

Text for **Section A**, an extract from *The History of Sneakers* by Naomi Braithwaite

The humble sneaker: a symbol of our times

Your best foot forward

Sneakers (or trainers if you're British!), once a symbol of athleticism, have transcended their primary function to become commercial and fashionable objects of desire. From sportswear and street style to catwalk fashion, sneakers have made their mark as the most sought-after commodities. 5

The global sneaker market, valued at approximately US\$79 billion in 2020, is predicted to reach US\$120 billion by 2026. With such huge growth, it is unsurprising that they are considered BIG business. Such are the strides in the sneaker industry that the shoe has become the undisputed cultural symbol of our times. 10

Comfort is king

The last couple of decades have seen a huge shift in how sneakers are worn. Donning a pair is no longer frowned upon in the workplace and they are even becoming socially acceptable on more formal occasions. 15

The continued dominance of the athleisure trend has had a significant impact on the growing sales of sneakers – along with the pursuit of comfort. This has grown in recent years with more people working from home and prioritising comfort, resulting in higher sales of loungewear, athleisure and flat shoes, like sneakers.

As such, sneakers have moved from being niche products to become coveted as fashionable objects. Footwear is now the biggest-selling category in the online luxury market and sneakers have made a significant contribution to this growth. 20

Popularity of outdoor pursuits

The earliest sports shoes were created in the middle of the 19th century when it was discovered that canvas uppers could be bonded to rubber soles. Known as sandshoes, they caught on with the increasing popularity of outdoor leisure pursuits such as beach excursions. By the end of the 19th century, sporting activities had become popular, in particular lawn tennis, resulting in the need for more specialised shoes. Around 1892, the US Rubber Company developed rubber and canvas shoes called keds. By 1917, keds – or sneakers as they became known – began to be mass produced. (They got their nickname because the rubber soles were so quiet compared to other contemporary shoes.) 25 30

From tennis to track

Two companies shaped the sneaker's evolution from tennis to track shoe. The first company, founded by Adi Dassler in Germany in 1924 and which later became known as Adidas, utilised canvas and rubber to develop light-weight spiked running shoes. In 1936, sprinter Jesse Owens wore Dassler's spikes at the Olympics. Following Owens' four gold medals, Dassler shoes became renowned in the sporting world. They soon became the most popular athletic shoe globally and business boomed. 35

The second company to shape the sneaker's future was Nike Inc. In 1972, Nike's first commercial design, the Cortez, was a cushioned running shoe. The public demand for this shoe surged after its use by the US Olympic athletes. Coinciding with a running craze across America, Nike sales reached US \$800 000 in the first year of release. 40

Contemporary to cool

During the first half of the 20th century, sports shoes were worn mostly to play sports. But in the 1950s, teens in America began wearing them as fashion statements. This fad really took off after James Dean appeared in sneakers in the cult teenage movie *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). 45

The popularity of sneakers soared again in the 70s and 80s with the emergence of the hip-hop music scene. Famous rappers such as Public Enemy made brightly coloured tracksuits and sneakers all the rage. Then, with the launch of Nike Air Jordans in 1984, sneakers were not only fashionable but became desirable status items – a phenomenon boosted by celebrity endorsements. Over the next four decades, new technologies developed from advances in space technology were used to help improve the performance of sneakers. One brand of sneaker, as well as being super light-weight and durable, had air pumped into them to make them fit more snugly. In another brand, little pockets of gas were added to create better cushioning. Of course, innovations like these come at a cost: athletic shoes have shot up in price! 50 55

The commercialisation of cool

In the 2020s, sneakers continue to grow in popularity. This is due, in part, to the resell culture. The rise of ‘sneakerheads’, people who collect and trade sneakers, has ensured that they maintain cult status. How does this work? Well, big brands routinely release limited edition shoes associated with a celebrity, hip-hop star or athlete. You would not believe the lengths people go to to get their hands on a pair of these rare shoes! And with good reason. They have a retail value of between US\$190 and US\$240 but are reselling for between US\$1695 to US\$6118. This lucrative sneaker resale market has created new kinds of sneaker enthusiasts who are generating significant hype along with personal income. 60 65

From sport to fashion, sneakers dominate today’s consumer market. Yet remarkably, despite mainstream adoption, sneakers retain their coolness as cultural icons.

BLANK PAGE

Permission to reproduce items where third-party owned material protected by copyright is included has been sought and cleared where possible. Every reasonable effort has been made by the publisher (UCLES) to trace copyright holders, but if any items requiring clearance have unwittingly been included, the publisher will be pleased to make amends at the earliest possible opportunity.

To avoid the issue of disclosure of answer-related information to candidates, all copyright acknowledgements are reproduced online in the Cambridge Assessment International Education Copyright Acknowledgements Booklet. This is produced annually and is available to download at <https://lowersecondary.cambridgeinternational.org/>

Cambridge Assessment International Education is part of Cambridge Assessment. Cambridge Assessment is the brand name of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), which is a department of the University of Cambridge.