a massive housing bubble. In turn, these loans allowed consumers to purchase homes they could not afford, and consequently, banks repossessed thousands of homes when lenders defaulted on mortgages. Large banks then auctioned off houses under market value to recoup monetary value.<sup>1</sup> As a result, metropolitan areas experienced significant price declines, with homes in San Francisco and Miami decreasing in value by 30%. Low prices ravaged Southern California, with residential real estate in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego decreasing over 25% from the previous year.<sup>2</sup> The United States government bailed out banks and prominent American corporations to revitalize the banks and halt further economic downturn. In January 2009, President Barack Obama passed a \$787 billion stimulus package to alleviate financial institutions, thus bestowing money to citizens in a tax return and creating new jobs. Consumerism again rose before the onset of the 2010s, and Americans finally felt financially secure after receiving economic stimulus payments and witnessing the economy restabilize itself.

Sneakers had already become traditional daily footwear for men in the 1980s. During this time, men predominantly wore sneakers for athletic purposes but they later rose in popularity and purchases increased drastically. Notably, the Air Jordan I, basketball legend Michael Jordan's initial signature shoe released in 1985, ignited a purchasing frenzy amongst Americans. Air Jordan I's colorful new look and Nike's presence on national television and in print advertising hooked basketball fans. Jordan quickly became a basketball titan as a twenty-two-year-old, an unprecedented feat.<sup>3</sup> Basketball icons like Jordan served as the leading ambassadors for athletic companies and wore the most popular shoes. The Black community quickly rallied around stars like Jordan, who positively highlighted Black culture. During the early 1990s, money flooded into basketball to popularize the sport beyond fringe communities, due to the booming economy.

1 "The Real Causes—and Casualties—of the Housing Crisis," Knowledge at Wharton, accessed April 14, 2022.

2 Peter Y. Hong, "REAL ESTATE; U.S. Home Prices Fall to '04 Level; Quarterly L.A.-Area Values are Down 27.6% from a Year Ago. Several Other Western Cities also are Hit Hard," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 2008.

3 Mary Flannery, "Sneakers: Putting On Airs," *Philadelphia Daily News*, April 3, 1985.

By the late 1990s, players including Ken Griffey Jr. and Deion Sanders, entered the fray of signature athletic footwear designed to the exact specifications of an athlete.<sup>4</sup> Youth and adults alike fixated on purchasing specific sneakers, queuing in line to buy a pair of their favorite player's shoes. Mass hysteria created a new side of the sneaker market where rare sneakers could resell for thousands of dollars. To an outsider, people who repeatedly purchased shoes well above retail price but rarely wore them were engaging in an expensive form of hoarding. However, the increased variety of sneaker styles and colorways that rapidly flooded the market had turned sneakers into a fashion statement and led consumers to expand their collections far beyond one pair.

As consumers increasingly purchased sneakers, whether for investment or fashion, partnerships between sneaker brands and pop culture formed in an attempt to capture a piece of the rapidly expanding sneaker market. For example, the legendary Allen Iverson and Jadakiss commercials in the early 2000s promoted Allen Iverson's signature sneakers. In the commercials, the rapper and the star NBA player switched roles. Iverson rapped while Jadakiss attempted a shot on the basket.<sup>5</sup> Reebok also partnered with musicians, chief among them Pharrell Williams, to unlock additional artistic creativity in their releases. In the 2000s, Pharrell created his clothing brand, Billionaire Boys Club, and experienced successful collaborations with Reebok in 2004. Reebok allowed Pharrell to redesign silhouettes, a newfound freedom in the sneaker industry.<sup>6</sup> Many athletes and celebrities utilized advertising of this kind to increase sales to the masses. As sneakers gained notoriety in pop culture, they also gained traction in the leisurewear market.

Gender roles in the United States also dramatically changed during the 21st century as men started to perform traditionally stereotypically feminine roles such as clothes shopping and stay-at-home parenting. In line with this trend, awareness of the sneaker fashion and leisurewear market also increased. Men meticulously selected their clothing and shoes, dressing to impress. Onlookers labeled the movement metrosexual, describing men interested in their appearance.<sup>7</sup> Men who shopped for themselves and carefully selected sought-out fashion items from brands, including Nike, Gucci, and North Face.

4 Brandon Edler, "The 90 Greatest Sneakers of the '90s," *Complex*, June 29, 2021.

5 "Reebok Reunites Allen Iverson and Jadakiss to Launch the Highly-Anticipated Answer 6," *PR Newswire*, October 17, 2002.

