

# **Men and Must-Have Shoes**

**Nichols, Dugan**

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Department of Journalism, Advertising, and Media Studies

Dugan Nichols  
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Men and Must-Have Shoes:  
Masculinizing the Sneakerhead Subculture

“Sneakerheads” are predominantly male, and they live for limited and high-end shoes. This subculture typically scoffs at shoe models that become “played out” or “overexposed,” and it thrives only when the “joints” are difficult to find.<sup>1</sup> As a result, these imperatives impel sneakerheads to hone their intuition, launch expeditions across major cities, and, in some cases, risk attack and robbery by “stick up kids.”<sup>2</sup> The mundane, passive act of buying shoes that most consumers are familiar with thus transforms into an active—if not dangerous—odyssey on the part of knowledgeable men. One can easily see then how the stereotypically feminine act of shoe shopping is reconceived in a masculine context.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the masculine realms of basketball, breakdancing, business, graffiti writing, hip-hop music and skateboarding all help to define sneakerheads and their media. I argue that these connotations preclude the act of sneaker collecting from being interpreted as “geeky” or feminine,<sup>4</sup> for the attention to sport and functionality does indeed surface in sneakerheads’ testimony.<sup>5</sup> I also argue

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<sup>1</sup> Bobbito Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those? New York City's Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987* (New York: Testify, 2003). The author would lose interest in a pair if it was “played out” (87). Interviewee Kurious described the first Michael Jordan sneaker disparagingly as “overexposed” (220). “Joints” is slang for shoes (13), as is the word “kicks” (9).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Malden: Polity, 2007). Gill writes that “girl power is tied to consumption” (187) and that women’s magazines’ “fashion pages may advise on staying abreast of all the latest trends” (192). This connotation comes up in other articles as well. Specifically for shoes and *Sex and the City*, see page 8 of this research.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bannister, “Loaded’: Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities,” *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (2006), 85. Bannister notes that record collecting can be seen in this manner, which inspires male collectors to take on an “anti-commercial stance” and “valor[ize] the obscure.”

<sup>5</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?* The speakers do not always couch their rhetoric in notions of functionality, etc. There are instances of Garcia and his interviewees saying a shoe looked “gorgeous” (48)

that the subculture represents a form of the longstanding aversion to mass culture, which has been historically and negatively associated “with woman.”<sup>6</sup> These male shoe shoppers—inflected with hip-hop beats and the ball court—praise only the most authentic models that the obscurest retailers carry.

Few academics have written on this specific phenomenon. Michael Malan mostly helps define the subculture and points to the difficulty outsiders have in understanding it.<sup>7</sup> Caroline Cunningham also discusses the group and its history.<sup>8</sup> In another study, two marketing researchers interview six collectors to determine why sneaker customization on *NIKEiD.com* and *RbkCustom.com* is popular.<sup>9</sup> D. Travers Scott discusses sneakers and their meanings, but he focuses primarily on how gay communities either shunned or adopted these shoes in different times and contexts.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Christina Denise Bush considers what sneaker consumption means for African American males, but she does not detail sneakerheads’ specific discourses that work to offset the feminine connotation of consumption. Rather, she focuses on the sneaker as “a means to communicate or perform an authentic identity.”<sup>11</sup>

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or “hot” (160). Similarly, there are other accounts of fans watching players’ “shoes instead of the game” (69).

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 191.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Malan, “The Sneakerhead,” *E-Scriptor: Online Journal of Student Writing* VII (Fall 2009), 145. <https://www.marist.edu/writingcenter/pdfs/escriptor7.pdf#page=144>.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Cunningham, “You Are What’s On Your Feet: Men and the Sneaker Subculture,” 1. <http://library.drexel.edu/publications/dsmr/cunningham%20final.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Giebelhausen and Stephanie Lawson, “Sneakerheads and Custom Kicks: Insight into Symbolic Mass Customization,” in *Handbook of Research in Mass Customization and Personalization*, vol. 1, eds. Frank T. Piller and Mitchell M. Tseng, 227.

<sup>10</sup> D. Travers Scott, “Contested Kicks: Sneakers and Gay Masculinity, 1964-2008,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (June 2011). For instance, Scott writes that in the 1950s, butch subcultures associated sneakers with a “feminine stereotype” (151).

<sup>11</sup> Christina Denise Bush, “No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Commodification, Performance, and Mis- and Disembodied Black Masculinity,” (Thesis, Ohio State University, 2010). She does mention other matters as well, such as the exclusivity of the shoes.

