

A red line-art illustration of a sneaker, showing the upper part of the shoe with various straps and details. The lines are thin and red, set against a dark red background.

sneaker culture

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introduction

Sneaker culture draws on so many different aspects of modern society – athletics, music, fashion, celebrities – but it also influences these categories, making sneaker culture a cornerstone of today's social and commercial environment. Since the industry holds such importance, the way that sneaker culture is represented directly reflects upon accepted social norms. Through research and my own experience within sneaker culture, I noticed a glaring flaw: the underrepresentation and inequality of women.

Athletics, specifically basketball, and the music industry, specifically hip hop, are two of the largest contributors to the origins of sneaker culture. Notably, these roots of the industry are also male dominated, which explains how sneaker culture and excluding women became synonymous. From all aspects – the faces of sneaker lines and collaborations, sneakers available to men versus women, advertisements geared towards men rather than women – sneakers have become a male status symbol. I am using the male dominated nature of sneaker culture as a lens to focus on gender inequality that reaches beyond sneakers and into today's social discussion.

In order to address this pattern of gender discrimination, I will be creating a series of branded infographics that will provide education on the exclusion of women from sneaker culture and how this exemplifies male domination in a broader sense. The project will address the main aspects of sneaker culture: athletics, hip-hop, sneaker lines and collaborations, and sneaker history through a feminist lens. The final form will be a digital infographic series in the form of a scrollable, digital document.

contextual discussion

Since sneaker culture is influential across platforms and takes reference from a wide variety of subcultures, my research includes references from multiple disciplines: Sociology, Psychology, and of course, Art and Design.

theory references

¹Hancock, Joseph H. 2019. "Fashion, Style and Global Culture Uniting Us." Fashion, Style, & Popular Culture. January 1, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc.6.1.3_2.

In Joseph Hancock's editorial article "Fashion, Style and Global Culture Uniting Us,"¹ he explains the universal appeal of the sneaker industry and how it still somehow excludes women. Hancock focuses on his observation of nostalgic styles making a comeback with Generation Z'ers, in addition to the company Obsessive Sneaker Disorder and their workshops, SOLEcial Studies. In accordance with the retro style discussion, Hancock explains that sneakers are arguably the most universal aspect of fashion to date, especially when he says,

"Whether high/low culture, urban/country, Western/Eastern, fashion/utility, collector/athlete or just someone who needs a comfortable shoe, it is almost certain that most people own or wear sneakers."

Even though sneakers are thought to be inclusive of all of these groups listed, there is still a sense of exclusion; he goes on to explain, "They emphasize the need for more minorities and women to become involved in the sneaker industry as it is still dominated by Caucasian men." The fact that almost everyone has sneakers yet sneaker culture still excludes large groups of people – women – is representative of larger cultural issues in our society.

²"Women's Historical Exclusion from Sneaker Culture – Gnovisjournal" n.d. Accessed November 19, 2019. <http://www.gnovisjournal.org/2019/03/08/womens-historical-exclusion-from-sneaker-culture/>.

Kashir Aboud's "Women's Historical Exclusion from Sneaker Culture"² focuses more specifically on the exclusion of women from sneaker culture. In this relatively brief blog post, Aboud clearly lays out the cultural roots of sneaker culture and gives a concise reasoning for the male-domination of sneaker culture. Referencing numerous scholarly sources, Aboud successfully captures the casual tone of sneaker culture while remaining credible. Sneakers have direct and strong influences from both sports (mainly basketball) and music (specifically hip-hop). Both of these industries have historical associations with the male identity. Male athletes and artists have promoted sneaker culture by incorporating the industry into their lifestyle and work, creating hype in their fan bases which are overtly male as well. However, Aboud emphasizes that female sneakerheads do exist, despite what sneaker companies think, and deserve the same respect as males when he says, "The only reason why

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some men in the sneaker community consider women to lack the same 'cool' factor is that they continue to question the legitimacy in any area that is not domestic or overtly sexual." The lack of female representation and participation in sneaker culture is a direct effect of women's oppression in other fields. The sneaker industry is a blatant example of female exclusion that deserves a different approach than the historical and current climate, or as About says, "...there needs to be a countercultural approach to sneaker culture that not only includes but also encourages women's contribution and participation."

