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DISEMPOWERING THROUGH DEFINITION: A DIALOGIC ETHICS FOR UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER VULNERABILITY THROUGH NIKE’S ‘MIKE AND SPIKE’ ADVERTISING AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CONSUMER HISTORY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Through socio-historical and market analysis and through the lens of ethical theory, this research argues that past thinking about vulnerable audiences is insufficiently grounded in evidence, unsubtle in its understanding of markets, and unselfconscious about its own paternalism. As a result, such thinking can actually disempower the very audiences it sets out to protect. This project is not simply a commentary on branding or on an historical incident; it is an important reflection of race relations in the United States and a theoretically important exploration of the power dynamics of defining vulnerability and of the roles and responsibilities of marketers, advertisers, endorsers, the media and consumers. This research proposes dialogic ethics as the framework through which to understand and define vulnerability in the consumer realm.

Advertising frequently is criticized for creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes of vulnerable populations. Scholars have criticized the media and, in particular, advertising for reflecting and perpetuating racism in portrayals of minorities, with much popular and scholarly criticism of advertising and race into the 1980s based on the fact that there were few to no positive representations of African Americans in mainstream advertising. In 1984, Nike signed rookie Michael Jordan and, in 1986, Nike’s advertising agency hired Spike Lee to direct commercials starring the athlete-turned-hero. The Spike/Mike campaign became emblematic of a breakthrough in race relations. However, the cultural “success” of the Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and Nike relationship and its influence on the brand was played out on the streets across America. The late-1980s and early-1990s mass media was full of reports about youth—specifically black, urban youth—killing each other for Nike’s Air Jordans. Social discourse on the increasingly mainstream images of African-Americans, initially pleased with the depictions
of a positive, successful and empowered black man in advertising, exploded with charges of exploitation and manipulation. The debate was framed by the premise of urban African-Americans as vulnerable to advertising in a unique way. The circumstances of the “sneaker killings”, which coincided with a time of change and re-formation in the advertising industry and its relation to the African American community, offer not only a rich context in and of itself but unsettles current perceptions of consumer vulnerability and are a hub from which to explore broader concerns about this concept—including issues of social, corporate and consumer responsibility, meaning exchange and control, power and discourse and empowerment. This long-running campaign and the discourse surrounding it are powerful expressions of American race relations and an opportunity to address how definitions of vulnerability can affect the marketplace and the populations deemed vulnerable.

This research explores the development of the Nike brand through its association with Michael Jordan and addresses to what extent this association came at a time when the black community was looking for and developing new expressions of their social experiences and position within American society, particularly as it was lived on the streets of urban America, and the ways in which that experience was represented to Main Street America. I argue that the Nike example provides a different perspective on the history of race dynamics and advertising than previously has been presented in scholarly inquiry. This case is a rich illustration of the complexities of and consumer engagement with the Nike brand; and because of the various, but similarly partial, interpretations in media and academic journals of the use of the Nike brand by black, urban communities, it provides a strong foundation upon which to question scholarly approaches to vulnerability and responsibility in consumption environments. Thus, the intention of this work is to interrogate the construction of vulnerability and issues of power and
responsibility in the consumer realm, and to affect change in discourses of and approaches to consumer vulnerability by re-conceptualizing an approach that both recognizes the structures of power through which consumers must navigate and acknowledges the interpretive domain of human nature.

I propose a dialogic ethics as a framework for understanding vulnerability and responsibility in consumer environments. Paulo Freire, in particular, helps us to understand that our humanity is bound in dialogue. Dialogue requires co-participation. The naming of groups as vulnerable through sweeping generalizations neglects to empower the oppressed by giving them voice in the encounter. When definitions of vulnerability are instituted in cultural and social structures of meaning without appropriate respect for and discourse with those so-named, then we risk instituting a culture of silence from the oppressed or “vulnerable.” This dehumanizes the oppressed and diffuses the structures of accountability that come with liberation. Instead, we must engage in true dialogue that accepts multiple voices, presents message that enable critical consciousness and empowers the participants, acknowledges the historical circumstances of our language in discourse, and promotes our humanness, which we find in relation to others.
In memory of and to my mother, Elaine Constantine Coleman

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One complaint about much social criticism directed at advertising is that it is not grounded in “real-world” questions and does not offer promising solutions. To address this concern, I am interrogating circumstances in which discourses of vulnerability have had an effect on actual practices directed at “vulnerable consumers.” Through socio-historical and market analysis and through the lens of ethical theory, I am arguing that past thinking about vulnerable audiences is insufficiently grounded in evidence, unsubtle in its understanding of markets, and unselfconscious about its own paternalism. As a result, such thinking can actually disempower the very audiences it sets out to protect. This project is not simply a commentary on branding or on an historical incident; it is an important reflection of race relations in the United States and a theoretically important exploration of the power dynamics of defining vulnerability and of the roles and responsibilities of marketers, advertisers, endorsers, the media and consumers.

In 1984, Nike signed rookie Michael Jordan and, in 1986, Nike’s advertising agency hired Spike Lee to direct commercials starring the athlete-turned-hero. Wildly popular and pronounced a success in the annals of corporate histories, the Spike/Mike campaign became emblematic of a breakthrough in race relations, changing the course of Nike’s advertising and symbolism and, indeed, altering the landscape of advertising itself. This long-running campaign and the discourse surrounding it are powerful expressions of American race relations and an opportunity to address how definitions of vulnerability can affect the marketplace and the populations deemed vulnerable. Until 1984,1 the company had been primarily a running company founded and managed by white male running enthusiasts, and the company’s advertising focused predominantly on a target market that reflected the company’s management. The Spike/Mike campaign offered a complex contrast not only to the previous advertising, but also to the white
Nike executives behind the brand. According to Phil Knight, Nike’s collaboration with Michael Jordan re-invented Nike and “conspired so profoundly to mark the general culture that… Nike had altered the look and sound and feel and even the abiding fantasies of everyday life.” Not only did this collaboration influence fantasies, but also the cultural symbols of myth and meaning that are exhibits of lived experience, having a profound effect on American and global culture.

But there is a significant difference between the popular perceptions of Nike’s power and strength and their actual health as a company. Contrary to what much of the public discourse suggested, signing a rookie Michael Jordan was an incredible gamble for this struggling company, whose marketing plan thrived on instinct and risk. And while Nike’s collaboration with Jordan breathed new life into the company, it did not solve all of Nike’s health problems. Nonetheless, the cultural “success” of the Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and Nike relationship and its influence on the brand was played out on the streets across America. The late-1980s and early-1990s mass media was full of reports about youth—specifically black, urban youth—killing each other for Nike’s Air Jordans. Social discourse on the increasingly mainstream images of African-Americans, initially pleased with the depictions of a positive, successful and empowered black man in advertising, exploded with charges of exploitation and manipulation and then with similarly myopic criticisms of the critics. The debate was framed by the premise of urban African-Americans as vulnerable to advertising in a unique way.

This research explores the development of the Nike brand through its association with Michael Jordan and addresses to what extent this association came at a time when the black community was looking for and developing new expressions of their social experiences and position within American society, particularly as it was lived on the streets of urban America,
and the ways in which that experience was represented to Main Street America. I argue that the Nike example provides a different perspective on the history of race dynamics and advertising than previously has been presented in scholarly inquiry. This case is a rich illustration of the complexities of and consumer engagement with the Nike brand; and because of the various, but similarly partial, interpretations in media and academic journals of the use of the Nike brand by black, urban communities, it provides a strong foundation upon which to question scholarly approaches to vulnerability and responsibility in consumption environments. Thus, the intention of this work is to interrogate the construction of vulnerability and issues of power and responsibility in the consumer realm, and to affect change in discourses of and approaches to consumer vulnerability by re-conceptualizing an approach that both recognizes the structures of power through which consumers must navigate and acknowledges the interpretive domain of human nature.

**Methodological Approach**

This research is interdisciplinary, integrating theory from a range of traditions but focusing on a historical analysis of Nike and Michael Jordan and, subsequently, with African-American communities. The use of historical methodology in consumer research offers “important opportunities for investigating many dynamic and volatile consumer phenomenon.” Historical research is not simply descriptive, but rather is an important interpretive and explanatory approach grounded in “real-world” questions that generate critical theory in a domain where complex forces drive human events. This means acknowledging consumption as a historically-shaped, sociocultural practice within a dynamic marketplace and acknowledging sophisticated
and often rebellious ways in which consumers engage with systems of meaning within the marketplace.

Under this framework, the ways in which black inner-city “marginalized” consumers used the Nike brand and the equity built into it by the Spike/Mike advertising offers an interesting venue for exploring symbolic performances of class and racial subjectivity and group/other interactions. This analysis is grounded in the historical context of the Spike/Mike campaign, which includes the antagonistic relationship between African-Americans and advertising through the 20th century, and approaches it as a “vehicle for understanding the structures of reality within a culture.” Thus, this research considers advertising as a creative and commercial expression and as a cultural text.

I spent six weeks in Washington, D.C. at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, which houses the Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992. This collection contains over thirty boxes of materials broken down into seven series that include thirty-one oral history interviews, Nike, Inc. documents, clip reports, advertising and marketing materials, and commercial reels. I went through every page of every available file and listened to all oral histories, transcribing research-relevant content, and viewed all video material. Additionally, I have gathered materials from a variety of outside sources, including print and online publications or advertising material, media reports not included in the Nike Archives, and interviews and histories presented by authors not introduced in the Archives. I also had the opportunity to meet with and interview Erin Patton, who as Director of Product & Marketing was the architect behind Nike’s JORDAN brand division launched in 1997, and who is author of Under the Influence: Tracing the Hip-Hop Generation’s Impact on Brands, Sports & Pop Culture (2009). While Mr. Patton’s arrival at Nike postdates much of the timeframe
developed in this research, he was confronted with many of the same issues presented in this research in his role as the Jordan brand manager and he was interviewed on Nightline in 1997 alongside Michael Jordan regarding issues relating to the “sneaker killings” and the marketing of Nike shoes.

There are four main components to this research. First, I examine the literature on vulnerability in consumer environments and, in particular, to persuasion attempts such as advertising. To fully understand this literature, I review the dominant critiques of advertising and their implicit views of consumers as either passive recipients of manipulative messages or active participants in systems of meaning. Due to the heavy weight that definitions of vulnerability place on demographic characteristics such as race, this necessarily brings me to the second component—a discussion of the history of African-Americans as consumers and as expressed through advertising. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the history of the African American experience in consumer environments and as expressed in advertising. Chapter 2 begins with early slave advertisements, the conventions of which are reflected in advertising depictions of African Americans well into the 20th century, and proceeds through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter 3 explores the post-Civil Rights era of African American consumers leading into the 1980s—an era in which a convergence of factors provided a ripe environment for a young African American basketball player to transition from a sports and advertising figure into a hero. Chapters 2 and 3 include the social and economic role of African-Americans and the results of multiple challenges by black communities and activists to the dominant systems of consumption and representation. Additionally, issues of social responsibility are incorporated into this history and are an important aspect of the theoretical framework of my research.
Third, I turn to the history of Nike and the development of their relationship with Michael Jordan and Spike Lee, with particular attention to the so-called “sneaker killings” of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the media focus on this phenomenon. Chapter 4 chronicles the history of Nike from its inception as a running company with an executive structure and a symbol system dominated by white male runners through the seminal years of the mid-1980s when their collaboration with Michael Jordan profoundly changed Nike’s symbolic value. This collaboration was implicated in the violence in America’s urban core. Chapter 5 focuses on the discourses of vulnerability evident in media reports and debates around the violence associated with athletic wear and the factors that placed Nike, Michael Jordan and Spike Lee within this system of consumption and violence. I consider what it was about that moment in history, that brand, and the black community in particular that made such an impact on popular conscience, and to what extent it came at a time when the black community was looking for ways of re-conceptualizing their social and economic roles, as well as their ability to develop meaning within these systems. In addition, I look critically at the roles and responsibilities of Nike, their advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy, as well as the celebrity spokesmen and directors who participated in Nike’s brand communications.

This leads into the fourth component of this work. Chapter 6 examines the structures of meaning within consumption environments and provides an ethical framework through which to understand and approach the complex relationships of consumers and brands that takes into account personal, ethical, social and corporate responsibilities. This requires a re-interrogation of the role of the audience and of the advertiser in creating meaning and of responsibility for symbolic and lived experiences through the brand. Finally, I introduce an ethical framework
through which to understand and approach the complex relationships of consumers and brands that takes into account personal, ethical, social and corporate responsibilities.

**Advertising and Meaning**

Marketing and advertising practices have been censured for an array of social, economic, ecological, political, and ethical reasons. Advertising theory in particular was long embroiled in debates over advertising’s role in society, with a great deal of scholarly attention devoted to the question. Critics of advertising claim that it is manipulative, intrusive, and superficial while others argue that it is informational, that it supports economic and information systems, and that it delivers meaning to consumers. A series of core claims are particularly pertinent for the current research. These criticisms include the notion that advertising promotes materialism and creates desires that are not in the public’s best interest; that it creates and perpetuates stereotypes, particularly of minorities; and that it inappropriately targets “vulnerable” consumers. A variety of influential authors have argued, to varying degrees, that the media in general and marketing and advertising in particular frame modern life by controlling social discourse and exerting power over the consuming public. But others instead have suggested that consumption practices carry cultural meaning that includes consumers as an inseparable component in the process of meaning making. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest, “we do not study the consumer as someone seeking to satisfy an end (needs), but as someone seeking to produce (construct) symbols.” In this view, production occurs not only in public or work spaces but in consumption as well, and consumers produce meaning not in a moment but as an ongoing process imbedded in systems of objects and existing in “a world of contradictions of his/her own making.” Further, consumption has been tied to the self and identity, to social meaning and the value
derived from it\textsuperscript{14} and to forms of social cohesion\textsuperscript{15} and meaning exchange.\textsuperscript{16} Advertising has been reconceptualized as “a vehicle of social communication” and as an institution working within an “ideological web” in which “advertising is at once defined by and defining culture.”\textsuperscript{17} It is “more than merely a system of creating meaning, it is a system of discerning or discovering meaning.”\textsuperscript{18} Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in these arguments are varying views of the consumer’s role in the communication process—that is, the ways in which consumers are defined, as active participants or passive recipients, are an indivisible part of the debate. These frameworks have vital implications for the way in which “vulnerable” consumers are defined and treated. Therefore, the current research examines this process of defining consumer vulnerability.

**Constructing Vulnerability**

The power to define what groups are vulnerable is the power to define meaning and position within a society\textsuperscript{19} and is the capacity either to uplift or denigrate these groups.\textsuperscript{20} Because of legal and conceptual precedents of vulnerability in the marketplace, advertising images of and targeted toward “vulnerable” groups have been feared in contemporary critiques as major moral threats.\textsuperscript{21} While sometimes acknowledging the complex interactions of consumers and advertising, such critiques tend to emphasize and extend assumptions of group weaknesses.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet, a satisfactory understanding of vulnerability in consumer realms has remained elusive and, in large part, has been based on demographic and socioeconomic variables. Vulnerable consumers have been defined as elderly,\textsuperscript{23} children,\textsuperscript{24} women,\textsuperscript{25} minorities,\textsuperscript{26} poor\textsuperscript{27} and urban, a term generally used to mean poor, urban minorities.\textsuperscript{28} This practice has continued, despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence to support sweeping characterizations of vulnerability by gender, age, and minority status.\textsuperscript{29} Additionally, the vulnerability of these groups is frequently
merged with promotion and targeting of “sin” products and services or deceitful promotional practices. With few exceptions, elderly, young, female, poor and minority are the defining characteristics of vulnerability and are the focus of concerns over persuasive attempts by and targeting practices of marketers and advertisers.