Other scholars have produced relevant work on how gender pertains to fashion, consumption and behavior. By taking these studies into account, I intend to reiterate the notion that men have been prone to masculinizing Western culture's feminine spheres (i.e., the kitchen, the shopping experience, and the home in general). Moreover, I will incorporate sneakerheads' statements from various media and show that their subculture is simply a continuation of this tradition, with the "hunting" for rare shoes supplanting the passive act of visiting a familiar store.<sup>12</sup> In this way, collectors engage in a type of negotiated masculinity, because their passion deviates from other traditional and hegemonic male behavior (e.g., playing sports).<sup>13</sup> But before articulating the numerous ways in which the sneaker subculture is masculinized, I first explain its history, its present state, and the collectors' actions.

### *Defining the Subculture*

Major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have covered the sneakerheads' exploits, and author/collector Bobbito Garcia has romanticized their plight in his book. Similarly, directors Thibaut de Longeville and Lisa Leone have documented enthusiasts in the film *Just For Kicks*. Other media, such as *nicekicks.com* and *Sneaker Freaker Magazine*, provide collectors with the latest news on shoe releases, designers' projects, and related interests. This sort of information is crucial, because, as noted above, the subculture has been preoccupied with seeking out, storing, and/or selling exclusive models of Adidas, Converse, Nike, Puma, and other brands.

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<sup>12</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 30. Gill writes that there are "multiple masculinities," and "some are more dominant or powerful than others." One type that has had trouble asserting its power may be the masculinity linked to fashion, as evidenced by the failure of *Cosmo Man Magazine* (205). I discuss sports specifically on page 13 of this research.

One can trace collectors' origins back to the 1970s, when shoe companies began to offer a wider array of choices to consumers. This was somewhat novel, because in the 1950s and 60s, for example, Converse would only manufacture identical lines of the Chuck Taylor athletic shoe.<sup>14</sup> According to Garcia, companies eventually introduced more models, "and if you didn't get them when they came out you might never see them again."<sup>15</sup> Such was the case with the Adidas Americana, for example, which vanished in 1977. Other rare models followed suit. The friends and commentators of Garcia's book note how even the color scheme of a model could be localized within a single city. Nike's Air Force 1, for instance, appeared in white in Boston, burgundy in Philadelphia, and powder blue in North Carolina.<sup>16</sup> In order to be respectable sneaker collectors, they had to devote time and effort in tracking down elusive quarries.<sup>17</sup>

The fetishizing of athletic shoes was initially bound up with playground and professional basketball. Companies sponsored star players like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Walt "Clyde" Frazier, and Bob McAdoo, and they etched the athletes' names somewhere on the product. Local legends sported the shoes and turned heads with them on too. This association began to dissolve over time, however, causing Garcia to lament that prized sneakers were adorning the feet of "the general public who didn't play basketball."<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, graffiti "bombers" and breakdancing "b-boys" meshed with the subculture

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<sup>14</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. Garcia writes that it is "standard in the sneaker industry" to have a shoe available for only one year (41).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. Until 1988, only two stores in the world carried this prized shoe.

<sup>17</sup> *Just For Kicks*, directed by Thibaut de Longeville and Lisa Leone, 2005, [part 5 of video], (2007), retrieved May 1, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf5nkFyhPCY&feature=related>. Garcia, interviewed in the documentary, says it "required research, travel time, daring, money, know-how, [and] street smart."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

from early on, too. Hip-hop music, likewise, made sneaker wearing a “staple style.”<sup>19</sup> Run DMC’s hit song of the 1980s, “My Adidas,” helped to promote this trend (and boost sales for the Adidas Superstar shell-toe).<sup>20</sup>

I go into more detail about sport and hip-hop in the following section, but a clearer definition of collectors’ behavior is in order. I refer to Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture*, and particularly where he writes that the “predominantly working class” subcultures of 1970s Britain expressed their “forbidden meanings” through “rituals” of conspicuous consumption.<sup>21</sup> The sneakerheads of 1970s New York appeared to be no different. Their goal was to impress peers with shoes, and they purchased freely—or at least tried to. They were not necessarily “people of means,” but they refused to let lack of funds hinder their pursuits.<sup>22</sup> If collectors could not buy a new pair, they sometimes kept a toothbrush on hand to clean their kicks. New shoelaces also created the illusion that an existing pair was fresh.<sup>23</sup>

Similar to the punks that Hebdige studied,<sup>24</sup> the market for limited shoes has become “increasingly mainstream.”<sup>25</sup> Garcia meanwhile complains that production has

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<sup>19</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 1 of video], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvdOXRhBIeQ>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* [part 2 of video], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVZIDaa1eBQ>.