From a more academic perspective, Dylan Miner's **Provocations on Sneakers: The Multiple Significations of Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity**³ reviews specific pop culture subsections of sneaker culture as a deep dive into how the industry became so excluding of women. Although this chapter of the publication addresses many key aspects of sneaker culture origins, the section that pertains the most to my project is "My Adidas' and the Origins of Masculine Consumption" because it focused directly on how sneaker culture became so male dominated. Since sneaker culture has such strong roots embedded in athletics, most specifically basketball, the male-dominated nature carried over to sneakers. The release of the first Air Jordan caused the sneaker world to transform, as Miner describes it, "from one where shoes functioned as a secondary accoutrement to one where sports, celebrity, and sneakers were reciprocal signifiers within basketball culture." Once sneakers became arguably synonymous with basketball, the lack of female representation was even more apparent in the sneaker industry, Miner explains, "Since sport has historically been related to masculine social roles, the consumption of these products reaffirms the consumer's identity as male." The explicit exploration of the correlation between sneaker culture and sports, especially basketball, reaffirms the underlying gender inequality that carried over from one industry to another. The combination of certain athletics and hip-hop music – both male dominated industries – has led to somewhat of a boys club revolving around sneakers.

³Project MUSE - Provocations on Sneakers: The Multiple Significations of Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity." n.d. Accessed November 18, 2019. <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.lib.umich.edu/article/369274>.

⁴"Sneakers : Fashion, Gender, and Subculture." n.d. Accessed September 24, 2019. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMTA5NTc4OV9fQU41?sid=47e15053-afe5-490d-837a-65936f262bb9@sdv-v-sessmgr01&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

Diving into the psychological reasoning behind sneakerheads and female exclusion, Yuniya Kawamura's **Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture**⁴ explores the sociological side. Kawamura dissects the sneaker enthusiasts, or "sneakerheads", and what it means to be a participant in this phenomenon. This publication was the first academic book dedicated solely to sneakers written by a sociologist. Beginning to understand the psychological and sociological reasoning behind sneaker obsession allows me to approach the discussion with a different perspective. More importantly, Kawamura touches on the male-dominant attribute of the sneaker community and how it alienates girls and women

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when she states, "Sneakers represent manhood and masculinity." Exploring the psychological reasoning behind the attraction to sneakers, in addition to looking into why sneakers have become a status symbol for men, provides a solid baseline understanding for my research topic. The sociology of the male dominated aspect of sneaker culture validates the issue at hand and speaks to the broader topic of gender inequality beyond the sneaker industry.

art + design references

⁵"Brooklyn Museum: The Rise of Sneaker Culture." n.d. Accessed November 18, 2019. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/rise_of_sneaker_culture

"The Rise of Sneaker Culture"⁵ by Elizabeth Semmelhack demonstrates how to successfully depict the history of sneaker culture, which is what I'm aiming to do with part of my exhibition. Her gallery show included a carefully curated collection of artifacts, represented key moments throughout the sneaker culture timeline, as she describes, "The exhibition... looks at the evolution of the sneaker from its beginnings to its current role as status symbol and urban icon." Aside from the clear evolution of sneaker form over the years, the collection also includes extremely rare and exclusive pairs of sneakers from private collectors, such as hip-hop artist Darryl "DMC" McDaniels. Sneakers such as these perfectly represent the ties between sneaker culture, music industry, athletics, and fashion throughout the years. This source provides a good baseline for the timeline element that I plan on implementing in my final form of my project.

Left: Fig. 1, adidas x Run-DMC 25th Anniversary Superstar, 2011

Right: Fig. 2, adidas Micropacer, 1984



⁶"Giorgia Lupi & Other Stories." n.d. Giorgialupi. Accessed January 20, 2020. <http://giorgialupi.com/giorgia-lupi-otherstories>.

