



Athletic appeal



Nike makes nearly half of the sports and leisure shoes sold in the US. 37% of its total revenues (\$16.3 billion for the last 12-month period for which figures are available) came from the US. PHOTO: NIKE



The \$55 billion US market has become the Camelot of the footwear industry, and athletic shoes are king; NPD figures show that 45% of those shoes fall into the athletic footwear category.

Two bright white adidas Supernovas gallop across a gleaming basketball court; Nike cross-trainers press through a moist track; multicoloured Vans peek out from the bottom edges of faded denim jeans. Although these images could be plucked from most spots on the globe, chances are you've attached an American accent to the wearers of those shoes.

The American affinity for athletic footwear—or "sneakers", as these shoes are more broadly called in the US—has become so ingrained in the international community's depiction of the average American that, after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the US State Department warned its citizens to avoid wearing t-shirt, jeans and sneakers abroad. This beloved ensemble, the government warned, could turn the sneaker-bearer into a target. Less ominously, travel books and websites abound with fashion guidance on how Americans can sidestep the sneaker and still walk around the world comfortably.

But in a nation that Forbes ranks among the top ten "fattest countries" in the world, this sporty choice of footwear seems somehow incongruous with America's obesity epidemic; exercise alone is not why Americans are spending \$22.5 billion a year on athletic footwear. Last December a random World Footwear survey of 100 people across the US, who ranged in age from 19 to 84, sought to gain insight into who is buying all of those athletic shoes, and—more significantly—why. It seems a dynamic mix of culture, influence and lifestyle is driving US citizens to choose gym shoes over Jimmy Choos.

America's thriving shoe industry

Americans bought 2.4 billion pairs of shoes in 2006. This is almost twice the footwear consumption of the European Union, and more than four times that of China and India, according to data gathered by NPD Group. The \$55 billion US market has become the Camelot of the footwear industry, and athletic shoes are king; NPD figures show that 45% of those shoes fall into the athletic footwear category.

Sales figures from Nike, who can claim nearly half of the sports and leisure shoes sold in the US, further illustrate the American sneaker obsession: of the \$16.3 billion revenue Nike brought in for the fiscal year ending May 2007, just under half was generated from all international markets combined, whereas 37% came in from the US alone (the remaining revenue was generated through subsidiaries).

The exercise paradox

In a market saturated with athletic products, US consumers are a puzzling

lot. Although nearly 50% of those surveyed attribute sneaker purchases to a healthy lifestyle featuring regular exercise, national statistics suggest that the shoes aren't working.

"Americans buy so many athletic shoes because they are obsessed with fitness in a way few countries are," says Karyn Convey (who owns three pairs of athletic shoes), assistant dean for international programmes at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. "I mean this in terms of our need to go to the gym, or go for a run; these are cultural anomalies in other countries."

The obsession Ms Convey observes is reflected in her countrymen's spending, though not necessarily in their actions. Last November, a Time magazine report, "One Day in America", revealed that Americans spent an annual \$4.9 billion on fitness equipment and \$17.4 billion on fitness clubs, even though on any given day at least 80% of the country was not exercising. ➤➤



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30% of adults engage in regular activity and 39% engage in none at all. Unsurprisingly, two-thirds of Americans are overweight, with one-third of the population weighing in as obese. Perhaps, as one 26-year-old female respondent writes: "While some Americans actually work out a lot, we also wear our running shoes because we enjoy giving the appearance that we are healthy and athletic".

Making sneakers famous

And who wouldn't want to exude health and athleticism? Some of America's most iconic—and wealthy—figures are successful athletes, propelled to glory wearing their name-brand sneakers.

"There are so many advertisements that show popular athletes," says Steve McIlwain, a software developer from Pensacola, Florida, "and they insinuate that the athlete is so successful because of his or her choice in shoes. People imitate those they admire, so why not wear the same shoe?"

Indeed, Nike's use of athletes to promote its products is consistently praised as marketing gold. Nearly 20 years ago this trend began with the immortalised "Be like Mike" campaign, which featured basketball god Michael Jordan defying gravity with the aid of his Nike Air Jordans. In the essay, *Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire*, Michael Eric Dyson credits Michael Jordan's presence with helping to

turn the sneaker industry into a multibillion dollar business. "The sneaker symbolises the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced the broader American cultural landscape," he writes.

This sneaker-wearing cultural landscape grows ever wider. The adidas worn to the 2006 Grammy Awards by talk-show hostess Ellen Degeneres fetched \$920 at a Clothes Off Our Backs charity auction. Last October, *W* magazine encouraged men to emulate Justin Timberlake's signature style: classic suits worn with ties and sneakers. The "Sneaker Sniper" of entertainment website *nzgirl.com* features celebrities venturing out in trendy sneakers: country singer Shania Twain matching her red sneakers and baseball cap, *Sex and The City's* Kristin Davis trading her Manolo Blahnik's for backless sneakers, socialite Paris Hilton managing to find obscure-coloured sneakers to match her complicated ensemble.

Even names like Dolce & Gabbana are dipping their designer toes into the sneaker pool. Karin Eldor, fashion correspondent for *askmen.com*, calls sneakers "one of the hottest trends to hit the men's footwear market". After instructing readers of her column on how best to wear Kenneth Cole sneakers from the office to the martini lounge, she says: "Sneakers now offer sporty sophistication that can be taken to the gym, the office and especially the street."

On track. People in the US spend \$4.9 billion on fitness equipment and \$17.4 billion on fitness clubs every year. Whether they put it into practice or not, they love the idea of exercise.
PHOTO: NIKE.