<sup>21</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London & New York: Methuen, 1979), 102.

<sup>22</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 1 of video].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, [part 1 of video]. Incidentally, shoelace care and etiquette are also important. Both *Just For Kicks* and *Where’d You Get Those?* detail what one can do with laces, from ironing them, to coordinating colors with clothes, to swapping them for elastic bands. As Koe Rodriguez states in *Just For Kicks*, “Your kicks were nothing” without different laces.

<sup>24</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 98. Hebdige writes that the disparaging articles about punks were equal to sympathetic ones. One example he gives is a 1977 article in *Woman’s Own* that showed “punks with smiling mothers” and stated that “punk can be a family affair.” He also says that subcultures “trends... feed back into the appropriate industries”—leading to the ability to capitalize (95).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Tunison, “Sneakerheads’ Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2007, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/16/AR2007021602181\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/16/AR2007021602181_pf.html).

since changed; shoe companies simply do not make models like they did 40 years ago.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, today's sneakerheads seem to express just as much passion and fervency as their forebears. It is common for a devotee to own nearly a dozen pairs, but in many cases, one sneakerhead can boast over 100 in a private collection.<sup>27</sup> Yet even this quantity is laughable when compared to ALLDAY, dubbed the "craziest collector ever" by *Sneaker Freaker Magazine*.<sup>28</sup> He dwarfs his contemporaries with a cache of 3,000+.

As noted above, collectors like ALLDAY cannot obtain their fashion accessories without serious effort. "Hardcore" sneakerheads reportedly scan Ebay for rare models and spend thousands of dollars on them.<sup>29</sup> They camp out in front of the niche shops, waiting in line "for days."<sup>30</sup> They also conduct research and follow, in part, "a small but very influential cadre of consumers" who advertise for the industry.<sup>31</sup> These "mavens" and "tastemakers" of the sneaker subculture determine what models are desirable through online media.<sup>32</sup> But in addition to physically hunting for shoes, why pay attention to elite bloggers? One reason might be that sneakerheads are "insecure about [their] own judgments and want to check them against others."<sup>33</sup> They may also want their tastes "affirmed by [their] peers and those [they] admire," and listening to shoe mavens is a sensible way to do just that.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Tunison, "Sneakerheads' Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair."

<sup>28</sup> *Sneaker Freaker* 20. This quote appears on the cover. His collection is worth a total of \$100,000 (71).

<sup>29</sup> Todd Wasserman, "Sneakerheads Rule," *Brandweek* 50, no. 37 (October 19, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 79.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. Wilson attributes this sentiment to Pierre Bourdieu, author of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

In any event, the sneakerheads' feverish devotion helps support a \$26 billion dollar sneaker industry—80% of which is based on hip hop and urban fashion.<sup>35</sup> One can of course buy mass produced footwear at a major retail store like Foot Locker, but this act is anathema to hardcore collectors; they want what the average shopper would have trouble accessing. Given this, the “specialty accounts” shoe companies hold with “smaller boutique stores” dictate the sneakerheads' consumer experience.<sup>36</sup> These shops have cropped up in major cities, such as Lifted in Portland, Major in Washington DC, and Dave's Quality Meat of New York (now defunct).<sup>37</sup> Other shops can be as ephemeral as the sneakers and disappear overnight.<sup>38</sup> High-end shoes walk the streets of London, Paris, and Tokyo too, but New York and its Lower East Side “boutiqueville” are perhaps the most famous sites for this type of consumption.<sup>39</sup>

Through specialty accounts, Nike, Adidas, and other companies typically furnish a boutique with a limited number of products. Quantities of a single model can run anywhere from 100 to 300 pairs total,<sup>40</sup> or they can be as low as 24—as was the case with a certain \$5,000 Nike shoe.<sup>41</sup> Other notable releases include a five-pair run of the Air Force 1 that Nike crafted for the rapper Young Jeezy—priced at a steep \$3,000 each. The Air Force 1's the company made exclusively for the cast of HBO's *Entourage* go for

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<sup>35</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 8 of video],

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbbkquDhQ0s&feature=related>.

<sup>36</sup> Tunison, “Sneakerheads' Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair.”