Giorgia Lupi is an Italian information designer who has heavily impacted the modern approach to infographics. Lupi says she takes pride in being an information designer because she gives people access to information while shaping the way in which they access it. Her nuanced style of hand drawn and slightly abstract displays of statistics and information has been recognized around the world. Her infographics offer me a refreshingly different style that stands out amongst other infographics that are seen too often. Her project in collaboration with the clothing brand & Other Stories⁶ is specifically inspiring to my project. Lupi creates visual displays of information based on empowering women that are making a difference. For example, Rachel Carson is an author, environmentalist, and activist that is attributed with the first contribution to literature from a conservationist perspective and

helped to launch the environmental movement, propel regulations, and set up agencies devoted to protecting the environment. Through Lupi's distinct visual design language, she created infographics based on the structural and semantical analysis of her work. Then, in collaboration with the clothing brand, these visuals were used on a variety of clothing items to create a collection specifically based on Rachel's work. Not only does Lupi's graphic style inspire my work, but her mission to shed light on inspiring women correlates perfectly with the aim of my project; to spark conversation on the underrepresentation of women.

Left: Fig. 3, Rachel, one of Lupi's subjects

Right: Fig. 4, tote bag from Lupi's collaborative fashion line

Bottom: Fig. 5, Lupi's sketches



Sheila Levrant de Bretteville is a graphic designer that uses her work to make a statement on feminist issues facing our society. Aside from her work, she is particularly inspiring to me because of her social work; she has founded and co-founded numerous workshops and centers for women. Most well known for her feminist graphic design work⁷ in the 70's, de Bretteville arguably played a role in the women's movement during that time period. One of her earliest pieces "Everywoman Newspaper" gave women a platform for their voice to be heard while incorporating bold, eye-catching graphics that represent the empowerment of women. Additionally, her interactive poster "Pink" questions the gender normality of pink being associated with females, sparking the conversation for other accepted gender stereotypes.

⁷"SheilaStudio." n.d. Accessed January 20, 2020. <http://sheilastudio.us/>.

The energy and message in her work inspires my project to be bold, empowering, and educational. Through her work, de Bretteville has proven her ability to spark conversations about gender stereotypes, something that I am striving to do with my project.

Top: Fig. 6, de Bretteville's "Pink", 1973

Left: Fig. 7, the "Everywoman Newspaper" cover, 1970

Right: Fig. 8, the "Everywoman Newspaper" in use, 1970



methodology

Throughout the duration of this project, my progress work can be categorized into three phases: brainstorming and research, ideation and branding, and visualizing and finalizing. During these stages, I continuously sought out feedback from my peers and professors in order to refine my project as much as possible. There was also some notable overlap between phases; for example, although audience considerations became evident during research and ideation, the viewer and the format in which my project would be viewed continued to inform my design decisions throughout the following stages.

brainstorming + research

During this very first phase, I roughly articulated the topic of my project and what I wanted it to accomplish in an early project proposal. I originally planned on creating the ideal female sneaker advertisement campaign, utilizing research and reference to male-oriented sneaker campaigns to inform my design decisions. I thought that creating such a campaign would lead the viewer to come to the realization that real-world sneaker campaigns, in addition to sneaker culture as a whole, is only welcoming to men. Despite the difference in form, I still had my consistent aim to provoke and educate my audience on the exclusion of women through the lens of sneaker culture. I was inspired by my own personal experiences with sneaker culture as a consumer, in addition to my internship experience with Foot Locker this past summer. I then conducted research in a broad range of disciplines to validate my project topic and boost my credibility as a designer.

My research revolved around the breakdown of sneaker culture and what other industries are synonymous: athletics – mainly basketball – hip-hop, celebrities, and fashion. While conducting this research, I began to feel unsure about my chosen form of an “ideal” sneaker campaign. With the overwhelming amount and diversity of evidence of gender imbalances within sneaker culture, I came to the realization that designing another advertising campaign wouldn’t successfully capture the shock factor that I experienced during my research. Women don’t need a sneaker campaign, they need to be informed about the injustices associated within the industry so they are able to make educated decisions. After coming to this realization I considered a variety of forms; spoof retro ads, informational posters, and even a multi-platform educational campaign. However, with the abundance of information that I deemed relevant, I decided to direct my form into a series of infographics that represent every aspect of sneaker culture to demonstrate gender inequality from all angles. By designing these infographics, I am providing digestible and educational statistics that allow the viewer to form their own opinion.

