

## CUSTOMIZED SHOES: A HIP-HOP STAPLE AND A REBELLIOUS FASHION

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In our society today, pursuits to conform or adjust to the ever-altering trends that dictate the fashion landscape are priorities for any fashion or pop-culture connoisseur. For better or for worse, the fate of consumer America is predicated on the domineering shadow of adolescent acquisition, and even more on producers capitalizing off the individuality that consumers hope to achieve. In hip-hop culture, where lavishness and extreme excess is a requirement at times, designer and name-brand fashions have found a niche in the urban ethos catalog. Throughout its rich and relatively young history, hip-hop's standard dress has undergone many modifications. However, one of the most essential and enduring hip-hop staples has been footwear. According to Rebecca Arnold's *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*, the cultures of feet and fashion have been negotiating for years, footwear first appearing as a necessary accessory during the 1980s when groups like Run-DMC made songs such as "My Adidas" to promote their undying love for "kicks" (Arnold 40). Fast-forward to 2002, and the marriage between shoes and hip-hop is still very much evident. Popular brands such as Nike, Reebok, and the ubiquitous Jordan brand are some of the most widely consumed and hip-hop endorsed products on the market. However, as of last year, a new phenomenon has taken the urban shoe market by storm, and reinvented the image of what it means to be "ghetto fabulous." The phenomenon we are speaking of, my friends, is the personalized shoe. First introduced through lyrics and now visually in music videos by rappers such as Jadakiss and Cam'ron, customized footwear has become the next popular trend among youth, and in many respects it is reminiscent of the Dapper Dan explosion of the 80s, when, according to Nelson George's *Hip Hop America*, street aficionados stitched the logos of name brands into regular articles of clothing and passed them off as authentic. The personalized shoe, which bleeds through similar

veins as its predecessor, is a more modern spectacle, combining shoes and boots with the fabric and monograms of top designer brands such as Gucci, Christian Dior, and Louis Vuitton (Lewis 2E). In “Be our Brand: Fashion and Personalization on the Web,” Susan Berry introduces to us the concept of “personalization,” which, quoting from Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects*, is proclaimed to be “an interaction between the personality of the individual and the so called ‘personality’ of the product itself” (Berry 19). This concept becomes quite practical when correlated to hip-hop youth culture’s infatuation with customized footwear, since it is in some respects an expression of creativity and a divergence from generic styles. More than just a form of self-expression and individuality, customized footwear has also matured into a representation of a latent social message. According to Arnold, hip-hop fashion came into the fashion industry through a term she describes as “slumming,” which “represented a form of rebellion against designer dictates of style and ‘good’ taste epitomized in . . . conservative tailoring” (32). It is interesting to note now that this same “slumming,” or anti-preppy aura, that hip-hop culture revolves around has been culturally replicated today in the form of customized footwear, which not only signifies consumer creativity and personalization, but also in some sense a rebellion against the upper echelon of top flight designers who shunned and looked at hip-hop as no more than a fad, and a relative long shot to have an impact on the consumer market. These social disruptions and the consumerist thirsts of “Wannabe Hood Donald Trumps” are dissected accurately in Peter Stearns’s “The First Causes of Consumerism” where the writer explains that since the development of the working classes, clothing has served as “badges of identity” in a rapidly changing social climate that uses consumerism as a means of “countering unfavorable changes or blurrings to social status” (30-1).

Today, hip-hop’s stimulus as a profitable musical genre correlates to its major dividends as a viable fashionable style. However, before its recent ascendance, hip-hop’s acceptance into mainstream culture was hardly a walk in the park. Often negatively stereotyped and badly portrayed in the media, hip-hop culture rarely received any notoriety as a fashionable trend. In fact, contemporary America’s standard opinion, especially during

the early 90s, was that hip-hop fashion was an intimidating style of dress and correlated to violence. According to Jeffrey McKinney's article "From Rags to Riches," the stereotypes of Middle America relegated hip-hop artists and the aspiring fashion gurus of urban society as pariahs of the industry, providing them with little opportunity to spread their wings:

A decade ago, hip-hop artists were decked out in Timberland footwear or Tommy Hilfiger apparel, rapping about these brands in their lyrics. Just a few years ago, hip-hop entrepreneurs who produced their own lines were either shut out of major fashion shows or relegated to urban apparel ghettos within department stores.