Drawing from David Caplovitz’s *The Poor Pay More* (1963), Alan Andreasen (1975, 1976) was instrumental in bringing issues of the urban (minority) poor to the attention of consumer researchers and arguing that marketing and advertising have an important role in improving their situation. In doing so, Andreasen explores the argument frequently lodged against the disadvantaged and particularly the poor that they act irrationally and, in doing so, are implicit in their own disadvantage. He notes,

“Americans tend to view the disadvantaged as disreputable, as behaving irresponsibly, as having too many babies, not looking for work aggressively enough, ‘living in sin,’ drinking excessively, and thus contributing to (if not causing) their own socioeconomic downfall… It points to the fact that many of the poor are heavily in debt, that many claim to be undernourished yet own color television sets or fancy cars, or that people who can’t get jobs wear $40 shoes.”

In his seminal work, *The Disadvantaged Consumer* (1975), Andreasen lays out a framework for addressing disadvantage along a variety of dimensions, including demographic characteristics, marketplace characteristics such as access and price, and the exploitative behavior of marketers. Further, he suggests a connection between disadvantage and vulnerability such that the powerlessness of disadvantage makes consumers more susceptible to vulnerability in the marketplace. Vulnerability is relational in nature and some of the most common debates about consumer vulnerability stem from the relationship of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Subsequent research has focused on the demographic makeup of the disadvantaged and the implications for consumer vulnerability. The cumulative result of this attention to the demographic and socioeconomic variables that potentially interact with vulnerability has been
twofold: it has resulted in conflation of disadvantage and vulnerability and in definitions of vulnerability that rely on demographics. As one article points out, “heretofore consumer vulnerability has been equated to who experiences vulnerability, with the implication that some categories of people, because of their membership in a defined class, are always vulnerable.”

Further, the emphasis on demographics has led to a critique of scholarship on disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers as deterministic and reductionist, neglecting a wide range of complex social and cultural forces that influence not only the production and reinforcement of disadvantage, but also influence how these groups are defined in popular and scholarly discourse.

Additionally, research on gender, class, and consumption has responded to these critiques by addressing the experiences of inequality and the constraints that create conflict. This theme is evident in the literature that addresses price discrimination in urban communities. Evocative of Andreasen’s argument of the 1970s that poor consumers do in fact make rational decisions as best they can “given their disadvantage” more recent research has demonstrated that our understanding of the consumption practices of urban poor has been too presumptuous about what such consumers cannot understand, has not adequately accounted for the structures of disadvantage under which consumption decisions are made, and has not been sophisticated enough to accommodate the savvy ways in which they negotiate their limitations within a broader consumer realm.

Furthermore, there is evidence that popular and scholarly understanding of who constitutes this group of poor disadvantaged consumers and how they behave has been misguided. Research has demonstrated that the American public dramatically overestimates the proportion of black Americans among the ranks of the poor and this miscalculation may be due to the dominant
public images of poverty as black and urban. The fact that these characteristics are frequently linked with crime and depravity both further encourages discriminatory practices in the marketplace and enhances fears about the consumption practices of these communities. As Austin (1994) argues, “Blacks are condemned and negatively stereotyped for engaging in activities that white people undertake without a second thought. Among the most significant of these activities is buying and selling of goods and services.” Therefore, it is not surprising that targeting practices aimed at blacks have become a central debate in public discourse and scholarly works alike—a debate that is heightened further by concerns over targeting of potentially harmful products and ostensible “sin” products to minority consumers.

The targeting of inner-city black communities with messages that encourage drinking, smoking, and gambling, for example, has fueled negative practices towards these consumers and debates about how and with what messages economically deprived communities should be included in the consumer world. These arguments pivot on controversies over targeting minorities due to their perceived vulnerability, but also recognize that historically minorities have been under-targeted. On one side of the debate minorities are perceived as uniquely vulnerable to targeting practices; on the other side targeting of these groups represents some movement toward inclusion. As one author points out, “There is nothing inherently wrong with target marketing,” but when vulnerability and potentially harmful products are factored together, “the concept of target marketing takes on an almost sinister connotation.”

Sautter and Oretskin (1997) address Senate hearings in the late 1980s and early 1990s on the practices of alcohol and tobacco companies in targeting minorities. They propose that the hearings were swayed by the argument that minorities “are more vulnerable and/or manipulable than other groups in society” and that advertisers of these products can exert control over their
consumption by creating needs through advertising that would not otherwise exist. The case of Heileman’s Powermaster malt liquor beverage is one particularly prominent source of these debates and is the subject of various advertising industry reports and scholarly articles.\textsuperscript{53} Powermaster, an “up-strength malt liquor,” was introduced in 1991 and was mainly targeted to the inner-city, whose population had demonstrated a preference for malt liquor drinks.\textsuperscript{55} Criticism of this drink and the company’s marketing tactics came from a variety of government, media, religious and community sources, including minority groups. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) reacted to these concerns by requiring Heileman to remove the word “power” from the name based on the premise that Powermaster was a direct reference to the product’s alcohol content. But the moral concerns raised in this case demonstrate the kind of attention given to target marketing of alcohol, tobacco and other potentially harmful or “sin” products. For example, Brenkert (1998) writes,

“Heileman was said to lack concern for the harm likely to be caused by its product. Blacks suffer disproportionately from cirrhosis of the liver and other liver diseases brought on by alcohol. In addition, alcohol-related social problems such as violence and crime are also prominent in the inner-city... Heileman was accused of taking unfair advantage of those in the inner-city whom they had targeted. Inner-city blacks were said to be especially vulnerable, due to their life circumstances, to advertisements and promotions formulated in terms of power, self-assertion and sexual success.”\textsuperscript{56}

Brenkert points out that while outcry came both from within and outside of the inner-city, there were no reports of objections raised by those actually targeted. He concluded that the criticisms of Heileman lacked merit insofar as the product was being marketed with the same strategies as similar products that experienced no public condemnation. Rather, Brenkert calls for an assessment of social or “collective responsibility” of associated groups.

In response to the kinds of criticisms outlined in the Heileman case, some have argued that the suggestion to curtail advertising of potentially harmful but legal products to minorities not
only constitutes censorship but racism. Others argue that it is patronizing and paternalistic for regulators to assume that they are more capable of discerning for minorities what they should drink than are minority individuals and populations themselves. These debates are framed by discourses on vulnerability and stand on varying definitions of vulnerable consumers; they are further complicated by the often-serious consequences that can be the direct result of consuming potentially harmful products such as alcohol and tobacco.

The basis for defining vulnerability by disadvantage along various demographic characteristics, insofar as it addresses who is vulnerable, is also consistent with developments in legal definitions of vulnerability. Morgan, Schuler and Stoltman (1995) chronicle the development of vulnerability as a legal concept of consumers “whose idiosyncratic sensitivities have contributed to their product-related injuries, differently from typical consumers.” Under this classification, vulnerable consumers historically have been small groups of consumers whose own characteristics predispose them to harm, as opposed to injurious features of the product or actions of the marketer. Over the past three decades courts have expanded this understanding of vulnerability to encompass larger groups, as well. Based on developments in case law and legislation, the authors suggest a formalized concept of vulnerability that is expanded beyond physical hypersensitivity to include physical competency, mental competency, and level of sophistication.

Various legislative acts have been designed to protect consumers under these three classes of vulnerability. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) applies to both physical and mental competency and the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA, 1968) ensures that those with diminished mental capacity are not at a disadvantage in certain circumstances. Morgan, Schuler and Stoltman (1995) suggest that these classes of vulnerable consumers could be
expanded to include populations with reduced physical competency that results from aging and those whose ability to process information (as those with dyslexia or attention deficit disorder) or comprehend information (illiterate populations or those with poor English skills) is compromised. The third class of vulnerability the authors discuss suggests that the level of consumer sophistication—that is, their naïveté or gullibility due to certain demographic characteristics, such as low socioeconomic background and level of education, that put them at a disadvantage—should be taken into account. While the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA) extends protection to even the least sophisticated consumer, Morgan, Schuler and Stoltman (1995) propose that definitions of vulnerability should be expanded across classes to incorporate a situational perspective since certain sets of factors “tend to be more stable across situations than across populations.” This argument suggests that vulnerability is the result of interactions between individual consumer characteristics and consumption situations and incorporates the relational nature of vulnerability.

Recent scholarship in marketing and advertising has rejuvenated attention to issues of consumer vulnerability and has begun to reexamine definitions of this concept. The *Journal of Macromarketing* dedicated a 2005 special issue to vulnerable consumers calling for a broadened understanding of the intersection of individual and structural factors in marketplace vulnerability. Indeed, the first article of the issue by Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005), entitled “Building Understanding of the Domain of Consumer Vulnerability,” proposes a “consumer-driven definition of consumer vulnerability” that does not fall prey to the misconception that vulnerability arises from demographic variables and avoids the paternalism often inherent in discourse on vulnerability. Theirs is an informative review of previous scholarship on vulnerability, but more importantly they place prevalent constructions of
vulnerability under a critical scope and provide a sound basis from which to move forward. Therefore, it is worth discussing this article in greater detail.

Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) make the distinction, drawn from Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) between actual and perceived vulnerability. Perceived vulnerability is derived from expectations of what the experiences of others must be like, rather than what they truly are. The authors argue that actual vulnerability is “understood only by listening to and observing the experiences of the consumer” and only through that understanding can marketers and public policy makers base their decisions. They reiterate the argument that vulnerability and disadvantage are not to be equated, as disadvantage is attributed to personal characteristics and does not acknowledge the power of individual agency. Instead, they offer the following definition of consumer vulnerability:

“Consumer vulnerability is a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products. It occurs when control is not in an individual’s hands, creating a dependence on external factors (e.g., marketers) to create fairness in the marketplace. The actual vulnerability arises from the interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions within a context where consumption goals may be hindered and the experience affects personal and social perceptions of self.”

The authors are working to account for the complexity of consumer vulnerability that stems from various interactions of states, characteristics, and situations. Further, they assert that conceptions of vulnerability must be drawn from consumers themselves, allow for consumer agency and acknowledge that regulatory responses to protect consumers can also inhibit agency. Drawing from Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005), others have suggested the opportunity to develop new and expanded perspectives that account for the complexity of interactions or relationships that drive vulnerability in the marketplace.
Shultz and Holbrook (2009) question whether the sustenance of modern socioeconomic systems is contingent on the factors that lead to vulnerability in others. Power and the perception of it are important determinants of consumer behavior. Those in positions to regulate messages in the marketplace, whether formally or informally, have a real effect on consumer vulnerability. Henry (2005) found that the experience of power influences consumption practices through its effect on the experience of social class and on self-concept. Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg (2005) argue that policy response can affect consumer experience of vulnerability by either facilitating or impeding consumer agency. The situation becomes complex indeed if the very same systems that define vulnerability are in fact its main contributors.

Because much research on vulnerability has focused on minority consumption, and specifically that of African Americans, the history of African Americans’ interaction with advertising and their involvement in the consumer world is a fertile area in which to consider vulnerability, but it is vast. The circumstances of the “sneaker killings,” which coincided with a time of change and re-formation in the advertising industry and its relation to the African American community, offer not only a rich context in and of itself but unsettles current perceptions of consumer vulnerability and are a hub from which to explore broader concerns about this concept—including issues of social, corporate and consumer responsibility, meaning exchange and control, power and discourse and empowerment.

**African Americans and Advertising**

Advertising frequently is criticized for creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes of vulnerable populations. Much popular and scholarly criticism of advertising and race into the 1980s was based on the fact that there were few to no positive or empowered representations of
African Americans in mainstream advertising. Scholars criticized the media and, in particular, advertising for reflecting and perpetuating racism in portrayals of minorities. While interest in African Americans as a consumer market is evidenced in the earlier part of the 20th century, marketers began to take more steady notice of black consumers in the 1960s. They proceeded with trepidation and feared alienating the larger white market. In reaction to these concerns, a body of research developed on consumer responses to racial cues and, in particular, on the effects of black models in advertising. Though the cumulative results were inconclusive, the research demonstrated neither dramatic racial differences nor negative effects in consumer responses to black models.

While negative portrayals of African Americans did not go unchallenged by black individuals, publications and organizations, the majority of mainstream images in advertising had long capitalized on the historical associations of African Americans as good domestic servants, a trend that continued well after the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights era. Thus, it is not surprising that the literature on race and advertising turned a critical eye towards issues of inclusion and stereotyping of African Americans in advertising. Still other scholars have expressed concern that even when African Americans have been integrated into mainstream advertising, it is nothing more than tokenism; that while “classic” racist appeals in contemporary contexts are subjected to severe retribution, contemporary appeals still carry on a legacy of racism; and that potentially racist elements present in advertising may have blunted any positive impact of increased representation.

African Americans fought representations of inferiority both in advertising and in the larger social and economic realm through their roles as consumers and their status in the business and economic world. This was enacted, for example, through consumer boycotts, legal pressure, and
the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{79} The Civil Rights era brought slow but steady success as the African American consumer market began to fuse with the mainstream consumer market. Images of African Americans in mainstream media became more successful and more empowered, even within a circumscribed set of roles. Black celebrities, such as Bill Cosby, were hired as endorsers with mass-market appeal and were important reflections of greater social shifts in American race relations. These increasingly popular representations of black figures in advertising developed into the 1980s were lauded as breakthroughs in race relations. Of these, one of the most celebrated of icons, and one who was honored in popular and scholarly works as having a prominent role in changing the media landscape for African Americans is Michael Jordan.

\textbf{Michael Jordan and Nike}

For a variety of reasons, notwithstanding his incredible physical and athletic prowess and the passion this sparked in the public conscience, Michael Jordan has been a figure of intense fascination, scrutiny and debate. Scholars have investigated his physical body as a site through which to explore larger cultural meanings, particularly of blackness and masculinity,\textsuperscript{80} of commodity,\textsuperscript{81} and of sociopolitical meanings of race, the construction of race\textsuperscript{82} and how it is normalized.\textsuperscript{83} In addition, Michael Jordan has been investigated and interpreted for his role as a spokesperson and as a brand himself for Nike, Inc. (i.e., the Nike Air Jordan line and the Jordan brand). Jordan has been called “a twentieth century sports hero,” “the greatest pitchman of all time,” “God disguised as Michael Jordan,” “the perfect embodiment of the sports spectacle,” the embodiment of “herculean cultural heroism,” and a plethora of other superlative-bearing descriptions. As a figure embedded in America’s popular conscience—
indeed, of the global conscience—he is an important site of study in theorizing “broader social, economic, political, and technological concerns that frame contemporary culture.” He has been called “one of the highest paid and fecund generators of social meaning in the history of media culture.” But as well, and as David Andrews argues has been lost in the swell of popular culture, Michael Jordan is a part of a longer history of oppression and degradation to which African Americans were subjected well into the 20th century. Further, according to scholar Cheryl Cole, he represented a stark contrast to the representations of criminalized African Americans and his celebrity potentially signified “the end of the historical pathologization and stigmatization of African American men, at least in the realm of the popular.” Thus, authors have explored Michael Jordan from a variety of vantage points that expand our understanding of the culture or spectacle of athletics, of the history and contemporary circumstances of African American culture, and of the marketplace and processes of commodification in contemporary socioeconomic systems.