ideation + branding

At the start of this methodology stage, my main focus was on creating the series of infographics to display all of the research from the first stage. Before I dove into making, I first experimented with the overall branding and aesthetic for my project and exhibition. Even though I wasn’t creating a brand, per se, I still visualized a branded experience for my audience – a cohesive look that coincided with my project topic. These

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applied branding methods will reassure the viewer that they are receiving information from a reliable source; a consistent branded front. In addition, the branding of the infographics provides an identity that viewers can identify and relate to. I referred back to my earlier sketches from the make-a-thon before I narrowed down my scope. I was drawn to the style that I worked with for these forms, which became the baseline for my branding.

Top Left: Fig. 9, digital illustration of the Air Jordan Retro 4

Top Right: Fig. 10, digital line drawing of the Nike Air Force 1

Bottom Left: Fig. 11, abstract digital illustration of the Balenciaga Triple Stack

Bottom Right: Fig. 12, abstract digital illustration of the Air Jordan Retro 1



Based off of this chosen aesthetic, I also referenced some of the most iconic sneakers to form a color palette for my project. I then decided upon typefaces and logo treatments that went along with this branding. I went through a few rounds of iteration and brainstorming for the name of the infographic series and sought out opinions from my peers to choose what made the most sense. Below are some logo and name iterations with my finalized name, logo, and branded color palette in the bottom right.

sneakher culture

**Top Left, Top Right,
Bottom Left:** Fig. 13-15,
logo iteration

Bottom Right: Fig. 16,
finalized logo

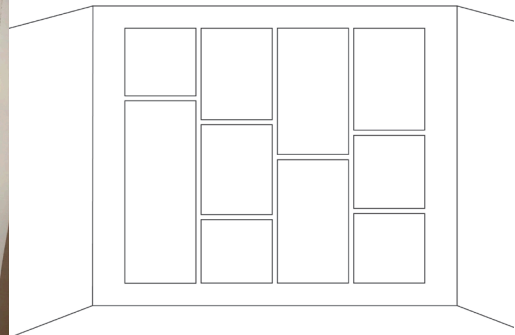
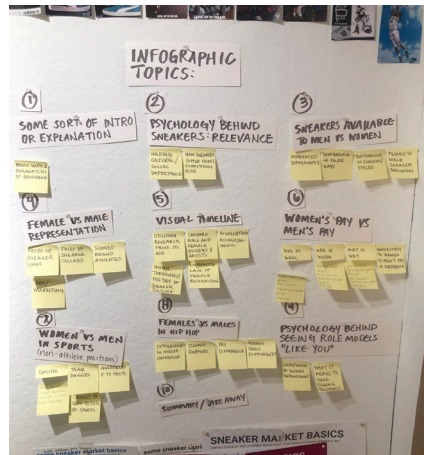


Once the branding was solidified, I switched my focus to the actual infographics and their content. Condensing all of my research into categories and figuring out the hierarchy between them was a rather difficult task. I went through many rounds of trial and error, thinking about relevance and main topic. As seen in the left image below, some of my finalized infographic topics are the gender pay gap, the importance of having role models that look like you, and sneaker availability to men vs women. During this process, I decided that I wanted the individual infographics to all form one large infographic when displayed together, demonstrated in the exhibition mock up below on the right. This way, each piece could stand alone but they also serve as a portion of a bigger "picture". Each of the ten infographic posters would have a main research topic, all relating back to sneaker culture and the noticeable gender imbalance.