(98)

According to Leslie L. Royal's "Hip-Hop on Top," those impressions have begun to subside, and hip-hop's allure today lies in the fact that it was an anomaly, allowing it to become a fixture in the fashion circuits of modern style. With its influence so gargantuan and the fact that "baggy, brightly colored Hip-Hop clothes have gone mainstream in American youth fashion and the result has brought small fortunes to a cadre of black designers," the embrace of urban fashion has become evident and gradual, opening the door for rapper-created brands such as Rocawear and Sean John to not only conquer urban outlets, but also for hip-hop fanatics to integrate urban flavor with existing trends, therefore spawning such concoctions as customized footwear (Royal 91-4).

In many ways, western culture's reluctance as well as its equally balanced fear and naiveté to accept hip-hop as a partner rather than a subordinate has allowed hip-hop to create its own autonomy as well as its own consumer following. Customized footwear, which involves the use of such upper-echelon brands such as Gucci (Figure 1), is in a way a subtle rebellion by the hip-hop community against the brands that subordinated it. In an almost coercive way, the culture has ushered itself into the realms of these luxury brands by integrating them into their culture. According to John L. Roberts's "Rap of Luxury," artists of the genre, who normally come from the ghetto environments that high-class brands have detested, have used their lyrics to convey their relentless pursuit to be in the same breath of social elite:

Though rappers have long found inspiration for lyrics in brand names like Adidas and Tanqueray, it's the prestige

logos that sparkle the brightest. Stars like Busta, P. Diddy, Ja Rule and Jay-Z have expensive tastes and have made themselves powerful pitchmen, lifting the aspirations of youth culture for life's finer things while spiking sales of the Cadillac Escalade, Bentley, Cristal champagne, Burberry, Prada and Louis Vuitton.

Directly or indirectly, these expensive tastes and fetishes in hip-hop tunes have become social signifiers. Though on the surface they appear to be blatant advertisements, they are also a screaming representation of rapper braggadocio, the visual representation of rags to riches, the equivalent of a status jump from the pedestrian purchases of Reeboks to the boisterous splurges of Chanel sandals. For the consumer, these elite brands offer temptation, desire, and jaded models of inspiration for ghetto youths who know no better and are easily persuaded. The brands purvey a capitalistic seduction that preys on the materialistic mind of an adolescent culture that can only afford to mimic the pocket-heavy and platinum-selling artists they look upon as their musical idols, who are, in turn, using the brands to accomplish their own societal leaps. The integration of Timberland boots (Figure 2) and Nike Air Force 1's (Figure 3), two hip-hop staples, which are often the most popular shoes to customize, is "personalization" at its finest, merging street culture with high fashion. The shoes, which can be ordered online through such websites as customgucci.com or custom made at repair stores for between \$100 and \$300, are not necessarily a rarity, but scarce for the average consumer (Maxwell 1). Mostly championed by hip-hop enthusiasts and passionate youths, customized footwear in hip-hop is virtually free marketing for elite brands. However, contrary to belief, this gratuitous promotion does not generate cohesion, but tension and a paradox between two separate spectrums of society.

Though the decadent practices of youth and consumer culture, which purchase or use "counterfeit" fabric and imitation monograms to create customized footwear, perpetuate the implicit expressiveness of artistic originality that hip-hop embodies, this expressive originality is contradicted by the idea that these methods expose a sense of tastelessness and a prostitution of brand names. A website like customgucci.com is one of a plethora of Internet forums that replicate monograms onto footwear and sell

customized urban apparel. On its home page, the site has a disclaimer clearly stating that it is “is in no way affiliated with Burberry, Coach, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, Manolo Blahnik, or Timberland,” which suggests that the products are replicas and that these primary designers are, unfairly, never compensated. This advocating of bootleg or replicated goods, which has always been a sign of consumer sovereignty since the days of prohibition and black-marketing, has always meant a short end, profit-wise, for the companies directly affiliated with the product. By reinventing these brands in an approach far removed from the intended vision hierarchy labels have for their emblems, urban society exposes an injustice and the natural human condition to find the best deal. However, it also simultaneously depicts a gesture towards conformity between social extremes, where dissemination, no matter what the means in a trendy and material world, creates a ripple effect in an easily dispersing pop culture.