6 Ross Tucker, "Reebok, Pharrell Williams Part Ways: Women's Wear Daily," *Wwd* 189, no. 12, January 19, 2005.

7 David Coad. *The Metrosexual: Gender, Sexuality, and Sport*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008).

If a man blended sportswear with high fashion in the 20th century, many presumed he was a homosexual. However, the trend of metrosexuality heightened self-awareness among straight men in their appearance while footwear in particular grew more critical as image became a larger focal point.<sup>8</sup> Manufacturers catered to metrosexual tastes, such as the popularity of extra-large pants, rushing to manufacture loose-fitting clothing for the masses.<sup>9</sup> In particular, Black men gained interest in metrosexual appearances as an extension of their pre-existing interest in fashion. Many Black celebrities embraced the trend, especially at the 2003 NBA Draft. Many sports fans considered this the best NBA draft class with some of the worst draft-night suits in history, as players in attendance sported pant legs that hung almost halfway to the floor.<sup>10</sup> Metrosexuals integrated sneakers into the outfit, a decision that resonated with men as a demographic. Athletic brands released silhouettes containing fancier materials, such as leather, to cater to these trends. Over time, the “metrosexual” label faded as mens’ desire for fashionable clothing became more mainstream.

In spite of these changes, the dichotomy between sneakers for fashion and athletic use prevailed throughout America before 2008. Consumers associated athletic pairs with masculinity and stylish pairs with femininity. Teenagers and young adults prized signature sneakers from idolized athletes such as Michael Jordan.<sup>11</sup> Jordan Brand attempted to create numerous hybrids of previous models to appeal to fashionable buyers but failed as male shoppers only desired signature models and colors.<sup>12</sup> Popular shoes often consisted of low-cut models, as numerous sports ditched low-tops that lacked ankle protection. During the 2000s, multiple sports brands including Nike, Puma, and Adidas, reintroduced old sporting models as fashionable trainers with ancient athletic technology.<sup>13</sup> Older trainers resonated with adults, as buyers enjoyed the nostalgic feeling of wearing a similar pair. Overall, companies attempted to hybridize fashion and athletic sneakers but faced limited

8 Daniela Petroff, “Metrosweat Discovers ‘Metrosexual’ for 2004: [Final Edition],” *Tribune*, January 17, 2004.

9 “Clothing Makers Create Baggier Pants to Follow Trends,” *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, July 9, 2004.

10 Leo Sepkowitz, “15 Years Ago, the NBA’s Best Draft Class Wore the Worst Suits of Their Lives,” *Bleacher Report*, June 27, 2018.

11 Tom Spears, “PUTTING on AIRS; Bubbled Runners a Must When it Comes to Fashions for Student Feet: [Final Edition],” *The Ottawa Citizen*, September 10, 1990.

12 Mark Alesia, “MJ’s Skills Take Center Stage at Fashion Show: [Cook Edition],” *Daily Herald*, September 10, 1997.

13 Edwina Ings-Chambers, “Art and Sole: Trainers Rise to the Occasion Trainers Are Finally a Fashion Icon, says Edwina Ings-Chambers - Beloved by Celebrities and Available in Multiple Styles, Colours and Materials: [LONDON 1ST EDITION],” *Financial Times*, April 30, 2005.

success as consumers opted to purchase either older sporting models deemed fashionable or new technologically-sound silhouettes.

The 2008 release of the Kobe IV, basketball star Kobe Bryant’s fourth signature shoe with Nike, blurred the lines between sneakers intended for either fashion or athletic uses. Massive fanfare centered around the shoe, as the sneaker arrived with glamorous adverts and many questions about the structure. For decades, consumers viewed low-top shoes as a fashion item and taboo for basketball wear, yet Kobe and his Nike team viewed the shoe as more dynamic, with the low-cut allowing players to move quicker.<sup>14</sup> With the Kobe IV signature sneaker, the design team ensured that the sneaker met his performance needs on the court. Kobe instructed Nike’s lead designer, Eric Avar, to focus on the calcaneus bone in one’s heel when designing the footwear, allowing Kobe to make sharper cuts and conserve energy.<sup>15</sup> The flywire ribbing around the foot was another feature that created added stability. Furthermore, the low-cut silhouette compared to the previous high-top models and leather upper of the sneaker made the Kobe IV a favorite of basketball players and a must-wear on fashionable formal occasions.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the Kobe IV’s new and improved design, both fashionable and athletic, increased functionality and led to significant popularity amongst American men.