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Left: Fig. 17, brainstorming exercise to figure out infographic topics and main content for each

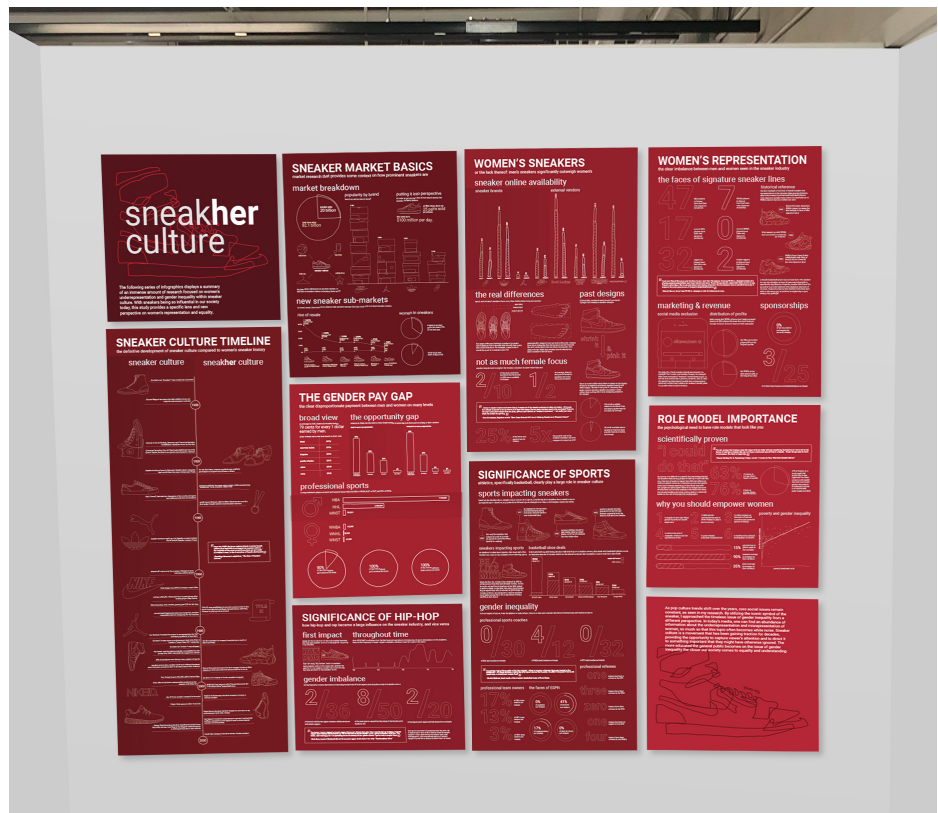
Right: Fig. 18, digital sketch of how the infographics would be presented in the gallery show



visualizing + finalizing

During this final stage, I utilized the research, branding, and plan of attack for the infographics to smoothly transition to the visualization and finalization of the infographics. Since I spent the majority of my project timeline focusing on the first two phases, I was prepared to chug away at translating my research into visuals. I already decided upon what topics and statistic to include, therefore, it was just a process of creating representational graphics, apply the branding, and ensuring that each graphic works with the surrounding visuals.

Right: Fig. 19, finalized version of how the infographics would have been formatted



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My original plan for the remainder of this stage was to prepare for my physical exhibition; printing and mounting my infographics, creating vinyl cutouts of my logo and artist's statement to adhere to another wall, and figure out the logistics of a takeaway that viewers could interact with. However, since our physical exhibition was cancelled, I had to make an alternative plan of action rather quickly. My infographics then had to be formatted for a digital platform and tailored to the possibility of reaching an even broader audience. This brought new considerations of displaying on a screen rather than in person, my main concern being a generally shorter attention span within viewers.

I decided to create a simple digital document that will have interactive links. I consider it to be a combination of a research document, blog, and visually stimulating website. The information is still organized "chronologically", as I had originally intended, but more rigid now. In my original display plan, I had a rough viewer reading path that I hoped most would follow, however, with this new digital format, I was able to control what the viewer read first much more than before. In this way, I treated my project more like a readable document than an infographic series, in addition to other supplements, such as the clickable table of contents. I was also able to incorporate thoughtful negative space that gave some visual breathing room so that the information was not as overwhelming as it would have been when presented all together.

creative work

sneakher culture is a digital infographic series in the form of a digital, scrollable document. The information is categorized into ten main topics within sneaker culture, two being the introduction and conclusion / take away sections. The infographics account for the individual aspects of sneaker culture but focus on how all aspects demonstrate the underrepresentation and inequality of women. The illustration style has a hand drawn aesthetic to offset the rather serious and urgent tone of the data in order to not lose the aesthetic of sneaker culture. The bold red background follows these same guidelines, in addition to providing an eye-catching element. Clickable links provide an educational and interactive experience for viewers that allow them to digest the information at their own pace.