Berry states that, “others have argued that consumer goods are ‘re-socialized’ and given meaning everyday by those who use them, a process that is particularly evident when it comes to fashion” (19). Customization of footwear, which embodies these principled ideals, is a perfect example of youth culture’s reinvention and destruction of invisible stereotypical marketing that luxury producers have bestowed upon hip-hop’s consumers. When you see brands such as Louis Vuitton or Christian Dior grace the sheets of such prominent fashion publications such as *Vogue*, the message is often clear that most of these styles and clothes are geared towards the elite or a bourgeois class of people. For hip-hop consumers and the culture’s fashion, their place among these heavyweights has always been queried. Consequently, marketing to lower-class groups, or gearing products toward African Americans, who originated most of these urban styles, has rarely been seen as a priority to these elite brands. However, in their own extravagant and lurid way, hip-hop culture has reinvented these brands and meshed them into the accessories of their own styles, sending a message that it is not necessary to have deep pockets in order to display these runway giants. Customized footwear’s attributes, which break away from the traditional marketing guidelines, test the traditional marketing audience luxury brands have targeted in the past. Here the impact of “personalization” has not only

outlined consumer sovereignty or liberation, but has amended the whole marketing structure. According to Douglas B. Bolt's "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?" hip-hop culture is an example of how creativity can defy social stereotypes and producer domination:

Consumers are beginning to break down marketers' dominance by seeking out social spaces in which they produce their own culture, apart from that which is foisted on them by the market. These spaces allow people to continually rework their identities rather than let the market dictate identities for them.

(70-90)

For hip-hop consumers and urban youths, these social spaces are the ghettos, the consortiums where most of the styles, especially customized footwear, are established. To hip-hop alums this forum is sacred, not just because it is where they come from but because in their estimations it is where their creativity is unhampered by the constraints of high-end commercial fashion. Though it may be perceived as cheap and unconventional, customized footwear represents more than just a money-rooted rebellion or a call for conformity. It is more than anything a symbol challenging the ideal of the American dream, in which money dictates success, and clothing becomes a signifying strand of that power that youths and consumer America yearn for and turn to, subtly attending to the trends and famous faces culture offers. In the case of hip-hop, where artists have reciprocated their fortunes and are able to absorb themselves in authentic chic flamboyancy, the consumer, who is limited money-wise, can only hope to achieve satisfaction through a material happiness which has no blueprint.

Consequently, counterfeit apparel becomes a viable, instead of disrespectful, option, and one of the only ways consumers can be part of the ghettoized revolution that their artists have commenced beyond the urban ethos. However, to play devil's advocate, could this "personalization" or perceived mutiny be just a false consumer reality instead of a subtle movement?

Berry brings up the notion that "personalization" doesn't really exist to an extent because of we are still being packaged in categories (16). In her article Berry goes online to shop for a product, and while personalizing her product she is asked questions that she claims "pre-packaged" her in "categories" that