Just as Michael Jordan has sparked intense interest and scrutiny, so has the story of Nike. The company and its founder have been the source of numerous case studies, histories, exposés, and scholarly works. The Nike story has been both a source of inspiration and of repudiation, but on both accounts there is a shared belief in the tremendous impact that Nike has had on the global landscape and popular conscience.

**Basketball and African American Culture**

Athletics have long been an important element of the American experience. Athletic pursuits have been circumscribed with aspects of community and communal good, with myths of exploration and conquest, as a source of heroism and valor and, as some would argue, for much
of its history it has served as a reflection of white patriarchal privilege.\footnote{97} But in spite of—or more likely because of—the fact that dominant social norms prevented any significant number of African Americans from participating in mainstream sports until the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, sport became a space for demonstrating and ritualizing achievement against the socially imposed restrictions of cultural expression. As one author argues, black sports heroes “captured and catalyzed the black cultural fetishization of sport as a means of expressing black cultural style, as a means of valorizing craft as a marker of racial and self-expression, and as a means of pursuing social and economic mobility.”\footnote{98} This has been done perhaps no more successfully than through basketball, which in turn owes its rise on a popular national level in large part to the influence of Nike and Michael Jordan and advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy in shaping popular culture.\footnote{99}

The sport of basketball was born in the United States in 1891 of Canadian Dr. James Naismith.\footnote{100} It was made popular through YMCAs, churches and other clubs in the northeastern United States\footnote{101} that included African American and white players, males and females\footnote{102} and it quickly infiltrated collegiate sports. The game began to flourish, particularly with young Americans whose means to participate in other sports was limited by equipment needs and social standards. A basketball game only required a ball and a goal and reputations were born through the oral traditions that passed on news of pickup and schoolyard games.\footnote{103} Various attempts in the early 1900s were made to “professionalize” the sport; in 1949 the Basketball Association of America (BAA), formed three years earlier, and the National Basketball League, formed in 1937, merged to create the National Basketball Association (NBA) that characterizes the professional sport today.\footnote{104} Since its early beginnings, basketball has held a significant place among things considered quintessentially American; but it was not until the 1970s that the game and its players
began to move towards a position of dominance in American popular culture\textsuperscript{105} and to experience unprecedented economic growth.\textsuperscript{106} Yet this growth at the same time was threatened and marred by public revelations of drug use by players, on-court violence and the retirement of Boston’s Bill Russell and Philadelphia’s Wilt Chamberlain, who had captured the attention and imagination of American fans.\textsuperscript{107}

While basketball today is virtually inseparable from the aesthetic and symbolism of Michael Jordan, it is important to remember that basketball is the “metaphoric center of black juvenile culture”\textsuperscript{108} and the sport draws much of its energy from urban, usually inner-city, courts. When Black players hailing from the inner-cities walked onto professional courts, many of these players had to alter their style of play because the moves, the jargon, and the interactions that characterized “schoolyard” play did not translate well in organized sport. The creative improvisations and on-court tricks of schoolyard basketball, drawn from the Harlem Globetrotters playbook, was considered “showboating,” “razzle-dazzle,” “fancy-pants stuff”\textsuperscript{109} by coaches and officiants of organized ball. According to Bijan Bayne (2005), “by the 1960s, some conservative coaches referred to this free style as ‘nigger ball,’ and not all of these coaches were white.”\textsuperscript{110} Even as far along as the late 1980s, according to historian Steven Riess, professional basketball was dominated by almost 90 percent with players from urban areas, nearly one-third of whom were from New York City.\textsuperscript{111} There were, nonetheless, wide discrepancies in the treatment of African Americans in professional basketball and its increasing commercialization. Despite the dominance of African Americans in college and professional team play, there were very few head coaches or general managers and a comparison of salaries and commercial endorsements demonstrates that the income for black players in comparison to white players was not commensurate with performance.\textsuperscript{112} Additionally, through media depictions of black culture
and of basketball, sports and gangs “are represented as the two practices vying for the agency and souls of African American male youths in urban America.”

In the end, though, it was the freewheeling, improvised style of black-dominated urban “schoolyard” ball that helped bring fans back to the sport in the early 1980s. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and high school bans on dunking were lifted in 1976 and fans were drawn to the street-like, though more disciplined, styles in the rivalry between Larry Bird and Earvin “Magic” Johnson that went from college to professional ball. These events helped paved the way for an improved NBA, but even in 1980 the professional sport was facing bankruptcy.

In 1984, David Stern became Commissioner of the NBA. He had already helped broker the 1983 salary cap agreement that gave poorer teams an opportunity to compete and implemented a drug testing policy that helped clean up the league’s tarnished image. Stern’s appointment coincided with Jordan’s entrance on the professional and commercial scenes. In fact, many credit the appearance of Michael Jordan and Nike on NBA courts for reinvigorating basketball, ensuring its rise and commercial success. In the 1980s, Nike helped promote the NBA and individual basketball stars into global icons, “enabling black athletes such as Michael Jordan to attain world-class superstar status and to promote the dream that success and renown are open to all in contemporary America.” One author called this relationship, together with the kind of celebrity culture that developed around the same time, the “perfect storm.” Indeed, despite a tumultuous and often adversarial relationship between Stern and Nike, Stern recognized that Jordan’s popularity, fueled both by his grace and dominance on the courts and by the spectacle of his presence in commercial media, was a boon for the NBA.
Conclusion: Meaning, Consumption and Power

Neither Nike nor those who endorse it have been without their share of criticisms, most of which revolve around production and consumption practices. Nike has been heavily criticized as exploiting foreign workers in developing countries to produce overpriced sneakers and athletic-wear that are then marketed to underprivileged youth. Douglas Kellner (2001) argues that Nike and Michael Jordan are each such an integral part of the meaning of the other that a tarnish on the reputation of one is a tarnish on both. And while many have considered Jordan a positive role model, still others have pointed to Jordan as a symbol of the decline of social values (Kellner 2001). One author writes,

“[W]hile sneaker companies have exploited black cultural expressions of cool, hip, chic, and style, they rarely benefit the people who both consume the largest quantity of products and whose culture redefined the sneaker companies’ raison d’être. This situation is more severely compounded by the presence of spokespeople like Jordan, Spike Lee, and Bo Jackson, who are either ineffectual or defensive about or indifferent to the lethal consequences (especially in urban black-on-black violence over sneaker company products) of black juvenile acquisition of products that these figures have helped make culturally desirable and economically marketable.”

Given the considerable cultural clout of Nike and Michael Jordan, it is important to explore these figures as sites of cultural production and knowledge, but also as sites that have been acted on by consumers, and to question from where or from whom they obtain such clout—or power.

This project expands on the inquiries of Michael Jordan and considers his role in a system of cultural consumption and meaning. I examine Nike and their association with Michael Jordan, particularly as it was expressed in the campaigns directed by Spike Lee and, through the use of ethical theory, I begin to map a system of advertisers and consumers as actors in a process of meaning. Rather than a system in which responsibilities have been diffused, I recognize these actors as working within broader social, economic, and political systems and consider ways in which these actors can act more responsibly and ethically. With the groundwork having been laid
by previous authors to question approaches to consumer vulnerability in various realms, including popular, legal, and scholarly, the time is ripe to reconceptualize how consumer vulnerability is understood and countered. To advance this goal, I propose a framework of dialogic ethics for critiquing and understanding consumer vulnerability that is grounded in historical understanding and is founded through ethical theory, and that accounts for the structures of power and acknowledges the critical element of exchange in communication processes.
Notes

1 Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman established Blue Ribbon Sports with a handshake in 1964. It was not until 1965 that Knight hired the first full-time employee and 1966 that the company opened its first retail outlet. The company did not take on the official name of Nike until 1978.


Theorists such as Marcuse (1964) and Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) have developed critiques of larger social concerns over consumption, advertising and the “creation of needs.” See Brian Wilson and Robert Sparks, “It’s Gotta Be the Shoes’: Youth, Race, and Sneaker Commercials,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13 (1996) for consideration of these theorists in a discussion of Michael Jordan and Nike advertising.


11 Ibid., 260


Peterson, *The Depiction of Senior Citizens in Magazine Advertisements: A Content Analysis*.


Austin, "A Nation of Thieves": Securing Black People’s Right to Shop and to Sell in White America, 147.


Smith and Cooper-Martin, Ethics and Target Marketing: The Role of Product Harm and Consumer Vulnerability.


Brenkert, Marketing to Inner-City Blacks: Powermaster and Moral Responsibility. The marketing of Uptown cigarettes is another prominent example of a deliberate and obvious attempt to capitalize on the lucrative urban market that drew the attention and ire of many critics from both within and outside of the black community. See The Downing of Uptown; Diana Minardi, "Old Joe Ads Move Trone Uptown ; Agency Packaging RJR’s New Brand Aimed at Blacks," Adweek, January 8, 1990; Judann Dagnoli, "RJR’s Uptown Targets Blacks," Advertising Age, December 18, 1989.

Calfee, 'Targeting' the Problem: It Isn’t Exploitation, It’s Efficient Marketing, 18; Wolburg, Drawing the Line between Targeting and Patronizing: How "Vulnerable" are the Vulnerable?, 287.

Sautter and Oretskin, Tobacco Targeting: The Ethical Complexity of Marketing to Minorities, 1012.


As discussed in Pollay, Jung S. Lee and Carter-Whitney, Separate, but Not Equal: Racial Segmentation in Cigarette Advertising.

Calfee, 'Targeting' the Problem: It Isn’t Exploitation, it’s Efficient Marketing, 18; Wolburg, Drawing the Line between Targeting and Patronizing: How "Vulnerable" are the Vulnerable?, 287-288.

Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg, Building Understanding in the Domain of Consumer Vulnerability, 128-139.


Ibid.

Ibid., 273.

Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg, Building Understanding in the Domain of Consumer Vulnerability, 128-139.
Ronald Paul Hill, "In this Special Issue on Vulnerable Consumers," *Journal of Macromarketing* 25, no. 2 (December, 2005), 127.


Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 124.


Andrews, Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sports, Media Culture, and Late Modern America, xiii.


Andrews, Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sports, Media Culture, and Late Modern America, xv.


Andrews, Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sports, Media Culture, and Late Modern America.


103 Bayne, *The Schoolyard Game: Blacktop Legends*, 81-100.


110 Ibid., 84.


112 Ibid.


119 Dyson, *Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 266.
CHAPTER 2: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND MARKETS, 1700s-1940s

Introduction

African Americans have sought inclusion and positive representation in advertising not only as an indication of economic power but as a symbolic expression of social value and respect.\(^1\) Despite long-standing evidence that the African American market would be a profitable one, it was not until the late 1980s, when the advertising industry could no longer turn away from the $203-billion buying power of Black consumers,\(^2\) that positive representations of African Americans began showing up in mainstream and targeted media in force. This was, as the histories of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement have taught, and as was reflected and perpetuated through the texts of advertising, a long and arduous process. It was in the context of this history that, in 1984, a young rookie Michael Jordan, fresh from his college days at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, signed with the Chicago Bulls and Nike, both of which he is credited with having redefined. But this story goes beyond his successes on the court and in Nike shoes to explore the impact that he had on the advertising industry and the symbolic life of America. Michael Jordan’s ascent as an icon of sports and of the American dream of success and consumption coincides with a changing advertising landscape that began earnestly to reflect the struggles of Black Americans for inclusion and positive representation. The history of African Americans’ relationship with advertising and consumption and the story of Nike, Michael Jordan and the “sneaker killings” are mutually informative because they contextualize the complexities of inclusion and representation, of the economic, social, and political situation of the Black community, and of the physical, social and symbolic importance of consumer goods in the struggles of Black Americans. The next two chapters are dedicated to exploring this history in order to set the stage for a stronger understanding of the role that Nike, Michael
Jordan, and other Black athletes and famous figures such as Spike Lee, played in ushering in a new era of representation for African Americans in advertising. The current chapter will address the history of African Americans, advertising and consumption in the United States dating back to the early slave advertisements and progressing up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1950s, African Americans had made important inroads into political, economic and cultural inclusion in mainstream America and in developing businesses and communities that were uniquely Black, both of which set the stage for the Civil Rights-era developments that are more frequently cited as the source of improved status of Blacks in America and in advertising. Chapter 3 resumes, then, with this history from the Civil Rights Era to the 1980s and 1990s. While numerous versions of American progress present the ever-increasing possibilities of African Americans emanating from the gains of the 1950s and 1960s, a closer examination of economic, social and cultural conditions reveals that many Blacks were struggling to understand and develop their cultural identity within the post-Civil Rights America. This was a particularly difficult task for the first generation of post-Civil Rights urban youth, many of whom were born into impoverished conditions with little access to the gains celebrated in the Civil Rights Movement. In trying to reconcile the advancements for which their predecessors so ardently fought and the conditions of their own existence, they developed new forms of representation, expression, and participation. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that leading into the 1980s, the African American community was looking for new ways of conceptualizing and expressing itself in the symbolic landscape of consumption, a search in which Nike and Jordan were implicated.

Several authors have presented compelling histories of African Americans and economic life, consumption and advertising, and their works help to inform this chapter. Marilyn Kern-
Foxworth’s *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus* (1994) traces the stereotypes of race, with their roots in slavery, that made their mark on advertising and for which advertising frequently served as a conduit. Her work provides an in-depth look at the development and symbolism of several long-standing and popular Black icons in advertising and the response of Black Americans to these (mis)representations. Kern-Foxworth also presents a discussion of the issues of frequency and status of African American representation in advertising, both of which have been developed in other popular and scholarly work and have played an important role in advertising criticism.

In *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (1993, 2nd edition), Janette L. Dates considers how advertisers have treated African American consumers, how they have portrayed them, and the role of African American practitioners and activists in fighting for more positive representations and in contributing to the strength and advancements of a growing African American consumer market. The African American consumer market is, in fact, the central issue in Robert E. Weems’s *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (1998). Weems demonstrates that characteristics and developments in the consumer realm are intricately intertwined with civil rights, broadly defined, of African Americans in the twentieth century and, contrary to many of the histories of “development,” that inclusion in mainstream consumer realms has had both positive and negative consequences for the Black community. But nonetheless, these advances were not made without the perseverance and savvy of African American individuals and organizations that fought for more appropriate inclusion in consumer and economic realms.