Users can either scroll chronologically – as I initially intended for the information to be read – or they also have the capability to skip to other sections via the clickable links in the table of contents towards the top. Even though the series serves as on large scale infographic, each individual infographic can stand

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alone. Therefore, users can choose what they want to read and learn more about, or skip sections all together. With each scroll, the information is spaced out so that the screen is not visually overwhelming at any point. Intentional gradients and hand drawn graphics give statistics dynamic elements. **sneakher culture** provides an educational and provoking experience on the underrepresentation and inequality of women through the unorthodox lens of sneaker culture. This creates a refreshing feminist perspective that is easily sharable, having the potential to reach a broad audience.

Right: Fig. 20, part of the final digital, scrollable document broken up for formatting purposes



sneakher culture

The following series of infographics displays a summary of an immense amount of research focused on women's underrepresentation and gender inequality within sneaker culture. With sneakers being so influential in our society today, this study provides a specific lens and new perspective on women's representation and equality.

CONTENTS

clickable infographic topics that bring you to the designated page



sneaker market



significance



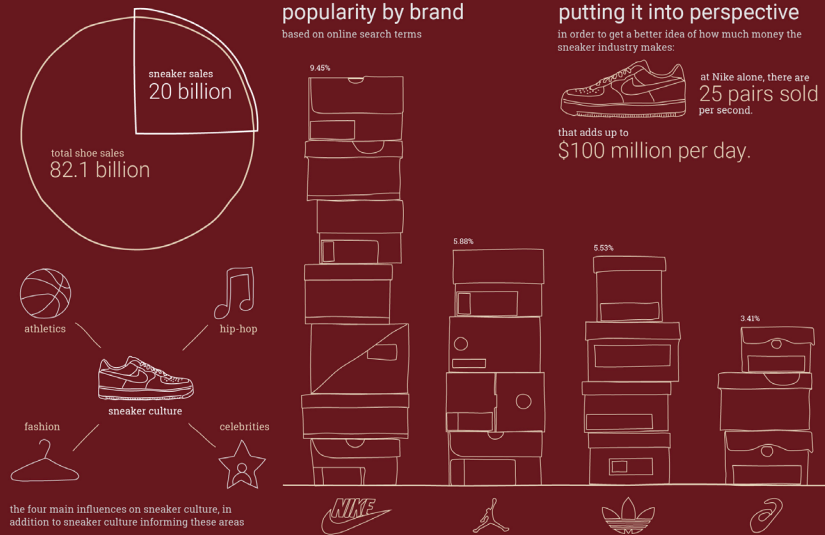
the gender

SNEAKER MARKET BASICS

market research that provides some context on how prominent sneakers are

Right: Fig. 21, part of the final digital, scrollable document broken up for formatting purposes

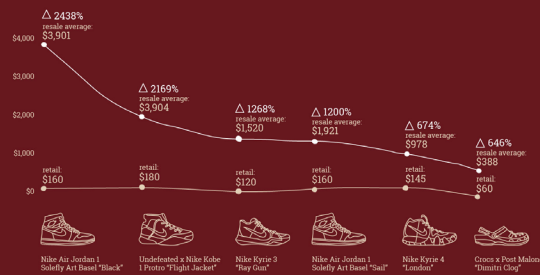
market breakdown



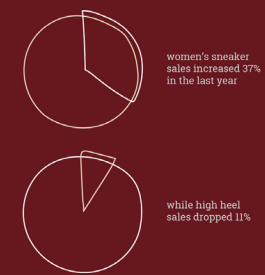
new sneaker sub-markets

in recent years, there have been distinct sub-markets emerge that play a key role in today's sneaker culture.

rise of resale



women in sneakers

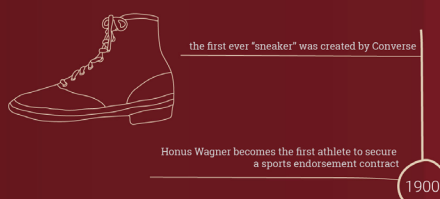


SNEAKER CULTURE TIMELINE

the definitive development of sneaker culture compared to women's sneaker history

sneaker culture

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Right: Fig. 22, part of the final digital, scrollable document broken up for formatting purposes