have “been predetermined by economic, demographic, and ‘lifestyle’ research” (16). As stated earlier, custom shoes are rarities; therefore, only available through online shopping and bootleg innovation. When consumers go online to purchase these shoes, they are in a sense still accepting a selection of packaged brands, and packaged footwear with which to customize them. Where is the rebellion, when consumers are still supporting the luxury brands and creating their combinations through the same base shoes? Why are Timberland Boots, and Nike Airforces usually the proposed footwear to “personalize”? Why aren’t K-Swizz or Puma sneakers, or Doc Martin hybrids viable options, and why are Burberry and Gucci the most replicated pairs? These questions bring up a viable argument: customized footwear is still contained “personalization,” but even more so proves that the allure and power of high-end chic still has a voice in the most extreme forms of “personalization,” no matter how subtle it may seem. In “Custom Cool: Designer-Swatch Shoes,” Sonja Lewis speaks to a shoe store owner named Bob Taylor who looks at the trend as nothing more than “tacky” (2E). Though Taylor obviously is not a young consumer, he still brings up a point that customized shoes could be just a cheap fad, shoddy clones of the actual versions of Gucci and Louis Vuitton footwear; not personalization at its finest, but poor creativity.

The magnetism and allure of hip-hop’s influence is clearly apparent, but what seems to make this discussion so interesting is the outstanding fact that designers such as Burberry do not perceive creative innovations such as custom personalization as extra advertising and a ticket to youth culture allegiance. In fact, to these elegant labels, hip-hop is the antithesis of what they represent, a street-oriented culture that is in their minds a challenge to their integrity and a threat to the storied histories that associating with the streets would bring to their tradition. However, it seems that the backlash has only made urban America more attracted to the luxury appeal. According to the publication *Brand Strategy*, it is the “exclusive values . . . [and] tokens of aspiration [despite the snobbery] ‘that make them’ a challenge to the urban consumer.” It is this persistence that has caused luxury brands to become even more fearful of the threat hip-hop has on

their social standing. Roberts describes fully these ambivalent attitudes of producer culture:

Many of the high-end companies are feeling a bit uneasy, as well. Hip-Hop's embrace can mean a windfall, but executives are concerned about long-term damage to their brands because of rap's sometimes unsavory aspects. Another worry: luxury brands view themselves as timeless, while hip-hop's unquenchable thirst for a fresh look inevitably makes them fleeting trends.

"Rap's unsavory aspects," such as violence, drug references, and misogyny, which Arnold's book states as things which "[taunt] bourgeois morality," are the same aspects of hip-hop that have always kept luxury brands at a distance. However, it is even more so the insolence that imaginative movements such as customized footwear embody in the unspoken creed of fashion that lead many of these brands to perceive the style as nothing more than another "fleeting" trend (Arnold 34). Royal agrees with Roberts's statements claiming that the sentiment from most fashion insiders and detractors is that "Hip-Hop wear may be short-lived and urban fashion designers won't be able to stand the test of time in the fashion industry" (Royal 91-4).

However, why wouldn't hip-hop be able to persevere? Its influence is enormous, so large, in fact, that according to McKinney, "the urban apparel segment alone grosses a whopping \$58 billion in annual sales . . . capturing market share from iconic labels as Ralph Lauren Polo and Donna Karan" (98). In fact, the barriers between urban and Neiman Marcus are gradually fading before our eyes, a truth solidified by the place of P. Diddy, one of rap's most identifiable icons and esteemed designers, on Louis Vuitton's 200-member VIP list. These types of gestures infer that the merger between luxury brands and hip-hop, especially in the form of customized footwear, should not be considered a surprise, but a prelude of what is to come if the barriers between the two markets continue to intertwine.

In hip-hop's enclaves, youth culture has used luxuriously laced foot apparel to renegotiate what an elite or bourgeois consumer really is. The identity or the visual image of a high fashion buyer becomes supplanted by the motivation to let it be known that hip-hop consumers have a sense of fashion too, and



can manifest and reinvent graceful brands to fit their own “ghetto fabulousness.” However, the motivation doesn’t lie in just displaying their mutiny, but just for the simple fact that like every consumer they enjoy wearing nice clothes. As Arnold points out,

Clothing can act as a disguise that confers power by drawing the wearer into a particular social or cultural group . . . [turning clothes] to visual codes that would [give] them some control of their identity and would express their sense of alienation in a direct and confrontational way. (34)

When hip-hoppers flood the streets with this hybrid of high fashion and street culture, they are once again trying to affiliate themselves with royalty and with the grandeur that comes with wearing these brands, almost defying their place as pariahs in the entire scheme of fashion culture. Stearns agrees with Arnold when he states,