In no small part, as is demonstrated by Jason Chambers’ *Madison Avenue and the Color Line* (2008), this work was conducted by African Americans in journalism, sales, and advertising. According to Chambers, these professionals saw advertising as both a means of employment and
financial opportunity and as a vehicle for change in the way that African Americans were perceived. While they were “actively engaged in defining the Black consumer both for the potential client and for Blacks themselves” and promoting positive representations of Black life, they were working contrary to the years of racism and degradation that were manifest in advertising. These and other authors contribute to our understanding of the forces that affected change in advertisers’ approach to consumers and to the imagery of African Americans in mass media and advertising, and of how these developments reflect cultural and structural changes in race relations in the United States.

**Early Advertising and Enslavement of African Americans**

The history of African Americans and advertising dates as far back as slave advertisements—announcing the barter of slaves and rewards for those fugitive and found—which serve as some of the most permanent historical records of the time. These ads were constituted with physical characteristics of the slave “commodities.” For example, John Custis of Williamsburg, Virginia sought the return of a runaway slave in the following advertisement placed in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1745:

RAN away, about the 10th of April last, from the Hon. John Custis, Esq; of Williamsburg, a Negro Man named Peter, of a middle Stature, about 30 Years of Age; has a Scar in his Forehead, or somewhere about the upper Part of his Face, occasion'd by falling into the Fire when a Child, is Virginia-born; he went away with Irons on his Legs, a Kersey Waistcoat, and a Cotton Pair of Breeches, laced on the Sides for Conveniencie of putting them on over his Irons; he has robb'd me, in Cash, Houshold Linen, and other Goods to a considerable Value; and notwithstanding he is Out-law'd will not be taken or return home; he can read, and I believe write. Whoever apprehends and conveys him safe to me, shall have Two Pistoles Reward, besides what the Law allows.

John Custis
These ads serve as stark reminders of the brutalities suffered by slaves. For example, the physical descriptions of slaves, as in the example above, are frequently accompanied by the markings of scars, serving as likely records of the brutal treatment they endured. Additionally, these ads serve as records of the cultural mentality and presumptions about the nature of African Americans that were necessary to maintain the status quo, as in the following example:

March 18, 1752. RAN away, last Night, from the Subscriber, a Negroe Man, named Anthony; he is a tall, slim young Fellow, hollow-eye'd, and has a large Scar of a Burn on one of his Wrists; he is very subtil, and frequently changes his Name when run away, and is suppos'd to be concern'd in a Robbery, committed in the Neighbourhood a few Nights ago, which is thought to be the Cause of his running away, as no other appears yet; Together with him went, I suppose for the same Reason, another Fellow, named Matt Cooper, who is a squat, well-set young Fellow, and has a Scar of a Boil on one of his Cheeks, just below the under Jaw-bone. Whoever takes up the said Runaways, or either, and conveys them to me, according to Law, shall be generously rewarded, by Philip Ludwell.7

A contemporary reader might readily see a simple desire for freedom as a clearer rationale for an enslaved man to run away. Mr. Ludwell’s presumptions demonstrate the embeddedness and depth of racial misrepresentations necessary for the maintenance of slavery. Here, as is later reflected in the development and representation of such iconic figures as Aunt Jemima, Mr. Ludwell not only exhibits the typical commodification of slaves, but additionally portrays them as complicit in their own servitude—as at least resigned if not contented servants. Further commodifying them, descriptions in ads often would include postulates about the slave’s personality that would be characterized in terms of their value. A 1752 ad placed by Thomas Pleasants in Williamsburg, Virginia described a runaway slave thus:

February 10, 1752. RAN away from the Subscriber, living in Goochland County, a likely Virginia-born Negroe Man, named Jack, about 6 Feet high, has a down cast sly Look when spoken to, talks very sensible, and is much addicted to Lying; had on when he went away a very long dy'd Cotton Waistcoat and Breeches, an Oznabrig
Shirt, Plaid Stockings, and Virginia-made Shoes. Whoever will apprehend and convey him to me, or to Mr. John Pleasants, in Henrico County, shall have a Pistole Reward, paid by Thomas Pleasants.  

Such colored descriptions of the slaves’ dress, physical traits (particularly oddities) and mannerisms was common and served not only to identify them but to value them.

The impact of the early slave ads was complex and enduring. Slave advertising was a vehicle of market information that united masters, bounty hunters and other parties who profited from the perpetuation of slavery, without which it would not have been as effective as an institution; in addition to this functional degradation, slave advertising was an instrument of explicit racism and the dehumanization of Blacks. At the same time, as Kern-Foxworth (1994) argues, advertising provided information for abolitionists and slaves, uniting them in their efforts to eradicate slavery and providing them with documentation of “the brutality of slavery.” Additionally, the involvement of African Americans in advertising was not completely disempowered. For example, thirty-six years before President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the establishment of *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827 as the first African American newspaper in the United States marked early commercial involvement of Blacks. This and other such journals would become, by the 1920s, “the first to vocally and publicly press American corporations to recognize and patronize the Black consumer market” and they provided positive depictions of African Americans otherwise lacking in mainstream media. For while from 1827 to the 1890s, images of African Americans began showing up on consumer product labels and in advertising, these images were frequently derived from many of the same conventions—commodification, dehumanization, stereotyping of physical and mental characteristics—as slave ads. However, notwithstanding this dual role played by slave ads, as well as the introduction of
Black owned and oriented newspapers, the implicit message about African Americans through advertising did not change significantly after the abolition of slavery in 1865.

The end of slavery and the swift changes that followed were disruptive, sparking fears among White Americans in both the North and South over the consequences of these changes and renewing debates over the role of Blacks in American society.¹⁴ The new industrial order threatened the romantic notions of the simplicity and honesty of agrarian society—a society that, in the reality of the American system, was largely dependent on the subservience and labor of African Americans. During and after Reconstruction in the United States, derogatory images of African Americans continued to surface in a variety of popular media, including advertising, and served to quell White anxieties and reinforce White dominance in American social, economic and political life. Despite the fact that Blacks had gained some status in legal terms—the freedom to own homes and businesses, to have their own communities and to participate in consumption—neither their social status nor their status in advertising had changed.¹⁵ In fact, advertisers continued to draw on images derived from slavery and perpetuated in dramatic fashion through minstrel shows as comical, crude, intellectually inferior and dependent on White masters.

**Advertising and Blackface: Roots in Minstrelsy**

Originally popularized in the mid-1800s by White actors in Blackface creating caricatures of African American life, the Black characters they depicted seem gross misrepresentations of the actual, lived experience of African Americans. These Blackface performances reached their pinnacle in the 1840s and 1850s, but they remained common into the second half of the century¹⁶ and were frequented by both Black and White audiences. In addition to the White performers in
Blackface, Black performers also created troupes and participated in this entertainment form, some of whom became quite popular. For these Black performers, participation in minstrelsy undoubtedly was a conflicted act. While they performed the stereotypes that at once served to oppress their own people, their performances also brought them notoriety and fame and ushered in new forms of Black expression that would garner greater respect and interest from Whites and Blacks alike. “Father of the Blues” W. C. Handy began his career as a minstrel performer in 1890 and minstrel stars George Walker and Egbert Walker became in 1901 the first black musicians to be recorded. Just as minstrel sounds drew their inspiration from black folk music, so too did the first widely known Black classical composer Harry T. Burleigh, who is credited with having shaped the development of a characteristically American music style. The minstrel shows derived their tone from the unique sounds of African American culture which would have a tremendous impact on the American experience and history.

Just as the White and Black performers encountered minstrel shows from different perspectives, so too did the audiences. The White audiences were dominated by the working class, though some in the middle and upper classes frequented these shows. As historian David Roediger recounts, “Minstrelsy was featured at President John Tyler’s inauguration, and in performances before Queen Victoria. Abraham Lincoln stole away from the pressures of duty during the Civil War to see Blackface shows. But the energy and complexity of the minstrel stage came largely from below, and specifically from the uses of racial disguise not only to mask tensions between classes but also to mask tensions within the working class.” For the predominantly working-class White audience, these shows were a complex reaffirmation of their superiority in a romanticized pre-industrial agrarian society amidst the tensions of their urbanized present; for the Black audiences, the performances were complex expressions of the
African-American cultural mark. For some, the performances were reminiscent of Black folk
tradition and the songs, frequently derived from slave songs that served to break the tedium or
voice their hardships, were authentic expressions of the experiences of African Americans. But
others resented the exaggerated and unrealistic caricatures and did not frequent the shows. Minstrel shows were not only popular diversions but reflected tensions within broader social,
cultural and political life in nineteenth century America.

One particularly dramatic example of the impact of minstrel shows on African American
experience well into the 20th century is the popularization of the term “Jim Crow” to denote state
sponsored segregation. Jim Crow began as a singing and dancing African American stable hand
played in Blackface by White actor Thomas Rice in a production in Louisville, Kentucky in the
1830s. Thus, minstrel show characters found both political and commercial “success” in the
popular conscience.

Depictions of African Americans drawn from minstrel shows were appearing regularly in
advertising by the 1890s, in the wake of popularity for this entertainment form. Some of the
most famous and enduring advertising icons, such as Aunt Jemima, have their roots in
minstrelsy. The inspiration for Aunt Jemima came when Chris L. Rutt, a reporter for the St.
Joseph Gazette and co-inventor of the first pancake mix, visited a vaudeville house in St. Joseph,
Missouri where a Blackface minstrel act played a popular tune called “Aunt Jemima.” Rutt
appropriated the name Aunt Jemima and the image of the Black mammy, a remnant of American
slave culture and as depicted on the posters for the minstrel act, to become what he believed to
be the perfect embodiment of the image he wanted to portray.

Aunt Jemima debuted in 1889 and was trademarked in 1893. The original marketing
materials for the brand described the story of Aunt Jemima as a former slave, willing and loyal to
her master until his death. This legend apparently was derived from the childhood experiences of Nancy Green, the first Black woman to bring Aunt Jemima to life, who spun the tale for audiences of Aunt Jemima’s former days “on a plantation ‘somewhere in the Deep South.’” As legend had it, at one point in Aunt Jemima’s contrived history, she saved her “employer” Colonel Higbee from imposing Union troops and revived wearied southern soldiers by serving them her pancakes. This disconnect from the realities of slavery is strangely reminiscent of Phillip Ludwell’s ad for his runaway slave, who he presumed must have been the culprit of a theft down the road—for lack of any better reason he could imagine for a slave to run away. The image of Aunt Jemima, the tale of her history, and her minstrel roots are clearly derived from a romantic notion of the African American slave that served to maintain the status quo of delegating Blacks to domestic realms. As a historian of The Quaker Oats Company described,

“The American Negro has always represented in American life the acme of the culinary art, respected as in France the chefs who belong to the Société Gastronomique. Traditional southern hospitality in slave times was made possible by the legendary genius of the Negroes as cooks and chefs. Long before the Civil War the Negro had become entrenched in folklore as the ultimate expert in cookery. From its first days, Aunt Jemima pancake flour capitalized on this identity so rooted in the American culture. And in each generation, Aunt Jemima had reflected the advancing status of the Negro. The first Aunt Jemima, as portrayed by Nancy Green, took pride in being the White man’s valued servant. In the next generation, the overweight, good-humored but unsophisticated Anna Robinson established the Negro cook as a personage in her own right… In the mid-twentieth century, Edith Wilson and other show personalities completed the transition… far removed from the days of servitude and lending fresh dignity to the image of the Negro as America’s unrivaled culinary expert.”

This author rather misses the point of prejudice in even a “dignified” Aunt Jemima, but certainly demonstrates the embeddedness of racism in these problematic depictions.

Aunt Jemima is but one example of the variety of stereotypes that frequently drew from the exaggerated misrepresentations of minstrel shows and were conspicuous in advertising icons, including Sambo, the Gold Dust Twins, Uncle Ben and Rastus. Imagery of Blacks in early
advertising was offensive and exaggerated physical characteristics and dialect. Mouths of Black figures would be gaping, their eyes and lips protruding, and their emotions uncontrolled. Their dialect would be misrepresented and derogatory terminology would be used to describe them. They would be depicted as thieves and cannibals, or otherwise as lazy, childlike or subservient.

These distorted images and manipulated dialect and mannerisms characterized the minstrel shows and were reflected in advertising most prominently through some of its most famous icons. These icons serve as graphic reminders of the historically-rooted racism against African Americans, borne out in its most brutal form through slavery, and perpetuated in the belief that the cultural value of African Americans was situated in their roles as good domestic servants.

**Advertising at the Turn of the Century**

In many ways, the mass production of images such as Aunt Jemima was a consequence of the capabilities and needs driven by the Industrial Revolution in the United States. The Industrial Revolution brought with it incredible technological, social and cultural changes, most conspicuously in the form of mass-produced consumer goods. The burgeoning production processes necessitated increases in consumption. Mass production could not be sustained without expanding markets and changing social values that allowed for the new ideology of consumption to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th century in America. With the new networks of transportation that had opened by the mid-1800s, these mass produced goods could be transported around the country and into growing urban centers for consumption.

In the modern era of mass communication, made possible by advances in print and production, photography, and distribution, advertising was the fuel for the consumer economy. Advertising helped manufacturers profit by selling more mass-produced goods at a lower cost to
the public. By the late 1800s, advertising was moving beyond the small, print-only, classified style ads typified by early slave announcements and was becoming an industry. With advances in print technology and the development of a mass market for magazines, advertisers had a broader range of capabilities in presenting their arguments. By this point, advertisers had determined that by creating a brand name and image, they could make their product irreplaceable and charge higher prices. In exchange, consumers would have not only an assurance of quality and consistency, but a mark of display. The mass availability of goods and information was seen by many as a democratizing force, bringing previously unobtainable lifestyles to the general public.

The Industrial Revolution also brought with it a class of nouveau riche, whose “conspicuous consumption” habits, as termed by Thorstein Veblen, were for the purpose of display and social power. Since Veblen’s presentation of the term, it has been used beyond the realm of the nouveau riche and to discuss consumption for the purposes of social display in a variety of forms. This becomes an important issue in considering the history of African Americans and the consumer market because discriminatory practices in the marketplace put African Americans at a disadvantage in finding quality and the purchase of certain brands ensured product quality. Additionally, for many, including some important African American leaders, the consumption of luxury was considered a mark of success both within the Black community and to the broader public and was part of the larger struggle against discrimination.

But for all of the proclamations that the new, turn-of-the-century consumer society brought with it the democratization of goods, with few exceptions African Americans were markedly absent in depictions of this consumer life (unless, perhaps, they were serving the goods). The negative depictions and otherwise absence of African Americans in advertising represented
economic censure that was enacted in social and political ways through Jim Crow laws. All of these forms of segregation and dismissal subjugated African Americans. Thus, just as civil rights were at issue, so was inclusion in the commercial realm. As one noted scholar wrote,

“…over the course of the twentieth century, consumption became a key aspect of citizenship… Therefore, advertising’s positive and representative depiction of Blacks fulfilling their role in the consumer society would be symbolic evidence of Blacks’ accepted status in society: stereotypes and subservient roles pointed to and justified discrimination, while positive or even simply accurate representations would point to their role as equal consumers and equal citizens.”