<sup>37</sup> “Crazy Dave Ortiz: L.E.S. Legend is Back,” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 63.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Skidmore, “Sneakerheads Love to Show Off Shoes,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2007.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/14/AR2007011400451.html>.

Skidmore refers to these as “pop-up stores,” which sell through their stock within a week's time.

<sup>39</sup> “STASH: From Nort to Nought. And Back...” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 53. A *Just for Kicks* interviewee described New York as the “Mecca” for shoes; earlier in the documentary, the narrator mentions the international cities (Part 1).

<sup>40</sup> Wasserman, “Sneakerheads Rule.”

<sup>41</sup> Richard A. Martin, “Urban Tactics; The Rebirth of the New York Sneakerhead,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2004.

\$2,000.<sup>42</sup> A limited Nike Dunk with the Sony Playstation logo stitched on the heel starts at \$1500—that is, if a collector can track down one of the 150 pairs.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, companies “often lose money” with these accounts, but they hope to create a “halo effect” for their standard mass-market shoes.<sup>44</sup> As I will discuss later, individual collectors can flip shoes and make a profit on the rarities they purchased.

When analyzing this subculture, it quickly becomes clear that most of the enthusiasts and major players are male, including the boutique owners (Omar Quiambao of Commonwealth),<sup>45</sup> the individual collectors (Kunle Martins with his 120 pairs),<sup>46</sup> the designers (Josh Franklin for Nike),<sup>47</sup> and the blogging elite (Matt Halfhill of *nicekicks.com*).<sup>48</sup> Men’s names appear predominantly in every news article, and mostly men weigh in on *Just For Kicks*.<sup>49</sup> So aside from a few female designers and bloggers featured in *Sneaker Freaker*, women tend to be relegated to the margins. And this is what makes a gender study of sneaker culture so interesting, because a love for fashionable shoes typically connotes an icon like *Sex and the City* character Carrie Bradshaw—whose “trademark obsession” is a “designer stiletto shoe.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, these men upset the stereotypical binary that has historically linked them to “production” and women to “consumption.”<sup>51</sup> But this is by no means the only instance where men appropriate and

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<sup>42</sup> “ALLDAY: The Heat Seeking Missile,” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 73.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> Wasserman, “Sneakerheads Rule.”

<sup>45</sup> Tunison, “Sneakerheads Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair.”

<sup>46</sup> Olivia Ma, “Sneaker Freaks,” *Newsweek* 144, no. 7, August 16, 2004, 69.

<sup>47</sup> “STASH: From Nort to Nought. And Back...” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 63.

<sup>48</sup> Wasserman, “Sneakerheads Rule.”

<sup>49</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 7 of video],

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juuPhEcW0Xo&feature=related>. Rapper Missy Elliott is an exception.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Arthurs, “*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama,” *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003), 93.

<sup>51</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 205.

reinterpret a feminized activity/space. In the following section, I briefly present studies on how this process has positioned the kitchen, home media, and consumerism as masculine. I then show more specifically how one can interpret men's sneaker shopping as a masculine behavior. Sneakerheads' statements provide some of this evidence, while other claims originate from my own analysis.

*Masculinizing Practices, Products, and Places: Sneakerheads Fit into an Ongoing Trend*

In her study of Food Network programs, Rebecca Swenson writes that “the private kitchen is a feminized space and female domain,” yet that has not stopped men from operating within it.<sup>52</sup> And on this channel, men structure their shows quite differently from women. Whereas females base cooking shows around “*domestic work done for family and friends*,” male hosts portray cooking as either a “*way to flex professional muscles*” or as a form of “*leisurely entertainment*.”<sup>53</sup> During evening programs, male hosts also masculinize cooking by presenting it as either an excuse to embark on a journey or as a “*competitive contest*.”<sup>54</sup> The journey and the contest to outdo one's peers in style are key components of the sneakerhead subculture as well.