Despite the Kobe IV being just a singular sneaker release, the launch of a versatile low-top shoe that people considered both fashionable and athletic, as well as its superior functionality, created headlines in the sneaker community. The Kobe IV ushered in a new wave of sneaker fashion, performance, and comfort. Due to the staggering influence of the Kobe IV and other models, men opted to wear sneakers to formal events instead of dress shoes. For instance, in 2009, Andy Samberg paired Reebok Pumps with a suit at the MTV Awards.<sup>17</sup> People now viewed athletic models as fashionable designer sneakers. Specifically, Nike, Adidas, and their subsidiary companies released numerous vaunted sneakers that became staples for this new wave of fashion, including Jordan, Kobe, and Yeezy models.<sup>18</sup> All of these models offered varying levels of athletic performance and

14 “Nike Zoom Kobe IV: Nike Unveils its Lightest and Strongest Basketball Shoe Ever,” *Business Wire*, December 11, 2008.

15 “Low-Tops, High-Risk? Lakers Superstar Bryant Bucks the Trend of Wearing High-Tops, Leaving Some to Wonder if He is Putting Too Much Pressure on His Ankles,” *Daily News*, December 17, 2008.

16 “Sports Apparel Brand Comes Out with Specialized Footwear,” *BusinessWorld*, January 26, 2009.

17 Jonathan Sawyer, “A Brief History of Celebrities Wearing Sneakers with Suits,” *Complex*, April 17, 2020.

18 Daniel Kang, “Best Sneakers of the Decade,” *University Wire*, September 23, 2020.

the Kobe IV in particular masterfully combined the dual functionality of athleticism and fashion.

Post 2008, the explosion of sneakers' financial profitability resulted in companies including Nike posting record profits, releases morphing into massive events, and the resale market soaring in popularity. The 2008 Housing Crisis significantly weakened the United States economy, with very few companies managing to post profit margins. Nevertheless, Nike recorded a successful fiscal year in 2009, posting revenue growth of 3% from \$18.6 billion to \$19.2 billion. Specifically, during that fiscal year, overall revenues in the United States increased 2% to \$6.5 billion while footwear revenues rose 5% to \$4.6 billion.<sup>19</sup> Nike and other footwear titans continued to experience exponential sales growth throughout the 2010s as the market for sneakers expanded dramatically. The success of large sneaker companies like Nike in the weak economy demonstrated the significance of the rise in demand for sneakers.

As sneaker sales extended nationwide, retail stores struggled to maintain stock of popular models, including the Nike silhouettes. Raffle systems arose to provide consumer equal opportunity to acquire coveted sneaker, but the chance-based system was far from a guarantee.

Some launches, like the Orlando launch of the Nike Galaxy Pack, utilized first come, first serve policies for the sought-after signature models of Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Kevin Durant, and Penny Hardaway. In particular, buyers coveted the \$220 Hardaway Galaxy Foamposite for its glow in the dark design and procured high resale value. Due to human trampling at release processions, riot-clad police officers and deputies arrived on horseback and closed the shopping mall in 2012. In total, more than one hundred law-enforcement officers arrived to disperse crowds.<sup>20</sup> Companies shipped a limited number of pairs in releases, and stores only received a few dozen pairs each. Limited availability created mass hysteria among unsuccessful buyers, especially with the Air Jordan XI annual release. Even though Nike produced hundreds of thousands of Air Jordan XI yearly, they sold out within minutes and the resultant scramble for shoes enabled sky-high resale prices.<sup>21</sup> Increased demand led to supply chain issues, and stores could

19 "NIKE, Inc. Reports Fiscal 2009 Fourth Quarter and Full Year Results," Business Wire, June 24, 2009.

20 Susan Jacobson, "Frenzy Afoot in Fla. for NBA Nike Launch," The Daily Camera, February 24, 2012.

21 Rory Barrs, "Sneaker no Mics; the Regulated Supply of and Intense Demand for the Air Jordan 11 Retro Low Concord," National Post, May 24, 2014.

not control the purchasing frenzy or implement equitable sales systems, unfortunately caused violence at several locations. A push for more online sales and raffles ensued as a result of these difficulties, with proponents hoping to both curtail violent in-person frenzies and provide equitability in purchases for buyers.

Designers such as Kanye West desired to avoid Nike's limited sneaker releases that previously caused in-person chaos and violence. Therefore, he left Nike and joined Adidas in 2015. The initial collection utilized a high-top design similar to West's iconic Nike shoe.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, West designed the Yeezy Boost 350, a comfortable low-top knit sneaker that became an instant success with shoppers. West and Adidas launched multiple different silhouettes along with dozens of colorways for the Yeezy Boost 350 which would ultimately become the most popular model throughout their seven-year partnership. The Yeezy Boost 350 also captivated the comfort wear movement that gained popularity with men in the mid-2010s.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the new Adidas partnership led to increased collaborative control for West, and an extremely successful, mutually profitable endeavor.