Stacy O'Brien (four pairs of athletic shoes), a web developer from Ashburn, Virginia, offers an explanation for this disparity: "To me buying shoes is the same as people buying gym memberships that they don't use," she says. "We buy the shoes in hope that it will motivate us to work out. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't." When it does work, the *Time* report found, it really works: exercising men are apt to spend 1 hour, 58 minutes a day working out and women will spend 1 hour, 14 minutes a day.

Nonetheless, the US National Center for Health Statistics says that only



The widespread wearing of sneakers in the US is due largely to the country's collective acceptance of the sneaker's multifaceted role. According to Peter Mangione, president of the Footwear Distributors and Retailers of America (FDRA), less than 10% of athletic shoes are worn for exercise. "The rest are used for other day-to-day activities," he says. "We are a casual society. We live a casual lifestyle built on casual looks, casual living and casual activities."

Sneaking into the office

"Ellen Degeneres ushered us into a new era of business casual with her

suits and sneakers," says Jenny Crow (three pairs of athletic shoes), an administrative assistant in Dallas, Texas. She adds that she regularly wears New Balance shoes with her office clothes. "I feel comfortable and prepared for action all day."

The growing acceptance of sneakers in the workplace has helped secure the high figures boasted by this market. Just over a third of those surveyed said that they have worn sneakers with business or business-casual attire. "Athletic shoes are more acceptable by everyone due to comfort," says Charlie Neff (seven pairs of athletic shoes), a Carrollton,

Texas-based retiree of the airline industry. "You have a tendency to work better if you are comfortable—look at Microsoft." Indeed, on its Careers page, Microsoft tells potential interviewees: "Dress comfortably . . . Microsoft prizes intelligence and contribution over style."

Not everybody supports the casual side of business-casual. Of the 60% who answered in the negative when asked about mixing sneakers and suits, nearly half added more emphatic responses such as "never" or "not a chance", often followed by multiple exclamation points.

"I would never wear sneakers with dressy or business attire unless I had a foot problem," says Pat Paschall (four pairs of athletic shoes), a well-travelled Air Force wife now living in Zebulon, North Carolina. She adds: "People dress sloppier in this country than any other country to which I've travelled."

Retired Air Force Colonel David Shea (two pairs of athletic shoes) of Washington, DC, who was stationed abroad with his family for three years, agrees: "Americans are indulgent," he says. "We put comfort over what is appropriate."

Getting too comfortable

Comfort, indulgence: could there be but a weak barrier between the two? To some, the ubiquitous sneaker embodies the country's less noble characteristics. One respondent, a mother of three who has spent time with her husband's family in the Middle East (and owns one pair of athletic shoes), feels that Americans spend excessive money on sneakers they don't need. "Americans like to spend money. Whether they actually need blue, black and white pairs of sneakers is not important," she says. "Someone in another country would be grateful for a single pair of sneakers to wear for ten years, not caring if it matched his outfit or whether the shoe was for running or walking."

According to the CIA's World Factbook, the per capita gross domestic product for the United ➤



The adidas Supernova. A pair of adidas sneakers, worn by Ellen Degeneres, fetched more than \$900 in a charity auction. PHOTO: ADIDAS

“...and it should be noted...”

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

The granddaddy of all sneakers is the Converse All Star of which over 600 million pairs were made between its introduction in 1921 and the closure of the last US plant in 2001. Originally developed by the immortal Chuck Taylor as a basketball shoe, its low price and colourful upper soon made it a cult item for the country's teenagers. Its vulcanised canvas and rubber construction also made it comfortable and hard wearing, such that the government issued American GI's with a pair during WWII for training purposes. By the 1960s, everywhere the feet of Americans went a pair of All Stars went too. Although they did not get to the moon, they were worn by the crew of Apollo 13 to the launch pad and over 10 million pairs were sold during the decade.

Then a new generation of sports shoes arrived, led by adidas with its leather upper trainers. The All Star was a one product concept that could not be re-designed. Converse tried to fight back by introducing new colours so that, by 1988, there were over 56 variations. It was not enough and the company went bankrupt. You can still buy a pair of imported All Stars however but, where they were once the only sneaker to be seen in, they are now very much a nostalgia item. None the less, it was Chuck Taylor and the All Star that created the mass market for sports-derived footwear that we see today.



States as of 2006 was \$43,800. Compare this with an assumed world average of \$10,200 and it's evident that many Americans do have the cash for more liberal consumption. "We buy new sneakers instead of cleaning up the old ones," says Ms Paschall, speculating about how she came to acquire her four pairs of sneakers, "the old ones may still be wearable but don't look good enough."

Sneaker peak?

From the shopaholics to the sheepish, Americans are buying sneakers in abundance. There's a

chance, however, that the rest of the world might be on its way to catching up. Peter Mangione feels that after 20 years of explosive growth, the American athletic footwear market has spent the last 18 months on a plateau. "The 80s and 90s were on an upwards trajectory, and more recently the retro look was very strong in athletics—reissues of lines such as Keds, Vans, K-Swiss were doing great with the baby boomers—but that's over now," he says. "Athletic shoes have topped out." He adds that America's market is still enormously successful and remains the largest in the world: "It's fantastic, it's just not growing", but

China currently holds the title of fastest growing athletic footwear market.

Will sneakers eventually seize the hearts of the rest of the world? Will beseeching entries like time-travellers.org's "Nothing screams 'I'm an ugly American tourist' like white sneakers...[Americans planning to travel abroad should] buy some comfy shoes...but don't get white sneakers" become obsolete? Imagine: a day when Americans leave behind their glowing running shoes to travel the world wearing D&G loafers; a day when American feet blend effortlessly with their equally comfortable international counterparts. 🌍