In order to rank among the more serious collectors, the devoted sneakerhead should expect to travel, and these journeys often entail more than a mere train ride to boutiqueville. Esteemed collector ALLDAY sold shoes in New York City after acquiring them in Japan and Florida.<sup>55</sup> Garcia reports that in 1987, the Adidas Centennial was limited to Detroit, Boston and Queens, which would have required some dedicated

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<sup>52</sup> Rebecca Swenson, “*Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity, and Food*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 1 (March 2009), 39. Swanson quotes Weedon and adds that “social institutions and popular culture” have helped make “the kitchen a gendered space” (38).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> “ALLDAY: The Heat Seeking Missile,” *Sneaker Freaker*, 72 .

consumers to hit the road.<sup>56</sup> On the production end, for example, designer Josh Franklin's work for shoe companies took him to Stockholm, Japan and the Dominican Republic.<sup>57</sup> Particularly for the buyer, though, hazards are inherent to the journey. Wearing a desirable pair of sneakers could consign an unlucky sneakerhead into the throes of assault and thievery. One such incident involved Nike's release of the \$300 Pigeon Dunk, which sold out at one New York store in twenty minutes. Police had to escort customers on the way out, because robbers positioned themselves around the corner of the boutique with baseball bats and knives under their coats.<sup>58</sup> As Garcia notes, to collect sneakers meant you had to risk "getting vicked in unknown territory."<sup>59</sup>

In regard to the contest environment, Garcia testifies that "there were rewards for being the shit, with hot sneakers that no one else had"—he also writes that "any true sneaker fiend's most cherished memories are of the days that he heard the words, 'Yo, money, where'd you get those?'"<sup>60</sup> In the same book, commentator Fabel claims that customizing sneakers was "very competitive," with the question of "who's gonna blow who up and be the flyest?" on some sneakerheads' minds.<sup>61</sup>

This notion of sneaker customization is an important one, because it invokes Keir Keightley's study on the friction experienced by male and female media users of the postwar era. Discourses surrounding the radio and television associated the devices with the masses, femininity and "low" culture, because they encouraged passive

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<sup>56</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?*, 166.

<sup>57</sup> "STASH: From Nort to Nought. And Back..." *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 63.

<sup>58</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 6 of video],

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THb8Bx9gatg&feature=related>.

<sup>59</sup> Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those?*, 209.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

engagement.<sup>62</sup> While the television represented “furniture,” the hi-fi was interpreted as “hardware” suitable for the active male.<sup>63</sup> This allowed men to see themselves as part of an “elite minority” that chose its own records instead of being “subject to a commercial broadcast flow controlled by far-flung corporations.”<sup>64</sup> Keightley goes on to say that “the commodities purchased by the high-fidelity connoisseur did not so obviously bear the mark of advertising... [for] ‘his’ purchases seemed to be about individual choice.”<sup>65</sup> A similar phenomenon occurs when sneakerheads paint their own shoes, because it blurs the fact that a large corporation manufactured the items. The behavior also mimics the hi-fi user who is “constantly manipulating his equipment” because sneakerheads can potentially “spend the five hours necessary to properly paint their sneakers.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, shoe customization requires care and mastery, which plays into the idea that buying and owning sneakers is masculine.

But I also argue that sneaker mastery extends beyond mere design; discourses about the maintenance and storage of the shoes also hark back to Keightley’s work on the technical hi-fi fans. For instance, co-owner of the Major boutique, Duk-ki Yu, keeps his stockpile of 1,500+ shoes in a “climate-controlled storage space,” which implies that he does not just passively own them.<sup>67</sup> Rather, he must take steps and employ technology to sustain their integrity. Similarly, Garcia writes that a “collector had to be cunning in how

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<sup>62</sup> Keir Keightley, “Low Television, High Fidelity: Taste and the Gendering of Home Entertainment Technologies,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 41, no. 2 (2003), 238.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 245. The second quote appears on p. 241.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>66</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Tunison, “Sneakerheads’ Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair.”

he stashed his joints.”<sup>68</sup> One friend comments in the book that he stacks shoes “according to size so that any adverse weight shifts don’t dent the boxes.”<sup>69</sup> Garcia also quotes Fabel, who would wrap the individual shoes *and* shoeboxes in plastic to protect against leaks, calling it a “ghetto incubator.”<sup>70</sup> ALLDAY describes having to “break down and fold about a hundred pairs” of shoes in order to transport them back to New York—indicating logistical prowess.<sup>71</sup> Ingenuity went into cleaning the valued sneakers, too. Fabel reports that to clean shoes properly, collectors had to transform into “mad scientists in the laboratory.”<sup>72</sup> He emphasizes the fact that he and others made their “own high powered chemicals,” which allots agency to sneakerheads who do more than simply buy.<sup>73</sup> Again, the technical care and allusions to science position owning sneakers as masculine.