Working within the confines of a hostile racial environment in the late 1800s and early 1900s, African American leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois began to urge their communities to build and strengthen by establishing their own businesses and serving Black communities under the belief that economic progress was the key to race progress. In 1907, Booker T. Washington published The Negro in Business, in which he addressed African American economic development and sang the praises of Black entrepreneurs. Several years later in 1912, Monroe Work of the Tuskegee Institute published The Negro Yearbook and Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro, which ran until 1950, and provided an important resource on the wealth and economic progress of African Americans. Such efforts would gather momentum in the 1930s Depression-era environment.

But the circumstances at the turn of the century were still dire. The 1896 decision of Plessy v. Ferguson legally sanctioned segregation and the already existent Jim Crow social standards. Many Blacks were still subjugated as part of the agricultural economy of the south and those who sought a better life in urban environments encountered economic depravity and prejudice. In spite of all of this hardship and denigration, however, African Americans began to accumulate wealth and to open business ventures that catered to Black communities. As early as 1888, two of the first African American banks had opened in Richmond, Virginia and Washington, DC.
These were followed by insurance companies, retail stores, other ventures and crafts, and organizations such as the National Business League to support them. These businesses worked to instill trust in consumers through advertising that presented a more realistic and positive depiction of African American life and to engage them in the process of strengthening their own communities, and they did so through the newspapers that had been the mediums of the few positive representations presented of and to them. These processes were instrumental in the development of an African American consumer market.

Companies approaching the Black consumer market through Black publications at the turn of the century, notably, were speaking to them predominantly through a limited set of stereotypical roles. Advertisers did not see the need for, and in fact actively did not create, messages for Black consumers that differed from what they would present to mainstream White America. Even while these stereotypical images did appear in Black publications, though, publishers were pressing advertisers to recognize the Black consumer market. In working for these new advertising dollars, publishers also were coaching advertisers to provide more positive and representative depictions of African American life in order to truly reach this growing market.

These African American publications were instrumental in providing the Black community with alternative and more representative images of their experiences by presenting Blacks in their pages. Further, through the pressures they exerted on advertisers, they were instrumental in the developing presence of Blacks working in the ad industry, which in turn helped to promote more positive representations in both Black and mainstream venues. In the first decades of the 20th century, their success, however, in terms of reach and depth of representation would still be a long time coming.
The first two decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century witnessed vast changes in the American landscape. Histories of the era depict an America of increasing wealth, populated by consumers with greater access to a wider variety of consumer goods. The “American Dream” as told through advertising was a testament to White ideologies that both reminisced about the purity of a romantic past and at the same time promoted a present and future of consumption to all with disposable income.

The Progressive Era was marked by technological and scientific advances, political, economic and business reforms, a growing middle class and a developing consumer culture. Yet frequently left out of these histories is the growing Black consumer market, developing in spite of the harsh racial climate of the times. Black Americans worked largely through their own community channels and publications to build businesses and promote them. They developed organizations, such as the National Negro Business League (NNBL), formed in 1900 by Booker T. Washington (renamed the National Business League in 1966) to help promote and support Black businesses, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 to champion legal rights of African Americans, and the National Urban League in 1911 to work to secure equal employment in the United States. African American leaders and communities clearly realized that working to become a strong economic force would give them weight and contribute to their acceptance and participation in American social, political, and economic realms.\textsuperscript{50}

Importantly, they also were looking for ways to express this in the symbolic landscape of America, one of the most influential spaces of which was becoming advertising.

\textbf{African Americans and Advertising: 1920s-1940s}

With the U.S.’s participation in World War I from 1917-1918, advertising experienced a boost, as advertisers aimed to keep their work relevant through messaging that let Americans
know of their support of the troops and their patriotism, and as the government created national advertising programs to gain and maintain public support. Advertising encouraged men to join the armed forces and rallied for domestic efforts and conservation of war materials on the home front. Three hundred and seventy thousand African Americans were in military service during the war, and between 1915 and 1918 countless others began migrating North in what has been called the “Great Migration” to find employment in wartime industries, improving incomes and creating large African American consumer markets. As the first generation of Blacks born free, though hindered by the enduring Jim Crow laws, they had a sense of entitlement to the rights of citizenship and to equality in the economic realm. At the same time many Blacks from other countries—particularly from other parts of the Americas, including the West Indies and Cuba—migrated to the United States. These Black immigrants of the “Great Migration” and from other countries during this era were symbolized by the “New Negro”, who was better educated, politically sophisticated, more powerful and more militant. As one author described, “Considered as a whole, the New Negroes were not only a national people, they were also international, multi-lingual, and ethnically heterogeneous.” The war also brought other changes for African Americans as they reconceptualized new identities and expressions and contributed in unique ways to the American landscape.

While Black soldiers were left out of wartime commemoration despite their participation in World War II, their impact notably was felt through the sounds that they took with them as they traveled overseas. While African American units in the U.S. Army had their own bands that dated back to 1909, they gained notoriety for their Jazz sounds during World War I. Jazz had emerged in the early 20th century in and around New Orleans from a combination of African and European influences such as minstrel shows, plantation bands, and Irish and Scottish folk tunes
and it was played in a variety venues from concerts and clubs to parades and funerals. In 1918, military band of the 369th Infantry from New York City, under the direction of James Reece Europe, participated in a joint concert of allied bands on the Champs Élysées, which they followed by a worldwide tour that set off a “permanent enthusiasm” around the Western world for the highly syncopated sounds of African American jazz.

The spread of jazz sounds and the end of the war ushered in the “Jazz Age.” In the early 1920s, Black music experienced various milestones on the American stage. While both Black and White audiences enjoyed the music of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Ethel Waters, artist Mamie Smith recorded the first record for Black music consumers. The successes of Black music in this era were part of a larger movement that grew out of the New Negro’s sense of racial pride that was encapsulated in the Harlem Renaissance as the Black community found creative ways of expressing identity through the arts.

The “Jazz Age”, also known with slightly varied context as the “Roaring Twenties”, was a decade of prosperity and sweeping social change; the new consumer society, which had begun developing at the turn of the century, became entrenched in the 1920s. Advertising expenditures went from $2.2 billion in 1919 to $3.4 billion in 1929. Developing technologies opened up new mediums for advertisers and new ways of imparting their messages. The introduction of radio in the 1920s and its widespread dissemination in the 1930s presented new possibilities through sound. But just as they were in print, African Americans were subjected to further defamatory representations. As the imagery and written dialect of print advertising had drawn from the tradition of minstrel shows, so too did radio make use of these conventions in the spoken word and through music.
Amos ‘n Andy, for example, was a hugely popular radio comedy that ran from the 1920s to the 1950s and was later adapted for television. Two White actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, depicted two Black characters and their antics. Typifying its minstrel roots, the show portrayed Andy in the “coon” role and Amos as the “Tom,” with plotlines that frequently positioned them alongside other common stereotypes such as the mammy. As one author points out, “What made them different from their predecessors [in minstrelsy and vaudeville] was the large number of people they reached with their comedy, including some African Americans.”

While perhaps not as offensive as some other shows of the day, Amos and Andy were far from representative of the Black public, but nonetheless were picked up as sponsors in advertising several products, most notably Listerine and Campbell’s, demonstrating the enduring complexity and rootedness of minstrel show conventions into the 20th century. Pressure from the NAACP is often credited for the demise of Amos ‘n Andy, but only after a long run that crossed mediums and formats.

Thus, despite a few locally broadcast Black radio stations, the majority of radio was dedicated to the entertainment of the White public and commonly at the expense of the Black community. To combat the barrage of negative stereotypes in mainstream advertising, many African Americans turned to Black-oriented media options as they increasingly came available. As early as 1929, with “The All Negro Hour,” radio began to speak directly to Black audiences. Black companies used these “cultural oases” to reach out to Black consumers, but advances in the availability of Black-oriented options was sluggish. Even by 1949, only four radio stations in the country appealed directly to Black consumers. By the 1950s, “Negro appeal” programming would proliferate, with estimates ranging from between 400 to as many as 600 such stations by that time. The majority of these stations were White-owned, but their counterparts in
mainstream advertising continued to waver in their commitment to Black audiences. And while the 1950 census, demonstrating ever-increasing size and urbanization, did compel advertisers to take a more earnest look at Black radio audiences, these changes should not be overstated—even into the 1970s, when Black entrepreneurs began buying stake in radio broadcast properties, “many advertisers claimed that they could as readily reach Black consumers through general market broadcast advertising, and they claimed that the African American consumer was not upscale enough to have much discretionary income.” This was an argument that had long-dominating advertisers’ thought across media options and placement decisions. Had advertisers heeded the early pressures of Black leaders to conduct research on African American markets, advertisers would have recognized that this was, in fact, a market with incredible potential that could be reached through black-oriented media outlets that were more likely to provide them with representative content and deferential treatment that they desired.

The advertising industry had entered a period of interest and experimentation with more adept consumer research practices in the 1920s. Advertising agency J. Walter Thompson hired behavioral psychologist John B. Watson in 1920, marking a move in advertising to ground itself in science and find more professional standing. Agencies increasingly sponsored market research to understand not only the economic potential, but the psychological characteristics and tendencies of consumers. Recognizing that very little of this work was conducted to understand African American consumers, Black leaders continued to push for representation not just in the advertising but in the research that generated the strategies and messages of advertising. Drawing from Booker T. Washington’s approach to the economic advancement of African Americans, Claude Barnett used his positions in a variety of ventures, including an advertising agency, a cosmetics business and ultimately publishing, to pressure American corporations to
attend to Black consumers; he was, as one author noted, “one of the earliest advocates pressing American corporations to devote specific advertising and marketing attention to Black consumers.”

Barnett pursued multiple angles in pressuring companies and advertising agencies not only to attend to African American markets but to Black publications, as well, and he recognized the importance of research on this market to support his argument.

Some works had been published on the Black consumer market by the 1920s. Booker T. Washington published *The Negro Business* in 1907 in which he discussed African American economic development. And in 1912, *The Negro Yearbook and Encyclopedia* began annual publications that lasted until 1950s, providing an overview of African American experience and informing readers of their wealth, progress, and collective consumer power. But the 1920s and 1930s were a time of increased interest in Black business development. In 1928, the National Negro Business League (NNBL) began taking surveys of Black businesses and, while they never materialized, also planned surveys of Black consumers. The authors of the study recommended that advertisers give more attention to the Black consumer market and “implicitly suggested that Blacks had an untapped economic strength that could be used in various ways to improve their economic standing.”

In 1928 and 1930, H.A. Haring published articles in the trade journal *Advertising & Selling*, entitled respectively “Selling to Harlem” and “The Negro as Consumer,” both encouraging corporations to market to Blacks. This work was anecdotal and tinged with condescension, but nonetheless suggested the viability of the African American consumer market. Haring’s work also was interesting for the assertions it made about the buying styles of Blacks, suggesting that they were a good market for high quality goods. This message about consumption patterns was further reinforced in academic literature by Paul K. Edwards’ 1932 book, *The Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer*, and his 1936 doctoral thesis on the topic of
Black consumers and their spending power and tendencies. More considerate of African Americans, Edwards found that despite their status at the lower echelon of the occupation and wage scales, African Americans tended to purchase quality food and clothing and would purchase major brand-name products even when those brands were not specifically creating marketing campaigns to speak to them. At the same time, though, he noted that African Americans had negative opinions about advertising that featured Blacks in subservient situations or depicted them in derogatory ways. Citing Aunt Jemima as an example, some Black consumers passed over these products because of these portrayals; in light of this, Edwards concluded that advertisers would at least have to respect the feelings of Black consumers in order to gain their business. He believed strongly enough in this message that he would send a summary of his work to company executives around the country to encourage them to work for the business of Black consumers.

Based on the work of Edwards, in 1933 Claude Barnett attempted but failed to garner support from corporations who stood to gain from his efforts to conduct a study on the consumption habits of African Americans in Chicago. Barnett and other Black leaders believed such work could have been the foundation for change by demonstrating to companies the value of African Americans as a market, by encouraging companies to invest advertising dollars in Black publications, and by encouraging more representative depictions of African Americans. Even though African Americans could be found depicted in professional roles in some Black publications, images of Blacks in the more expansive image industry remained problematic and few, and Black publications were often passed over in favor of more mainstream advertising options. Even companies such as Camel cigarettes, Chevrolet and Pepsi-Cola who began advertising in Black publications by the mid-1930s continued to use ads developed for
mainstream media without any efforts to reflect African American consumer experience. Despite the movement of such companies into African American markets, many others continued to dismiss and avoid them, in part drawn from long-standing prejudices and in part due to the economic conditions and fears surrounding the Great Depression.

The argument presented by Edwards and more forcefully promoted by Black leaders was that African Americans were aware of their power and influence as consumers, and were willing to use it to gain greater acknowledgement, representation and status not only as consumers but as citizens. This approach was more clearly articulated through the “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns of the 1930s. Initiated in Chicago by editors of the *Whip*, a militant African American publication, these campaigns spread to cities across the country. While they were intended to pressure businesses servicing Black communities to employ Blacks and thereby provide them with greater access to jobs, these campaigns demonstrated the power of African American economic retribution. Both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, while proposing different approaches to ensure the security and success of African Americans, advocated the position of strength through Black economic development. In the 1930s, DuBois would translate economic strength into support of the growing consumer boycott movement. But the Depression offered a unique opportunity for Black consumers because the impact of their efforts was particularly acute for businesses. Robert Weems has explained, “Besides merely seeking to increase African American employment opportunities at White-owned businesses, some Black consumers, during the Great Depression, used their dollars to enhance African American business development.” Thus, encouraged by leaders such as Washington and DuBois, African American consumers leveraged their buying power not only to pressure White companies and advertisers but also to boost Black-owned businesses.
On a broader scale, one thing the Depression era did for the advantage of consumers was to instigate increased consumer scrutiny and distrust of advertising and a greater desire among businesses to obtain what patronage they could get. In the context of these hard times, seemingly businesses would be more affected by consumer boycotts and the “Don’t buy where you can’t work” movements experienced significant successes both in getting Black patrons to be recognized as viable consumers and in gaining access to employment in these same places where they would spend their money. Additionally, the increased scrutiny of advertising spawned from the Depression would translate in subsequent decades, in conjunction with other social and economic changes, into concerns and criticisms over the unequal representation of Black Americans.