In 2016, Pharrell returned to the shoe scene to design a new line of products with Adidas titled Human Race, which included his view on the popular Adidas running model the NMD. The sneaker quickly ascended as one of the hottest shoes globally. Celebrity demand for the shoe caused resale values of the original releases to eclipse \$1,000.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, West's former creative director Virgil Abloh's popularity increased because of his personal fashion brand, Off-White. Off-White rose to prominence in the celebrity sphere due to their non-conventional designs including a pattern of white stripes and footwear adorned with printed writing and custom laundry tags.<sup>25</sup> Nike hired Abloh to work on a sneaker collaboration akin to his ex-employer, West. The result was "The Ten," a groundbreaking project wherein Abloh reimagined ten legendary Nike shoes, including the Air Jordan I and Air Force 1, in 2017 Abloh's collection ventured into new territory for Nike, as reconstructing a famous sneaker was previously off-limits. Still, Abloh completely revamped illus-

22 "Clothes to Help Life': Kanye West's Adidas Debut at New York Fashion Week," Telegraph. Co.Uk, February 13, 2015.

23 "Adidas and Kanye West make History with Transformative New Partnership: Adidas + KANYE WEST: The most Significant Partnership Ever Created between an Athletic Brand and a Non-Athlete," PR Newswire, June 29, 2016.

24 Matt Vitone, "Adidas Originals & Pharrell Williams Debut New Yellow Hu NMD," Sourcing Journal (Online), July 20, 2016.

25 "Virgil Abloh, Kanye West's Creative Director, Puts Street Wear in the Spotlight with His Off-White Line," New York Times, November 5, 2014.

trious models and infused the prototypes with new life. The collaboration rocked the sneaker world as people welcomed the new viewpoints on the classics and embraced old Nike silhouettes.<sup>26</sup> While developing redesigns in different colorways than “The Ten,” Abloh desired key Black sporting figures to headline his new releases. Michael Jordan approved various reconstructions of classic Jordan models like the Air Jordan I and II plus Jordan III, IV, and V. For the 2018 Off-White World Cup collection, Abloh recruited Kylian Mbappe, a budding soccer superstar, to serve as the youthful poster boy.<sup>27</sup> Abloh often recalled watching one of his biggest influences, Michael Jordan, in his prime. With his reconstruction of Jordan models, Abloh desired to spotlight the original prototype and used his creativity to persuade newer generations to enjoy Jordan’s greatness as a Black icon.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, sneakers with massive appeal, including Jordans and Kobes or limited runs such as Yeezy and Off-White collaborations, evolved into staples of the resale market. When popular silhouettes sold out rapidly, dedicated consumers ventured to the resale market to spend well over market value to secure their desired sneakers. By the end of 2018, reselling as a profession emerged and the sneaker resale market reached a valuation of over \$2 billion.<sup>29</sup>

Sneaker subculture exploded over the past fifteen years in popularity and profitability. First, a massive barrier between performance and fashion dissolved as a result of the unveiling of the Kobe IV. Before, men debated the primary use of sneakers as athletic or fashion wear, but the low top appealed to both categories with its new technology and sleek appearance. Black designers, the pallbearers of the sneaker movement, rose in prominence during the Obama Administration, showcasing and amalgamation of male and Black identities and representing their importance in fashion and the local community. To this end, Virgil Abloh included many famous Black athletes in his advertising campaigns. As popularity increased, the sneaker economy skyrocketed and a new highly profitable second-hand resale market emerged. Currently, the subculture of sneakers is still evolving along racial and financial lines among men.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Gallagher, “Why Nike Chose Virgil Abloh to Rethink its Sneakers; the Sneaker Giant Isn’t the Only One Who’s Got the Enterprising Designer of Streetwear Line Off-White on Speed Dial. He’s also Collaborating with Ikea, John Mayer, Dave Chappelle and Sarah Jessica Parker,” *Wall Street Journal* (Online), September 6, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Kang, “Virgil Abloh’s Off-White and Nike Bring the Heat,” *University Wire*, September 23, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Darcel Rockett, “Embodying the City’s Connectivity: Meet the Local Artists Behind the New Jordan Chicago Collaborators’ Collection,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Hall, “Here’s Why the Sneaker Resale Market was Recently Valued at Over \$2 Billion,” *Sourcing Journal* (Online), December 20, 2018.

New innovative designs constantly emerge as men from different ethnic backgrounds work together towards an inclusive community. As a result of this evolution, designers are veering towards more inclusive designs from all cultures, creating fashionable and athletic sneakers marketed to all.

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