Another exploration into home media—this time video gaming—helps to explain the gendering of sneaker culture as well. John Vanderhoef’s thesis on the matter references the ongoing denigration of mainstream/feminine culture and notes that “popular culture has repeatedly designated video games as a male pastime.”<sup>74</sup> But he adds that “hardcore gamers are afraid of being seen as less than true men,” and that males lashed out at the onset of casual games for the computer and Nintendo Wii.<sup>75</sup> Like the hi-fi listener, “hardcore gamers position casual gamers as passive, naïve, and mindless

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<sup>68</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 204. Commentator Johnny Snakeback Fever adds that a shoe stash was referred to as a “quiver,” like the arrow supply kept by a “medieval marksman.”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>71</sup> “ALLDAY: The Heat Seeking Missile,” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 71.

<sup>72</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 200.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>74</sup> John Vanderhoef, “Casual Threats: Gender and Video Game Culture” (Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010), 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

consumers.”<sup>76</sup> Incidentally, these exact contrasts between activeness and passivity—knowledge and naivety—emerge in the testimony of the devoted sneakerhead too. Collector Tommy Rebel, for instance, chastises the students at his high school who merely bought shoes because of their “nice color.”<sup>77</sup> He claims that “they don’t know the history behind the making of the shoe” and quickly dismisses them as “just consumers.”<sup>78</sup> Bobbito Garcia expresses similar sentiments, noting in his book that he will still dream of being “in a down low sneaker store that no one knows about that doesn’t exist buying some discontinued model that doesn’t exist anymore either.”<sup>79</sup> One of his commentators likewise bemoaned the fact that more people were buying sneakers in the late 1980s, thus ending the “fun” of the hunt.<sup>80</sup> The sneaker companies at that point, he claimed, “just mass produced things that were rare and ruined everything.”<sup>81</sup>

Buying rare commodities is still buying, however, and as I mentioned earlier, various discourses have connected consumption to femininity. These include everything from *Sex and the City* to *Teen Magazine*. The mostly male sneakerheads, however, have predicated their chief behavior on this very practice. Yet a range of staunchly masculine activities and institutions offset and mask enthusiasts’ reliance on the stereotypically feminine act of shoe shopping. First among these activities, of course, is basketball, which has influenced the subculture since its inception. Playing or watching sports is considered masculine, and engaging with them while praising sneakers helps to keep

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>77</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 5 of video].

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 174.

fashionable purchases in the realm of masculine behavior.<sup>82</sup> Graffiti writing and breakdancing pose as other elements of the subculture that connote masculinity. Lindsey Othen-Price writes that not only is tagging typically “carried out by adolescent males,” but its terminology and tactics also possess a palpable sense of militarism.<sup>83</sup> Taggers hide in bushes, work quietly, and sneak into train yards to “bomb” surfaces.<sup>84</sup> Roberta Shapiro notes that breakdancing is mostly reserved for young men too, and that a key component is challenging other dancers.<sup>85</sup> In addition, this tripartite of activities permits sneakerheads to weigh in on the functionality of a shoe, thus downplaying the idea that footwear is just ornamentation. For example, breakdancer Doze states that Pumas allow his feet to breathe,<sup>86</sup> while other b-boys accepted the Nike Cortez as a “functional” shoe to dance in.<sup>87</sup> One graffiti artist admits that “the black mesh of the [Nike] Vandal absorbed any kind of ink stain,” and that it was “the official bombing shoe in ’85.”<sup>88</sup> Another tagger claims that the Adidas Top Tens had great “ankle support,” which he would need when “bombing the elevated trains.”<sup>89</sup>

Still other factors continue to influence sneaker culture. As Duk-ki Yu reports, the “sneaker collector look... borrows freely from both the skater and hip-hop look.”<sup>90</sup> One writer conflates the two styles in another news article as well, describing them as

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<sup>82</sup> Ava Rose and James Friedman, “Television Sports as Mas(s)culine Cult of Distraction,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>83</sup> Lindsey Othen-Price, “Making Their Mark: A Psychodynamic View of Adolescent Graffiti Writing,” *Psychodynamic Practice* 12, no. 1 (February 2006), 5.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Roberta Shapiro, “The Aesthetics of Institutionalization: Breakdancing in France,” *Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2004), 319.

<sup>86</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 86.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>90</sup> Tunison, “Sneakerheads Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair.”