SIGNIFICANCE OF HIP-HOP

how hip-hop and rap became a large influence on the sneaker industry, and vice versa

first impact

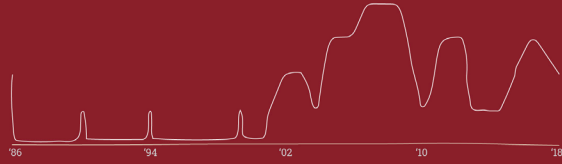
many attribute the start of the relationship between hip-hop and sneaker culture to the popular rap group from the 80's:



their hit song "My Adidas" led to a sneaker endorsement and collaboration that opened the gate for future rappers, in addition to correlating hip-hop aesthetic to the sneaker world.

throughout time

after RUN DMC's collaboration, the hip-hop and rap industry became much more synonymous with sneakers, seen in the frequency of major rapper x sneaker collaborations throughout the years.



gender imbalance

the hip-hop industry has a clear history of excluding women from different aspects, including the overlap with sneaker culture.



of the most well known rapper x sneaker collaborations are with female rappers

of the most popular rap and hip-hop songs of the decade are by female artists

of the highest paid rappers and hip-hop artists are female

“You know, I never [signed a female rapper] because I always thought, like, I would end up fucking a female rapper and fucking the business up. I’m so focused on my business. I just, I gotta be honest with you. You know, she looking good. I’m spending so much money on her photo shoots. I gotta fuck a couple times.”
 -Rick Ross, head of Maybach Music Group and rapper in his interview with “The Breakfast Club”

this quote successfully summarizes the attitude of many male record label heads towards female rappers, other than being extremely toxic and disrespectful, the oversexualization of female rappers by males in charge hinders their success.

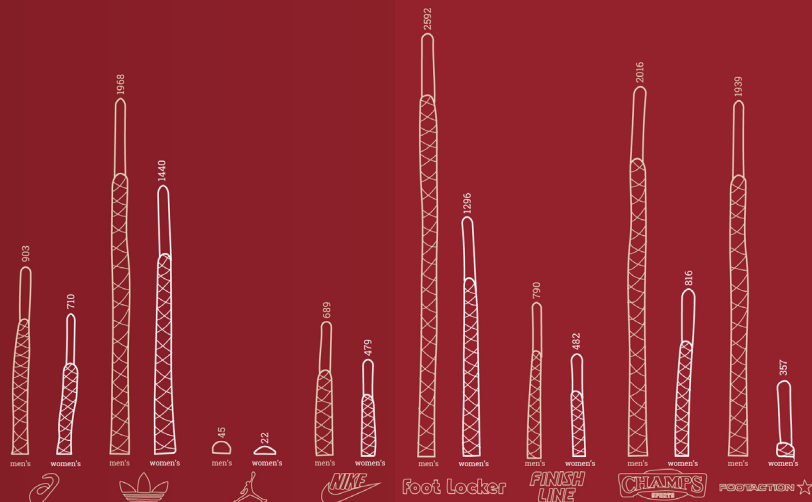
WOMEN’S SNEAKERS

or the lack thereof: men’s sneakers significantly outweigh women’s

sneaker online availability

sneaker brands

external vendors



conclusion

As pop culture trends shift over the years, core social issues remain constant, as seen in my research. By utilizing the iconic symbol of the sneaker, I approached the persistent issue of gender inequality from a different perspective. In today's media, one can find an abundance of information about the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women, so much so that this topic often becomes white noise. Sneaker culture is a movement that has been gaining traction for decades, providing the opportunity to capture viewer's attention and to direct it to something important that they might have otherwise ignored. Even though the final form of my project inevitably changed, I am satisfied with the quality of my research and the accessibility that the visualization provides. In this digital format, the infographics have the potential to reach a much broader audience, which is an unexpected positive. The more educated the general public becomes on the issue of gender inequality, the closer our society comes to equality and understanding.

references

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