It was also during the 1930s that the first study of ethnic stereotypes was conducted by Princeton University researchers. F.H. Allport had suggested in 1924 that stereotypes were synonymous with prejudice, and Walter Lippmann introduced the concept to the general public in 1926. Later, in 1960, Gordon Allport published *The Nature of Prejudice*, in which he suggested that stereotypes are perpetuated through media, and in 1977, J. Bowes suggested that they are defined by being fixed and extreme despite changing events. This persistence of stereotypes is clearly represented in many of the public discourses and actions toward African Americans through much of the 20th century. Research has demonstrated that negative stereotypes perpetuate poor conditions and serve to maintain status quo. A barrage of media material, including advertising, socially sanctioned racial prejudice well into the late 20th century. And despite the telling research of a largely untapped, growing and viable Black consumer market, no significant quantity of research takes place until well after World War II in the 1950s and 1960s. But the efforts of the various consumer empowerment activists in the 1930s
had an enduring effect on African Americans’ awareness and use of their role as consumers and, along with increasing visibility in other cultural realms, only served to increase their determination during World War II.\textsuperscript{99}

For example, throughout the 1930s, several momentous events in athletics prefaced some of the later arguments that African American leaders would use to connect fascism abroad with the oppression they experienced at home. Runner Jesse Owens broke records in winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, the stronghold of Nazi Germany. Boxer Joe Louis defeated Italian-American Primo Carnera in 1935 and German Max Schmeling in 1938. For African Americans who saw these opponents as symbols of oppressive forces, these victories destabilized racist claims of superiority over the Black race.\textsuperscript{100} As America entered World War II to fight fascism and racism, Black America faced conflicting demands on their loyalties to each other and to an America that had for years degraded and demoralized them. Blacks seized the opportunity to leverage the official American war rhetoric of democracy and freedom to speak out against racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{101}

**World War II and Beyond: 1940s-1950s**

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and drew the United States into World War II. With wartime technology and production demands, industrialization gained further momentum and brought with it profound changes that ushered in a new era of prosperity for millions of Americans.\textsuperscript{102} As it had in the First World War, the advertising industry offered its services as consumption was reprioritized to support the war effort. In 1942, the War Advertising Council, renamed the Advertising Council in 1945, was formed to coordinate advertising’s efforts and reinitiate the poster and advertising programs that had proven successful in World
The advertising industry provided almost a billion dollars of time and space; and advertising agencies and businesses rallied around patriotic themes, with a multitude of brands communicating a variety of wartime themes that helped develop consumer loyalty. After World War II, the United States had solidified its status as a global power and emerged prepared for another period of prosperity.

But the 1940s is a somewhat underappreciated time in the history of African Americans and advertising. It is a period rich with developments that serve as the foundation for advances most commonly associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. According to author Thomas Cripps, “on the eve of an impending foreign war against nations that included racism in their policies, Blacks seized the opportunity to demonstrate that their social goals and the nation’s had very nearly become one.” Though they had to balance the issue delicately, Black newspapers played an important role in addressing the issue of discrimination both abroad and at home through the “Double V” concept. They voiced strong support for the war, but took the opportunity of the international effort to protest discrimination at home and segregation and exclusion of Blacks, particularly in the Armed Forces. Over 2.5 million African Americans had signed up for the draft. They served separately from White soldiers, but nonetheless played an important role in the war effort and returned home demanding equal rights for jobs, better housing and fair wages. African Americans gained increasing recognition for their efforts in the war, on the home front, and as consumers. African Americans had been armed with a growing assertiveness in consumer realms in the wake of consumer empowerment efforts of the 1930s and they returned with an “enhanced sense of self-determination” from World War II. Advertising did not escape the censure of this increased consumer activism.

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Months prior to Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941 to prohibit discrimination in government and government-related defense industries and established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (F.E.P.C) to oversee the implementation of the executive order.\textsuperscript{113} Though timed to deter a planned protest march in the nation’s capital, this edict paved the way for Black workers to gain entry into skilled industrial positions,\textsuperscript{114} of which there was an increasing number developing to meet wartime demands. Consequently, along with millions of other Americans seeking employment and a way out of Depression-era hardships,\textsuperscript{115} many Blacks migrated to areas where these jobs could be found\textsuperscript{116} and were hired in skilled industrial positions with higher wages than previously imaginable.\textsuperscript{117} These changes were not met without resistance and tension, as demonstrated through the 1943 Detroit race riots.\textsuperscript{118} But additionally, these migrations opened up market possibilities that did not previously exist.

For example, with black urban populations growing, the market for Black music expanded significantly\textsuperscript{119} and provided audiences for pioneers in Black music forms. This would have important effects in the postwar era, as the rhythm and blues sounds of Black-oriented radio crossed over into the White teenage market.\textsuperscript{120} William Barlow writes of this phenomenon, “Postwar radio was characterized by both White and Black deejays capturing the attention and imagination of a youthful urban audience with the introduction of rhythm and blues formats. As had been the case in similar cross-cultural exchanges in the past, the Black innovators set the new styles… while their White imitators and benefactors reaped the financial benefits.”\textsuperscript{121} Here, Barlow is articulating a recurrent theme in which the “cross-cultural exchange” is inequitable; more so, black businesses and organizations frequently would suffer from these exchanges.
In what Robert Weems has termed the “most dramatic business overture to African American consumers” of the 1940s, the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson as the first African American to the White-dominated major league establishment. But this move meant mixed results for the African American community that sought mainstream recognition but had also worked hard to develop organizations of their own. While professional baseball had included black players from its inception in the 1870s and 1880s, Jim Crow conventions quickly prevailed. In a move that was representative of the situation with other American sports, professional baseball banned black players in 1877—a ban that was not lifted until Robinson’s 1947 debut on Ebbets Field. Robinson’s move to the mainstream professional league united African Americans around a sense of growing pride and triumph. But this move was not without its trials. Robinson was subjected to a variety indignations and threats, the most egregious of which were against his life. In spite of this, he made a tremendous impact on the sports world—earning the Rookie of the Year Award in his debut year and the league-wide MVP in 1949—and on American society, as having crossed the color line in sports. Robinson is credited with having paved the way for further integration in other arenas as well as breaking down the stalwart barriers of prejudice.

Robinson recognized on various levels the import of his entry into national major league baseball. Upon the announcement of his signing, he is quoted as having said, “I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am that I am the first member of my race in organized ball. I realize how much it means to me, to my race, and to baseball. I can only say that I’ll do my very best to come through in every manner.” According to Walter Leavy in a 1997 anniversary article on Robinson in *Ebony*, “Largely because of Robinson, the color line in sports came tumbling down, creating a path for the likes of Michael Jordan, Reggie Jackson, and Walter Payton.” Many
Blacks at the time also believed that this move was a symbol of ensuing change in other spaces previously closed to them. Thus, the benefits of this historic move were numerous, for it represented an important triumph, served as a source of pride and an entre into other arenas for African Americans, and it proved to be a quite profitable for the Dodgers.

The rising levels of income and increased urbanization of the Black community were important factors in the desegregation of baseball.127 With urbanization, large communities of potential fans had developed whose pride in the accomplishments of their race undoubtedly made them quite loyal and whose increasing income allowed them the opportunity to support their teams. However, this move also signaled the beginning of the end for the Negro Baseball Leagues, originally founded to provide an outlet for Black players banned from mainstream sports, as both fans and players migrated to the major leagues.128 The Negro League baseball followed much the same path as other African American businesses that lost consumers and revenue to the process of integration, as mainstream outlets began catering to them.

This issue was similarly reflected in the profits acquired from advertising to Blacks. American businesses were poised to reap considerable profits from Black consumers, while Black businesses faced the threat of losing consumers and revenue. African Americans’ increasing wages, greater disposable income, and developing awareness of their economic power garnered the attention of the advertising trade press and of advertisers129—attention that was followed, with some reluctance, by interest in and need for Black professionals within the mass media and image industries.

Coupled with continued pressure from African American consumers and leaders, Americans were starting to feel the imminent changes in race relations. By the early 1940s, several corporations had been penalized by African Americans for their representation of and to Black
consumers. As Weems recounts, “These companies’ subsequent public apologies to Black consumers and their removal of offensive ads and products graphically demonstrated the potential power of Black consumer activism.” This kind of pressure continued throughout the 1940s in the face of wavering business reactions to the growing African American consumer market. For example, David J. Sullivan, who had emerged as a leading expert on the Black consumer market during WWII, published several important and widely read essays on the demographic and statistical profiles of Black consumers, in which he advised advertisers about what not to do when advertising to Blacks. This advice attended to some of the long-standing prejudices and misrepresentations of African Americans, drawing from slave and minstrel imagery—he advised advertisers not to exaggerate physical characteristics, to avoid Blackface and other minstrel conventions and characters such as “Aunt Jemimas,” and to use proper English grammar and dialect. Sullivan was reflecting in the popular press what previous research had already indicated—African Americans have long been sensitive to negative depictions and used their role as consumers to act out against them. With a greater number of major corporations advertising in African American media by the mid-1940s and with the new challenges of representation posed by the introduction of television, this issue was becoming increasingly prominent.

As interest in the African American market grew, White companies and advertising agencies began turning to “Negro market” specialists like Sullivan to help them communicate with Black audiences. Some companies, such as Pepsi-Cola, hired these specialists to work internally. Pepsi established a Negro Sales Department in the 1940s and put African American Edward J. Boyd in charge. He was later replaced by Harvey C. Russell, whose previous experience at a Black owned advertising agency prepared him for the role, and who would go on to become
the first African American to earn the title of vice president for a major corporation when he was promoted by Pepsi.\textsuperscript{138} Noticing the success of companies like Pepsi in African American markets, other companies began to follow suit in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{139} In 1953, several such special-market experts established the National Association of Market Developers (NAMD) through which to further promote the African American consumer market.\textsuperscript{140} As it developed, this organization became instrumental in encouraging advertisers and marketers to tailor their messages to Black consumers and speak to them with greater deference and creativity.\textsuperscript{141}

But while White-owned companies were consulting “Negro market” specialists, the entrepreneurial spirit of African Americans like David Sullivan was playing its own hand in creating Black-owned agencies and advertising mediums. Sullivan, whose market research proved influential, opened what is likely the first African American full-service advertising agency in 1943.\textsuperscript{142} The fact that his work became so influential was a testament to the importance of the growing African American market; but the fact that his agency only stayed open until 1949 points to the difficulties faced by Blacks in convincing White-owned advertisers to attend to Black consumers and of Black-owned media to thrive. However, despite the difficulties experienced by Sullivan’s and other Black-owned advertising agencies, these businessmen had gained important experience in the field of advertising that helped them dispel some of the long-standing prejudices about Blacks’ ability to work in such an environment and proved the inroad to American corporations that began hiring African Americans for their special expertise with Black consumers.\textsuperscript{143}

In 1945, as World War II concluded, John H. Johnson launched \textit{Ebony} magazine to appeal to members of the accomplished African American middle class. Following on the heels of \textit{Negro Digest}, which he formed in 1942, \textit{Ebony} was a contrast to previous periodicals that highlighted
the difficulties of African American life. Instead, Johnson created *Ebony* to focus on stories of African American lifestyle and achievements.¹⁴⁴ *Ebony* was quickly a success among African Americans and, despite initial hesitation on the part of advertising agencies to direct their clients to a new, Black-oriented magazine, Johnson began to urge such national advertisers as Chesterfield cigarettes, Kotex and Zenith to put their advertising dollars into *Ebony*.¹⁴⁵ As one scholar has concluded, “Johnson’s importance in generating corporate interest in Black consumers can scarcely be overestimated.”¹⁴⁶ Not only did he fill a void for a large population of African Americans at a time when they were increasing in size and earned income, but along the way he convinced many national companies that they would be a lucrative market and one to be taken seriously. Fitting of this argument, *Ebony* publicized their scoop on the 1950 Census report that revealed some important data about Black consumers.¹⁴⁷ While editors and Black leaders had been relying on outdated and questionable data to demonstrate the strength of the African American market, the census revealed that the Black population had increased over 17 percent in the last 10 years to over 15 million and that their income had increased almost 300 percent since the last census. These data further demonstrated the consumption needs of Blacks, as they ventured into home ownership, entered better occupations and were increasingly urban.¹⁴⁸ Johnson also believed, as had Claude Barnett before him, that Black consumers were uniquely brand conscious in a way that White consumers were not because they had learned to use brands as assurances of quality and consistency as they coped with the abuses endured in the market system from years of prejudice and ill treatment. Additionally, Johnson argued that while conspicuous consumption was at play, choice brand names served as markers of class status within the black community that symbolized their ability to consume as first class Americans, if only in their own neighborhoods.¹⁴⁹ On these various grounds, Johnson continued to encourage
advertisers to attend to the African American market into the 1950s. He bypassed advertising agencies, whose reluctance to recommend Black-oriented media to clients had stunted Johnson’s efforts, and he went directly to corporate executives; his articles for the trade press, speeches at trade organizations, and marketing films focused on reaching Black consumers; he initiated a program of product endorsements from *Ebony*; and he advertised regularly in the trade press.  

Through the 1950s, an increasing number of research studies were published demonstrating the capacity of African American consumers and the possibilities of reaching them through Black-oriented media and messages. Black publishers had served as the early impetus and the continued driving force behind this increased recognition of and interest in Black consumers. The financial success of their publications was certainly at issue, but for many, there was a clear and self-conscious drive to remodel the representation and symbolism of African American life.

By the 1950s, television had become the dominant advertising medium, trumping radio, newspapers and magazines, and its rapid expansion provided advertisers with unprecedented access to consumers. But television posed a new set of challenges and opportunities relating to representation. Just as in previous mediums, racism and discrimination were prevalent on television as its images entered homes across America. The Amos ‘n’ Andy show’s move onto television is one prominent example. Though on television the Amos and Andy characters were played by Black actors, they lacked none of the stereotypical representations evident in the radio show, and with television’s visual impact, critics like the NAACP objected even more fervently. Nonetheless, mainstream America’s acceptance of racial discrimination in the media was embedded enough that the show would last through syndication until 1966.
As physical spaces across the country were being desegregated in the wake of a variety of highly-publicized events such as the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education and the 1955 Rosa Parks incident and subsequent 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the contentions on the television medium were indicative of continuing fears of advertisers over the potential effects of pursuing Black consumers. Even as they expressed increase interest in the African American consumer market, advertisers were trepidatious of the effects that they imagined would come from mainstream consumers if they were clearly and openly to target Black consumers. Despite strong evidence to the contrary, advertisers feared White backlash if they blatantly targeted Blacks, integrated them into their advertising or used them in anything more than nominal roles\textsuperscript{158} in mainstream venues. Nat King Cole blamed such reasoning for the demise of his NBC show in 1957.\textsuperscript{159} Cole was the first African American to have his own television show,\textsuperscript{160} but it appeared to him and to others that despite the fact that the show was created to deliver Black consumers to advertisers,\textsuperscript{161} industry executives never gave his show a chance. As Nat King Cole was quoted in Ebony, “Madison Avenue, the center of the advertising industry, and their big clients didn’t want their products associated with Negroes.”\textsuperscript{162} These events are relevant because if media serves as any indication of social and political realities, then through the 1950s Blacks were allowed very little contribution and recognition and were designated to specific, limited sets of stereotypical roles.