“subcultures that judge a guy by his sneakers.”<sup>91</sup> This connection is appropriate not only because both spheres are masculine, but also because male rappers often “belittle” women,<sup>92</sup> and male skaters tend not to “relate to females as equals.”<sup>93</sup> The sneaker industry also sponsors celebrities from either subculture. Rapper Missy Elliott and Run DMC have their own signature models.<sup>94</sup> Reebok signed rappers Jay-Z and 50 Cent to a lucrative endorsement deal, too.<sup>95</sup> Nike’s SB line carries models that boast the names of top skaters, including contest circuit champion Paul Rodriguez.<sup>96</sup> The production of a fashionable sneaker that is ostensibly *for* skateboarding adds another layer of masculinity to its consumption.<sup>97</sup>

The individual entrepreneur is yet another character in the sneaker culture’s wide cast. This person operates independently of the boutiques’ economics, buying multiple pairs of limited shoes with the intention of selling for a profit. The online service Ebay can facilitate the flippers’ sales and award them with a considerable markup. In the aforementioned Pigeon Dunk saga, individual sellers offered pairs online at \$750-2000—which translates to around two to seven times the retail price.<sup>98</sup> In a process that echoes

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<sup>91</sup> Martin, “Urban Tactics; The Rebirth of the New York Sneakerhead.”

<sup>92</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, “Can a Thug (get some) Love? Sex, Romance, and the Definition of a Hip Hop Thug,” *Women and Language* 32, no. 2 (September 2009), 35. The reason may be because “subjects who occupy a hierarchical location other than the ideal (straight, white, Christian, bourgeois)... [highlight] male distinctiveness in feminized space... [and degrade] women.”

<sup>93</sup> Becky Beal, “Alternative Masculinity and Its Effects on Gender Relations in the Subculture of Skateboarding,” *Journal of Sport Behavior* 19, no. 3 (August 1996), 204. Beal also writes that although skateboarders’ values “did not reflect a mainstream masculinity, the participants [of her study] defined skateboarding as a masculine practice.”

<sup>94</sup> Eric Wilson, “Front Row; Sneakerhead Bonanza,” *New York Times*, March, 23, 2006.

<sup>95</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 7 of video].

<sup>96</sup> “Best of the Best 2010 Sneakers,” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 117.

<sup>97</sup> Bush, “No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Commodification, Performance, and Mis- and Disembodied Black Masculinity.” Bush writes that sneakers are “often purchased... [and] worn for activities other than those for which they were created,” which suggests that masculine shoe buyers are not always playing the sport the shoes are made for.

<sup>98</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 6 of video].

back to Keightley's hi-fi users, sneakerhead Mark Ong (aka SBTG) paints Nikes and sells them for \$350 a pair.<sup>99</sup> Another "customizer," Methamphibian, sells his repainted sneakers for upwards of \$900.<sup>100</sup> ALLDAY, wanting to emulate Brooklyn "hustlers" who dealt with money, originally bought shoes for himself but then started selling them.<sup>101</sup> The role of the artists and sellers in sneaker culture provides the same connotation as basketball, hip-hop, and skateboarding, etc., because possessing "financial acumen" is a "masculine [trait]."<sup>102</sup> It is yet another element that upsets the conventional impressions of a (feminized) fashionable shoe consumer; making profits off of the many shoes in a closet helps mask that one collected so many in the first place. Interestingly, ALLDAY describes one purchase as a "big investment," which connotes a transaction more substantial than a simple one that might occur in a mall.<sup>103</sup>

A study on gender and male-dominated sneaker culture would be incomplete without also incorporating collectors' quotes regarding women. These have not been extraordinarily prevalent, but references to the opposite sex do surface across different source material. These quotes are perhaps the most explicit way to reaffirm the sneakerheads' masculinity; collectors will on occasion qualify a statement about shoes by referencing women, thus making their own actions seem heteronormative. For instance, hip-hop scholar Koe Rodriguez explains that looking fashionable was "how you pulled

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<sup>99</sup> Rob Walker, "The Way We Live Now: 3/20-05: Consumed; For Kicks," *New York Times Magazine*, March 20, 2005, 38.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>101</sup> "ALLDAY: The Heat Seeking Missile," *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 71.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas Battema and Phillip Sewell, "Trading in Masculinity: Muscles, Money, and Market Discourse in the WWF," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 281.

<sup>103</sup> "ALLDAY: The Heat Seeking Missile," *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 71.

honeys.”<sup>104</sup> B-boy Doze Green explained it more poetically, saying that the “male peacock has these beautiful feathers and stuff to attract the lady peacock.”<sup>105</sup> After describing going to high school as a “fashion show,” one of Garcia’s commentators admitted that he was also “trying to impress the ladies.”<sup>106</sup> In the same book, Jazzy Art derided the Nike Double Team shoes, because they were a chore to remove before being intimate with a girl.<sup>107</sup> These qualifiers are important to consider, and they also segue into the last nuance of sneaker culture I want to mention—an issue of one of its leading magazines, *Sneaker Freaker*. I use the publication throughout for enthusiasts’ statements, but I also think an analysis of the product itself is in order. I argue that it only bears some marks of New Lad literature—which is prevalent in magazines such as *loaded*, *FHM*, and *Maxim*.