If a person could demonstrate modest achievement in new ways, it could compensate for the disruption of traditional channels. Since I cannot qualify for the traditional costume worn of an established craft—the fancy ceremonial clothing and badges worn by members of a guild—I will buy and wear vivid new clothing styles instead. (31)

As a whole, “disruption” is what customized footwear represents. It creates a new identity, allowing a group of a particular social status, in this case urban youths and rappers, to appear in another light. Furthermore, it exemplifies one of the principal statutes of hip-hop culture: bravado and achievement of praise for materialistic exploits.

All in all, the hybrid of hip-hop shoes and luxury brand fabrics is a microcosm of what fashion means to society, and what it represents to the social structures of America. This footwear not only serves as a byproduct of urban originality, but also as a fresh capitalistic trend that crosses societal borders and exposes the negotiation of conformity and consumer nature. Exemplifying hip-hop culture’s disobedience against being subordinated by luxury brands by implementing celebrated and distinguished labels with hip-hop style is a huge step in eradicating the misconceptions and stereotypes have long deterred hip-hop expansion and acknowledgment. For hip-hop fashion to survive, it must continue

to perpetuate its aura and reinvent itself without sacrificing its appealing characteristics. In a recent song, rapper Jay-Z says that he is the “young black Ralph Lauren,” alluding to the success of his Rocawear clothing line. This is evidence by itself that though big brands may look at hip-hop as an anomaly, urban designers still find inspiration in the threads of their counterparts, only wanting their own piece of the pie in an otherwise lucrative industry. From the 80s, when thick gold chains ruled and a pair of Adidas was the standard, to the blending of present-day customized shoes and designer fabrics, hip-hop is a fashion based on creativity. As long as the originality and ability to turn the unlikely to the popular exists, hip-hop will never cease to capture the imagination of the public, and will always be a fixture as a fashion in contemporary America.

## FIGURES



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3

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**COMMENTARY**  
**AMIT BARIA**

“Customized Shoes: A Hip-Hop Staple and a Rebellious Fashion” by Anthony Lopez proves to be an innovative work reflecting the state of urban youth culture still in its early uprising. It is reflective of the social status of an emerging culture, including its identity and individualism, which makes it as unique as it is. The original aspect of research and its relevance to current-day society makes the topic and overall piece extremely interesting.

Lopez takes a stand at challenging mainstream culture rather effectively. The textual support is strong and effectively used. The writer’s attempt to address multiple aspects of youth urban culture and fashion is developed, although it is also a weak point in the piece. The main issues are indeed fashion and hip-hop culture, but the argument seems to shift focus from one to the other without a clear sense as to which is the primary purpose for writing. It is not absolutely clear as to whether or not the purpose of the work is to discuss the state that urban youth culture has evolved into today in general, or if it is written to focus on the fashion industry and how hip-hop has made an impact on it, and vice versa. It is also lacking alternate perspectives, such as that of the top designers. Inclusion of this perspective would have made the writer’s argument much stronger. Why should urban youth single out and rebel against these specific designers? Is it not a free-market economy that we live in where those who choose to provide a good or service may target it to those they feel they would mutually benefit from? Do urban youth actually believe that these designer’s reluctance to target the hip-hop market is personal, and that they should, in fact, rebel?

There are places throughout the paper in which Lopez addresses the influence that the fashion industry has on urban culture; how the rise of urban fashion has portrayed urban culture in a positive light; and the individualism and originality associated with it. What about the moral and legal issues tagged with the rise in popularity of this trend? If these shoes are solely counterfeit, are there major legal issues involved, trademark issues? Lopez mentions that creating these shoes is a way that urban culture

defies stereotypes and the upper echelon of society. These major designers, and those who support them, have also worked hard to reach their levels of success; is it fair or moral that urban fashion is looting them of what is rightfully theirs, their names and designs? Is this not only illegal, but a bad influence and negative reflection on hip-hop culture?