By the 1950s, it was clear to most observers that advertising held considerable influence over the symbolic life of America. In 1952, historian David Potter declared, “Advertising now compares with such long-standing institutions as the school and the church in the magnitude of its social influence. It dominates the media, it has vast power in the shaping of popular standards, and it is really one of the very limited group of institutions which exercise social control.”\textsuperscript{163}
Further, in 1954, Potter argued that advertising lacked any sense of social responsibility. Or, as another scholar articulated, until the 1960s advertising maintained “an amoral attitude to social concerns” that went unquestioned. Thus, it is no surprise that the Black community, standing on a foundation laid by African Americans throughout the 20th century, increasingly turned its attention to the advertising industry as they entered into the Civil Rights era of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Conclusion

By the 1950s, African Americans had made significant inroads into gaining stronger and more accurate representation in American cultural, political and economic arenas and had set the stage for the tremendous impact of the Civil Rights Movement. While there were many positive changes yet to be made, Black images in the culture industries that had long been based on gross misrepresentations and stereotypes drawn from early slave ads and minstrel show acts were, by the 1940s, beginning to make a shift towards more representative images that spoke directly to Black consumers. Mid-century advertisers were taking a keener interest in the growing African American market and, rather than relying on old stereotypes, some advertisers were beginning to turn to “Negro market specialists” to help them develop more appropriate appeals. The early-American slave ads and the images of African Americans in mainstream advertising throughout the 19th century serve as records of the mindset of Americans towards Blacks and demonstrate the presumptions and misrepresentations that served to reinforce white dominance in American social, economic and political life. Drawing inspiration from these same stereotypes and in turn feeding back into the advertising landscape, the caricatures in minstrel shows misrepresented the actual lives and contributions of blacks and likewise served to reaffirm white superiority in a
romanticized pre-industrial agrarian society. Some of the most famous and enduring advertising icons such as Aunt Jemima have their roots in minstrelsy. But at the same time, minstrel shows were a complex arena for acting out the tensions in a post-Emancipation society. The unique sound of the minstrel shows was drawn from African American culture and had a strong impact on American musical language. Despite the derogatory tone of minstrel shows, various African Americans, including actors and musicians, made names for themselves in this arena.

But black communities were content with neither the derogatory imagery depicting them or the marginal status afforded them. The turn of the century and a new industrialized era had brought with it a new consumption ethic that was supported by modern methods of transportation and of mass communication. African American leaders detected opportunity within this developing system and urged their communities to build and strengthen themselves economically in an effort to assert themselves in other areas in which they sought inclusion and equal representation. These leaders began urging their communities to establish their own businesses and to serve the growing black consumer population. Black publications, which had begun to build even in pre-Civil War America, began to press advertisers to recognize the growing power of the Black consumer market and to attend to them with more realistic representations that did not fall guilty of the stereotypical standbys.

Wartime migration reformulated the black consumer market further. As blacks moved to the north and to urban centers searching for better wages and better acceptance, they also reconceptualized black identity and contributed to the American landscape with various expressions of this new identity. They did so through unique sounds of African American jazz and the artistic expressions of the Harlem Renaissance articulated a new sense of racial pride for the aging first generations of Black Americans born free. However, these sounds and images in
their authentic forms were not to become a part of mainstream America for decades. As radio was introduced in the 1920s and disseminated in homes across America in the 1930s, many of the same stereotypes that had been found in print transitioned onto radio. And despite America’s fascination with the sounds of jazz, white America co-opted and profited from these sounds, while the African Americans who created them were relegated for the most part to black-oriented media options and were marginalized.

While the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were times of intensified interest in African American markets, as was reflected in increased research into these markets, there was still a great amount of resistance to black consumers. Many advertisers maintained the belief that they could reach blacks through mainstream media and, despite a great deal of evidence showing otherwise, that most blacks did not have enough discretionary income to be viable consumers anyway. Despite this resistance, African American leaders and publishers like Claude Barnett and John H. Johnson continued to push for more research and to urge companies to attend more closely to black markets. As a result, some national advertisers did begin placing advertisements into Black publications, but these ads were the same ones developed for white consumers and did not speak directly to the publications’ black audiences. Overall, depictions of African Americans remained problematic and few through the 1930s. But, by that time, African American leaders were becoming increasingly sophisticated in their approaches to obtain greater recognition and equality.

While America was in the depths of the Great Depression, advertisers began to realize that they could not afford to turn away patronage based on long-standing prejudices. Black leaders seized this opportunity and implemented a series of efforts that culminated in the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns of the 1930s. African Americans were aware of their
economic power, of what it could do to advance them in American society, and they were not afraid to use it. Despite a change in Americans’ focus as a result of World War II, African Americans continued their consumer activism in the 1940s and created organizations such as the NAMD through which they rallied their efforts.

Thus, in post-Civil War America, African Americans endured long-running battles for inclusion and representation. They leveraged the cultural impact of the uniquely Black sounds and images of music and art, and they realized the tremendous potential of their economic force. In building African American businesses and pressing mainstream advertisers with the developing growth of Black, urban markets and increased research into these markets, they began to build, though sometimes slowly and rarely without resistance, the momentum that would propel the Civil Rights Movement of the late-1950s and 1960s.
Notes


3 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 2.


10 Ibid., 21


Marquette, *Brands, Trademarks and Good Will: The Story of the Quaker Oats Company*, 138-139.


Kerwin Kofi Charles, Erik Hurst and Nikolai Roussanov, *Conspicuous Consumption and Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007); This concept is important in the context of the history of African Americans and consumption because a number of sources have claimed that the African American market is more conscious about brands and less willing to accept substitutes than are Whites. While the argument has been made that African Americans are more vulnerable to the temptations of market practices that instill otherwise meaningless goods with meaning well beyond their use value, others have demonstrated the historical and socio-cultural rationale behind this notion as it bears out in contemporary terms. For example, K.K. Charles, E. Hurst, and N. Roussanov, *Conspicuous Consumption and Race*, found that in fact African Americans and Hispanics do spend more money on conspicuous or visible goods than do comparable Whites; additionally, they found that differences in reference group income can account for most of the differences. Other authors have argued that these differences could be attributed to the fact that Black Americans could not rely on fair and equal service and could not trust the quality of goods being sold to them and, to cope with marketplace discrimination, they turned to brand names they could trust.; Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry*, 44.

Ibid., 44.

Ibid., 4-5.


Ibid., 9.


Ibid.; Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*.


Ibid., 135.


Ibid., 176.


Ibid., 191.

Ibid., 190-193.


Ibid., 194.

Ibid., 195.

Ibid., 190.

Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 41.

Ibid., 41.

Barlow, *Commercial and Noncommercial Radio*, 228.


Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 44.


Ibid., 29.

Ibid., 8-9.


Ibid., 29.

Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*.


Ibid., 78.

Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 60.


Ibid., 236.


Ibid., 170.


111 Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 60.

112 Ibid., 60.


118 Barlow, *Commercial and Noncommercial Radio*, 205.


120 Barlow, *Commercial and Noncommercial Radio*, 229.

121 Ibid., 229.


128 Ibid., 3.


130 Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 60.

131 Ibid., 32.

132 Ibid., 32.


136 Ibid., 49.


140 Ibid., 63-64.

141 Ibid., 65.

142 Ibid., 72.

143 Ibid., 83.

144 Ibid., 41.

145 Ibid., 42-43.

146 Ibid., 43.

147 Ibid., 45-46.

148 Ibid., 46.

149 Ibid., 44; As Jason Chambers recounts in his book *Madison Avenue and the Color Line* (2008), Johnson discussed the importance of brand name goods to black consumers in a 1949 editorial in his Ebony magazine. The editorial was entitled, “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs.” For a more detailed discussion of this, see Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry*, 44.

150 Ibid., 43.

151 Ibid., 47.

152 Ibid., 19.

153 Ibid., 19.


159 Ibid., 39.


161 Ibid., 108.


CHAPTER 3: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND MARKETS, 1950s-1980s

Introduction

Chapter Two chronicled the hardships and successes of African Americans—planted in the 1700s with early American slave advertising and proceeding through the early 1950s with the seeds of the Civil Rights Movement—in garnering greater inclusion in consumer realms and in struggling to transform the symbolism and imagery by which they were characterized. It concluded with the 1940s and early 1950s, during which time the foundation was laid across a variety of mediums for greater and more representative African American presence that would, as many believed, be the path to the achievement of civil liberties. Indeed, the social and political achievements of the coming Civil Rights Movement were indebted in no small part to the economic advancement for which many in the African American community had fought.

This chapter continues that history by examining the major initiatives towards representation during the Civil Rights movement, the environment in which they developed, and what kind of change they affected in subsequent years. As struggles for civil rights met greater attention in mainstream America, activists also called for greater attention to representations of African Americans in media as important vessels for and reflections of positive change. Additionally, this chapter explores various communication media and forms that were important in providing voice for African Americans, as well as the political and social environments in which they existed.

Civil Rights and Consumer Rights: Late 1950s-1970

The 1960s in advertising histories is known for the Creative Revolution of the industry. But on a broader scale, the 1960s were met with sweeping social, political and cultural change.
The seemingly unfettered prosperity of the 1950s had only served to quell the growing disillusionment with the American government’s failure to alleviate racial and social injustice.\(^1\)

The 1960 Presidential election was in many ways a demonstration of the newfound African American influence, as the political movement toward Democratic nominee John F. Kennedy provided the margin of votes that helped elect him.\(^2\) Kennedy’s attention to civil rights issues had attracted many voters who might otherwise have gone with Republican nominee Richard Nixon.\(^3\)

Despite fervent opposition from Southern powers within his party, Kennedy proceeded to push various civil rights enactments, including the strongest civil rights legislation to date that, when stymied in Congress, inspired Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous 1963 “I have a dream” speech before the Lincoln Memorial.\(^4\)

After Kennedy’s assassination in November of that year, Lyndon B. Johnson pushed the bill through Congress in a tribute to Kennedy, creating the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which was considered “the culmination of the civil rights movement at that time.”\(^5\) Included in the 1964 Civil Rights Act were Title VI and Title VII, which required that federal agencies allocating financial assistance must do so free of discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. Federal organizations such as the Small Business Administration, established in 1953, began to target blacks as part of their obligation to abide by the new legislation.\(^6\) In tandem with the Civil Rights Act, President Johnson’s Economic Opportunity Act established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to support an increase in black employment and the Office of Economic Opportunity, which helped to guide black businesspeople through loan programs designed to provide business assistance to poor, inner-city blacks.\(^7\) Despite the fact that these measures to aid small businesses still provided significantly disproportionate support in favor of white businesspeople, they met resistance from opponents who argued that they preferentially
treated African Americans. Regardless, many considered these efforts largely in and of
themselves ineffective; however, they did offer an opportunity for national civil rights and local
community-based organizations who were able to leverage Johnson’s political moves “to
promote the economic empowerment of black communities in creating their own programs.”

For example, in 1962 Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference
(SCLC) founded Operation Breadbasket in Atlanta and in 1966 expanded to Chicago under the
direction of the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Operation Breadbasket was created to put “bread,
money and income in the baskets of black and poor people.” As the program developed, it
established a mission of promoting both black employment and black business, targeting both
black and white establishments through their efforts.

Thus, among the issues of the 1960s that came to the forefront were the civil rights and
economic opportunities of African Americans, and these issues would have a tremendous impact
in the following decades. Robert Weems recounts an August 5, 1961 Business Week story
entitled “New Business Ways in the South,” in which a department store manager was quoted as
saying, “After this eating thing has settled down, we’re going to have more upheaval. It’s a
social revolution, and we can’t have it painlessly.” Average Americans understood that the
nation was on the precipice of a revolution. This social revolution coalesced on a variety of
fronts, from the feminist movement to the consumer movement to the youth hippie movement;
the issue of civil rights was at the heart of this momentous social upheaval.

Indeed, these were the years of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, “sit-ins” and
“freedom riders,” integration of public spaces, riots, and a new approach to being black, typified
in style by “Afros” and in such phraseology as “Black is beautiful.” Another common theme of
the era, drawn in no small way from the 1930s “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns
and subsequent black consumer activism, was the theme “Be Black. Buy Black.” Equal opportunities for employment and consumption were driving forces of change. The civil rights protests in the early 1960s were a direct result of unequal employment practices, consumption opportunities, and inaccurate representations that disadvantaged minorities. A number of scholars have argued that the impetus for change in American society arose from the pragmatism of businesses in recognizing both the benefits of hiring and targeting African Americans, but also the repercussions of not doing so. Increasingly, U.S. companies, recognizing the importance of black consumers to their business success, were instrumental in guiding the American public through the social changes of the 1960s. Therefore, in response to this growing sense of racial pride of 1960s activism, American companies co-opted black culture and began promoting it to both white and black consumers with messages about “soul music” (the former rhythm and blues of previous eras) and “soul food”; but they suffered from a lack of authenticity. To alleviate the problem, these companies turned once again to black consultants. But even as some advertising professionals were not taking seriously the concerns and culture of black shoppers, others, and particularly those in integrated agencies, were assuming the role of changing representations and improving the symbolism of black Americans in advertising.

According to Kern-Foxworth, blacks in the 1960s increasingly were tackling the derogatory language and imagery of advertising and the symbolic power that it held. Certainly to this point, after years of disparaging stereotypes, negative images of blacks had become embedded in the advertising landscape and had become fixtures in many American homes. Therefore, as the fight for civil liberties surged, several groups began pressing businesses and advertising agencies to integrate blacks into their marketing and advertising strategies and imagery and to do so in ways that more accurately represented African American life and experience. They wanted to
break advertisers of the erroneous assumption that blacks could be reached by white-oriented messages and did not have unique market needs and desires; perhaps more so, they wanted to eradicate the underlying prejudice on which these strategies were based—the ongoing, though unwarranted, fear that whites would be offended by the depiction of an integrated and fully-respected African American.

Organizations such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and individuals like Jesse Jackson, who saw this as an issue of civil liberties, were at the helm of a movement to change advertising representations and compel U.S. companies to incorporate black models. These civil rights groups met with the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) and other advertising entities to urge them to take up the issues of black consumers and promote change within the industry they represented. When these appeals proved inadequate, black leaders threatened boycotts and petitioned through legal channels such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to take measures opposing the discriminatory practices manifested in much advertising and media content. In 1964, the NAACP called for the top 100 advertising agencies to examine media practices in Mississippi and urge their clients to reprove the media that did not uphold principles of civil liberties; in 1962, a New York mayoral commission on job advancement directly encouraged advertisers and agencies to integrate their advertising; in 1966 and 1967, the New York State Commission on Human Rights held hearings that resulted in hundreds more black employees in top advertising agencies, in positions where they could influence the representation of blacks in advertising messages; and in 1968, the Kerner Commission reported that the mass media dominated by whites was an inadequate system and required integration.
President Johnson established the interracial, bi-partisan National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (NACCD) in 1967 in the wake of riots in American cities like Watts, Newark, Harlem and Detroit. President Johnson was criticized for comprising the commission of moderates; but as Tom Wicker of the New York Times argued, “A commission made up of militants, or even influenced by them, could not conceivably have spoken with a voice so effective, so sure to be heard by white, moderate, responsible America.”

The NACCD released a sweeping report, commonly called the Kerner Report after commission chair Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois, that blamed white racism as the core cause of the riots, indicated that black resentment of police stemmed from perceptions of police brutality and harassment of blacks, and indicted mass media for its role in depicting African Americans as subordinate members of American society.