Fashion, the new styles, and consumption predicate much of the content of women’s magazines.<sup>108</sup> The first magazines to offer similar content to men were aimed at the “new man”—a “‘commercial’ figure” who was “affluent, narcissistic and preoccupied with fashion and consumption.”<sup>109</sup> Tim Edwards credits 1986’s *Arena Magazine* for catering to the New Man and 1994’s *loaded* for doing the same for the New Lad.<sup>110</sup> Gill notes that this “‘laddish’ tone” allowed producers to address men in ways reserved originally for females. These magazines offer “an almost hysterical emphasis on women’s bodies and heterosexual sex, juxtaposed alongside avowedly homoerotic

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<sup>104</sup> *Just For Kicks*, [part 1 of video].

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?*, 195.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>108</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 187, 192.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>110</sup> Tim Edwards, “Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, Style and Men’s Magazines,” in *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 137.

photographs.”<sup>111</sup> Moreover, Edwards writes that lad magazines feature “scantily clad young women,” “alcohol-induced practical jokes,”<sup>112</sup> or “rudeness and bad behavior.”<sup>113</sup> One may expect *Sneaker Freaker*—given its role as vehicle to market fashionable shoes to men—to feature these types of New Lad conventions. Issue #20, however, does not overtly express such conventions.

The issue ran a few photos of women, but they are not necessarily in skimpy attire. The females involved are also designers and interviewees for the most part, and not the superfluous models consigned to something peripheral to the magazine—like a calendar.<sup>114</sup> A few women model for a clothing/sneaker company’s products, however. The magazine features more whole-page images of the actual sneakers. In addition to the paucity of revealing clothing is a lack of crude humor. There was one reference, though, to a Converse shoe fitting like a “skintight Trojan,” but comments like these were rare.<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, this issue did not fully express the sentiments of a Lad magazine, even though its premise and the subculture it caters to is based on male fashion and consumption.

### *Conclusion*

I have argued in this paper that the largely male sneaker subculture speaks and behaves in ways that tend to masculinize shoe shopping—whether knowingly or not. Not only do they praise exclusivity and berate mass produced goods, but they also acknowledge and/or engage in classically masculine activities (i.e. shooting hoops, skateboarding, and tagging trains). Moreover, the idea that the culture is about more than

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<sup>111</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 207.

<sup>112</sup> Edwards, “Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, Style and Men’s Magazines,” 132. Edwards also says that the ads are mostly by the “tobacco, alcohol and sex industries.”

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>115</sup> “2010—Year of Converse?” *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 50.

just shoes is reflected in the coverage of sneakerheads. Writers sometimes stress the behavior's significance, as one journalist did when comparing sneaker purchases to collecting "art."<sup>116</sup> Likewise, a designer in *Sneaker Freaker* even played up elements of drama when describing his materials. In an attempt to create a biking shoe that could withstand rain, he worked with Supermarine cotton—a derivative of a fabric "invented by the British in World War II, primarily because their pilots were getting shot down in the North Sea and... dying of hypothermia."<sup>117</sup> These types of grave or serious discourses persist throughout the culture (stories of the thwarted Pigeon Dunk robberies would be others). Finally, analyzing sneaker culture in terms of gender is but one method. Bush's aforementioned thesis looks more specifically at race and class vis-à-vis sneakers, noting that "Blackness (in relationship to consumer culture) remains valuable and most prominent as a tool for the transference of 'cool.'"<sup>118</sup> This is especially evident, for instance, with celebrity-endorsed shoes. I did not explore the racial implications of marketing sneakers, but I feel I have added to scholarship with comparisons of sneakerheads to male cooks, male hi-fi users and the New Lad.

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<sup>116</sup> Tunison, "Sneakerheads Kick It Up a Notch in Search for that Rare Pair."

<sup>117</sup> "Outlier vs. Feit: Industrial Strength," *Sneaker Freaker* 20, 79.

<sup>118</sup> Bush, "No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Commodification, Performance, and Mis- and Disembodied Black Masculinity," 11.

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