Lopez mentions the influence and positive image that rappers are placing on youth to strive for success. He also speaks of how these same adolescents and bootleggers are counterfeiting the product, rather than working hard to achieve such a social status. So, they would rather counterfeit their true image to emulate that of something that they wish they could be? If hip-hop culture is one of originality and individuality, aren't these two characteristics lacking in this situation? By supporting these designers' trademarks, where is the justification of individual identity, when urban culture is attempting to portray the same social status of the people that they are claiming to rebel against? Where is the rebellion? It may be social protest against these designers by causing "disruption" among them, but the fact is that these youth are still using the designers' original ideas as their own.

These issues are mostly ignored; they are touched upon throughout the paper, but could use some more development. The other side of the argument needs to be thoroughly implemented in order for the paper to reach its full potential. The majority of the paper is geared to the urban youth perspective and hip-hop culture, and their justifications for their actions, yet this proves to be rather one-sided.

Lopez has demonstrated many other aspects of his paper very effectively. The argument that exists is very strong and developed. The research is strong and thorough. He demonstrates a controlled, unique style exemplified by his effective and refined word choice. Despite a small number of shortcomings, overall, the paper is rather successful.

**RESPONSE**  
**ANTHONY LOPEZ**

When I first sat down to write this essay, I knew that it would be a difficult task to put into focus the broad and contemporary subject that hip-hop is. Its presence not only correlates directly and indirectly into dollars for record companies, but is also now an inevitable part of our culture, sometimes prostituted, sometimes overused by corporate America in order to sell products. We have come to the point in society where rappers such as Method Man and Redman are in commercials promoting Right Guard; record labels such as Def Jam are putting out their own videogames; and even women such as Queen Latifah are nominated for Oscars. In the months following since I've written my essay, rapper and entrepreneur Jay-Z has put out his own shoe with Reebok, amassing tremendous sales to date, and further supporting the claim that hip-hop culture is not a fleeting trend. Observing the success that that venture produced, fellow rappers such as 50 Cent and Nelly have parlayed their similar popularity to also sign distinct deals with shoe companies, Reebok and Nike, respectively, using their images to add more dollar signs next to their names. In my estimation, these transactions, which were once considered subtle "disruptions" that I mentioned in my paper, are now are no longer anomalies but common events in the scheme of this liaison. One of the primary things I sought to make outstanding in the essay was the process and the ascension of hip-hop throughout the fashion world, with the shoes acting more as a vehicle to illuminate the societal and marketable interactions that America has had with hip-hop, and I think I accomplished that.

As Baria points out, my essay is a bit one-sided and needs to be more universal. The chief reason for my lack of perspective does not lie in my aloofness or irresponsibility towards high-end fashion, but can be blamed on the fact that I am in all accounts a hip-hop lifer. The music, the lifestyle, and the celebratory glow it has brought me throughout my young life has made me who I am. Therefore, in instances such as these, where you have to be economical in your writing, and where the facets of society, culture, and the state of the music, artists and entertainment are

all balls that need to be juggled equally, my loyalties and my excitement towards trying to cover all branches often left me lost in my own writing. When you read the paper, there is a gamut of subtopics and ideas that could have formulated into papers of their own, and as a result of me compiling such an intriguing list of these ideas, I maybe tried too hard to encompass them all in some shape or form, which may have deterred it in some respects.

I do agree that it is unfair that these companies do not receive compensation for the use of their emblems and monograms, but in the end I believe everything is residual and they still will remain staples and receive notoriety, no matter how their goods are disseminated. Bootlegging, replicating materials, and the purchase of these items should never be considered the most viable forms of making a living or making a fashion statement, but it is part of our society and, ethics or integrity aside, it is one of those creative aspects of our world that every consumer has tried or contributed to discreetly at one point or another. Overall, this paper was enjoyable to write and research and is a testament to the notion that writing about what you love and writing what you know can often produce your best work. Though it could have been more polished, I hope that I upheld the aesthetics of fashion and hip-hop and provided a piece of writing that will stimulate minds and act as an innovative spin on a fresh subject.