The report argued that most whites were oblivious to the destructive environment of the racial ghetto, yet nonetheless were “deeply implicated” in the circumstances that led to conditions in America’s ghettos; further, these social and economic conditions created patterns of continued disadvantage for blacks in comparison to whites. The report concluded, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

They did not dance around the causes: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

Recognizing a complex set of social, political and economic conditions that led to rioting and outrage over the conditions experienced by many black Americans, the report suggested that “frustrated hopes are the residue of the unfulfilled expectations aroused by the great judicial and legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the dramatic struggle for equal rights in the South” and what the rioters were seeking was “fuller participation in the social order and the
material benefits enjoyed by the majority of American citizens.” Though none of the Kerner Commission report’s major proposals were carried out, the information it provided about the impact of media on the African American condition, offered an opportunity for blacks in demanding more realistic depictions of their situations, life roles and their relationships. Just as African American leaders had been looking at specific agencies and companies to target in their efforts to gain greater recognition for blacks in advertising, they also took aim at specific media for their failure to reflect the changing mores of the civil rights era.

Back in the 1940s, radio had been the site of a variety of programs that took a critical look at racism and segregation as the black community fused their goals with the patriotic war-era goals. The government’s War Department made a strategic attempt to implement a program of integration into some of the nation’s primetime programs. But when the war ended, radio broadcasts returned to “business as usual” and integration of the airwaves took a recess. The popularity of the rhythm and blues music was overshadowed by the 1950s white youth rock ‘n roll sounds that it had inspired; rhythm and blues was marginalized to black-only radio stations and re-coined “soul music.” But the mental shift occurring in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s paved the way for an increasing number of black-oriented radio stations to speak to the still-growing urban listening audience. Until the “Top 40” radio format later upset the control that deejays had over radio content, black deejays commanded a great deal of influence over the airwaves. On these “soul music” stations, deejays promoted the socially conscious music of such artists as Aretha Franklin and James Brown, they introduced new artists to their local airwaves, and they held significant sway over the music industry. However, even while deejays induced a variety of changes in radio, African Americans were impeded from commercial radio ownership; though this would change in the 1970s, the ultimate control over content on black-
oriented radio stations still rested in the hands of white owners through the 1960s. Therefore, even after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, when radio stations responded to increasing pressures and began airing series that featured African Americans, many viewed these programs as simply accommodationist and lacking in authenticity. But while radio was a place of contention over racial issues in the 1960s, television and print were the more contested media in the 1960s.

Generally speaking, print advertising appeared to reflect more adequately and promptly the changing social environment. A 1963 print ad for the New York Telephone Company appeared in the New York Herald Tribune and other local newspapers featuring a black model. This was recorded as a significant news event in a variety of papers as the first time a general circulation publication had featured a black model in a non-disparaging manner—indeed, in an empowered position. Despite the hopefulness provided by this incident of integration, significant discrepancies persisted in advertising—particularly in television.

In 1963, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sought to change the image of African Americans by pressing for integration of television commercials and higher employment of blacks in advertising and media industries. This effort, called the TV Image Campaign, was driven by the belief that advertising was playing a significant role in the oppression of blacks and that with some important changes in the advertising industry, the medium instead could improve the image of blacks in America. In a few short months, CORE had succeeded in securing agreements to integrate African Americans into sponsored programs and advertising from three of the largest American companies—Lever Brothers, Colgate-Palmolive, and Proctor & Gamble—and were preparing to meet with many more. Conversely, the following year General Motors announced it would withdraw sponsorship of “Bonanza” if it featured an African American as a guest star; while they later reversed this decision under pressure from NAACP
and NBC, this incident was a prominent display of the tenuous nature of gains made by such organizations as CORE. Further, a 1964 study of television published by the New York Ethical Society demonstrated that despite some improvements, the television industry was failing to reflect political and social changes of the era. This trend persisted in the frequency of African Americans in advertising. In 1953, one of the first studies of frequency examined a series of print publications between 1949-1950, indicating that in the very small percentage of ads that contained blacks (just over 0.5 percent), they were almost always cast in unskilled labor positions. This study was reproduced in 1970 by a different author, who concluded that there had been a slight increase in the use of black models and they were not as heavily stereotyped in his survey from 1967-1968. But even these positive conclusions were contested. Authors David Colfax and Susan Sternberg (1972) argued that a mere shift in racial stereotypes had occurred, rather than genuine representations of African American life and experiences. Similar and more expansive studies were conducted on the frequency of blacks in both print and television advertising with similar results.

Thus, given African American leaders’ belief that one important inroad to changing the limited appearance and demeaning representations in advertising would be through gaining employment in advertising agencies, it is not surprising that in 1966, CORE joined forces with the Consumer Information Services (CIS) to protest defamatory and segregated advertising and media; in doing so, they cast their gaze on the lead advertising agency for Proctor & Gamble which, at the time, was Benton & Bowles. They chastised the agencies for failing to invest in the black community despite significant revenues gained directly from blacks, but their ultimate goal was to increase employment of African Americans in the advertising industry. In 1968, a survey conducted for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders indicated that 86%
of U.S. employers felt obligated to make a strong effort to employ minorities; but when they had to rate the importance of this in a list of other social issues, the issue was rated as less serious than it was by a general sample of the population.\textsuperscript{54} This indicates that even though businessmen professed a dedication to increasing minority representation in business, they still were not aligned with the general public in their sense of urgency for this issue. This evidence is somewhat disheartening in light of the intense scrutiny lodged at businesses by government and civil rights activists, who were demanding change in hiring practices and had set their sights on advertising and other communication industries.\textsuperscript{55} Even so, the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s did produce substantial and fundamental changes in the way Americans and American businesses approached the black community.\textsuperscript{56} As Steven M. Gelber wrote in his groundbreaking work on the social role of businesses in integrating African Americans into American culture:

“Through their protests, American Negroes were able to bring about increased government pressure for Black employment. The combination of Black and government demands changed the attitudes of the White public, which in turn created the setting in which the business community could alter its traditional discriminatory practices. As a result of Black activism society as a whole came to accept employment discrimination as a social problem, and therefore business attempts to eliminate unfair employment practices became socially responsible activity. A thread of corporate social responsibility runs throughout American business history, but it was not until the late 1960s that the business community could count employment integration in its census of good deeds.”\textsuperscript{57}

African American employment within the advertising industry did appear to have experienced a dramatic upsurge in the late 1960s in direct response to pressures by government and civil rights organizations. According to one study conducted by AAAA, minority employment in the fifteen largest advertising agencies more than doubled in a two year period in the late 1960s.

The period between 1967 and 1975 has been called the “Golden Age” for African American agencies, which had begun opening their doors at a rate previously unmatched.\textsuperscript{58} While many of them would not survive the economic environment of the late 1970s experienced throughout the
industry, some not only survived but thrived and offered to the advertising canvas more authentic representations of African Americans. During this same period, both the advertising industry and black leaders were experiencing shifts in their approach to blacks and advertising. Within the industry, agencies had already taken some significant steps from simply hiring African Americans to actively recruiting and training them. Sparked by the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and particularly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the notion of “Black Power” began to take root. Despite criticisms of black power being invested with reverse racism, leaders of this movement argued that it was about the promotion of a positive black self-identity, of pride, and of further development of black political and economic power independent of the historically oppressive, white-dominated mainstream institutions. These political ideas were linked artistically through the Black Arts Movement, which expressed the violence of the era while at the same time rejecting the “white aesthetic” and promoting a liberatory vision of black beauty and pride. The black arts movement was an effort to regain black expression and re-present a black aesthetic rooted in black experience and as seen through the eyes of African Americans. Prompted by this changing mindset, black leaders began modifying their traditional arguments for integration and replacing them with calls for representations that were unique to African Americans and that arose from genuine knowledge reflecting their lives and experiences through advertising.

However, the employment growth of the late 1960s was not replicated in the 1970s, as the attention of Americans and their government turned to the ensuing political and economic turmoil and the spirit of change of the 1960s gave way as many of the previous stereotypes subtly made their way back into the advertising landscape. As did many upstart advertising agencies in the 1960s and 1970s, the tides flowed and ebbed for black-owned agencies.
Nonetheless, the impact of African American agencies in the “Golden Era” laid the foundation for future inroads into the industry and for significant changes in its approach to representing blacks in its texts.\textsuperscript{66}

**Prelude to Hip-Hop and A Changing Commercial Culture: 1970s**

The 1970s were times of continued social turbulence. The presidential election of 1968 prefigured the political and economic disquiet to come. Republican Richard Nixon won by a narrow margin in a strongly contested election. While Nixon espoused some rather progressive ideologies, which became realities through regulatory legislation in areas ranging from environmentalism to civil rights, Nixon also sought party realignment with southern whites notorious for their opposition to civil rights and New Deal legislation.\textsuperscript{67} Nixon’s administration was plagued with the drawn-out conflict in Vietnam. Despite winning a second term on promises of phasing out U.S. involvement, he instead stepped up war efforts between 1969 and 1971.\textsuperscript{68}

With a heavy burden on the poor, the Vietnam War had a particularly grave impact on black communities whose faith in American politics was only further shaken.\textsuperscript{69} As the Vietnam War dragged to its conclusion, the Watergate scandal shook all Americans’ faith in the political system, and growing inflation, accompanied by federal deficits, undermined the strength of the economic system on which the consumption ethic rested. While the post-World War II prosperity had come to an end, the post-war urbanization trends continued as the disparity between blacks and whites in urban centers grew and was further exaggerated by white suburbanization.\textsuperscript{70}

In his seminal work *The Disadvantaged Consumer* (1975), Alan Andreasen chronicles the consumer problems faced by the disadvantaged—the poor and black—and proposes solutions to alleviate these problems. The issues addressed by Andreasen in this book and his other works are
worth some attention here. Andreasen’s work stems from a recognition that both the advocates and critics of the consumer movement of the 1960s had disconnected many of the concerns taken up by the movement from their roots in heavily disadvantaged populations.71 Indeed, in an article entitled “The Differing Nature of Consumerism in the Ghetto” (1976), Andreasen argues that the consumer movement of the 1960s was a white, middle-class movement and as such lacked the capacity to truly understand the nature of and therefore improve the circumstances of the truly disadvantaged—the poor and black.72

This third wave of consumerism in the United States began with the writings of Vance Packard in the late 1950s and was propelled by Ralph Nader and the auto safety hearings of 1965 and 1966.73 While he concedes that all consumers are to some extent disadvantaged, Andreasen is concerned with the question of whether the group that he has chosen to call disadvantaged—“the individuals who are particularly handicapped in achieving adequate value for their consumer dollar in the urban marketplace because of their severely restricted incomes, their minority racial status, their old age, and/or their difficulties with language”74—have problems in the consumer realm that are qualitatively different than those of the rest of society. He concluded that in fact they were qualitatively different and that because of this, a white, middle-class consumer movement would not be equipped to battle the problems of poor, urban blacks,75 echoing the sentiments expressed in the Kern Commission Report of the white community’s blind eye to the destructive conditions of the racial ghetto.

The historical and contemporary oppression and exclusion experienced by the black community, Andreasen argued, created “a set of shared experiences and views of the world that set blacks apart from the rest of society in terms of the basic goals and behavioral patterns they bring to the marketplace.”76 The statistics of black urban poor were disheartening. In 1970, the 8
million black poor made up 30% of all poor, despite the fact that blacks overall accounted for only about 11% of the total population. Andreasen concluded that without the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the situation might be even worse for black Americans. While Chapters 1 and 6 deal further with the issues of “disadvantage,” it is important to note here, as Andreasen does, that analyses of poor black consumers tend to be derived from middle-class standards of rationality and without proper heed to the conditions of poor black consumers and that these analyses rest on stereotypes. That is, “An integral part of the popular stereotype of blacks in America is that they are ‘as a race’ happy-go-lucky spendthrifts, living on the pleasures of the moment, paying little heed to future needs.” As the black community had to this point long realized, many of these stereotypes had been created and perpetuated through representations in mass media and, in particular, advertising. The importance of black presence in the advertising industry, therefore, remained as crucial as ever and yet, as the Society of Black Communicators decried in the late 1970s, the number of black advertising agencies was decreasing.

Unfortunately, in combination with a variety of industry and economic issues, by the mid-1970s, when businesses were struggling through the worst economic environment since the Great Depression, many companies dropped their black-owned advertising agencies in an effort to economize. However, some unanticipated advances arose out of these conditions. Driven to find areas where they could increase their revenues, many companies began to look in earnest at black consumers as legitimate and lucrative markets. “This interest sparked the emergence of new Black agencies, media vehicles, and spokespersons,” explains advertising historian Jason Chambers, “helping raise the visibility of Black consumers and the Black agency segment even further.” Two African American agencies in particular, Burrell, Inc. and UniWorld, benefited from these changes and they emerged promoting new concepts about the black consumer market
that stemmed from shifts in overall social goals. For example, in running his agency, Tom Burrell espoused a philosophy of “positive realism”—a concept with its roots in earlier leaders such as Claude Barnett and David Sullivan, Burrell argued that advertising should use positive and affirmative images of blacks in common circumstances, as they really are.

Concurrently, black organizations were continuing to push for the elimination of racism in and greater employment for blacks in advertising. In 1970, the NAACP appealed to the FCC to examine the continued racism in advertising. In 1975, Vernon Jordan of the National Urban League reinitiated the charge against discrimination in the employment practices of advertising agencies; and prominent figures like Jesse Jackson, along with voices from the variety of coalitions he formed, criticized the practices of major corporations like Coca-Cola, an approach they would continue well into the 1990s with companies such as Nike. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth argues, “what occurred as a result is what we now refer to as ‘integrated advertising.’” While that may be, it seems that what African American activists were seeking at this point, however, went beyond “integrated advertising” to form a deeper and more authentic understanding of black consumers—one that appealed to black pride and that depicted their lives through the “positive realism” espoused by Burrell. Janette Dates argues, “As we have seen, most often the portrayal of Blacks in advertising showed an insensitivity to the African American consumer, and a lack of understanding of the market,” particularly as the belief persisted among many advertisers having argued that black consumers could be reached through general market (i.e., white-oriented) appeals. But gradually through the 1970s, marketers appeared to gain more appropriate understanding of black consumer markets and realize that they were not monolithic and could not all be targeted with one message and certainly not one message designed for white audiences.
White marketers could have taken a cue from recession-surviving black-owned agencies that understood and capitalized on the diversity of the African American market. As Jason Chambers writes of Vince Cullers Advertising, “The development of Soul marketing also exemplifies how Cullers and other black professionals highlighted divisions within the black consumer market. Soul marketing was not applicable to every single person… [therefore], it could not reach every piece of the black consumer market; indeed, it would sometimes alienate blacks from a product.”

But as the advertising industry began to respond to these pressures to more appropriately target African American consumers, these very same practices were under scrutiny. This scrutiny arose in large part from the structural developments of the industry and its treatment of African Americans—targeting to black consumers primarily was conducted by black-owned agencies or by “special markets” units within mainstream agencies. Some argued that this was not an improvement over long-standing social issues, but rather that it constituted segregation in reverse. Proponents within the industry responded that targeted marketing was exactly the kind of deference that black leaders and consumers had been seeking throughout the 20th century.

Arguments against target marketing would resurface in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in contention with specific kinds of target marketing, particularly those that singled out urban, black consumers for “sin” products such as tobacco and alcohol. Given the specific circumstances surrounding such products, however, these concerns would have greater legitimacy and weight because of the potential and actual negative consequences to the black community that arise from specific inherent characteristics of those products. But in the meantime, target marketing of black consumers “had the support of both the changing emphasis of the civil rights movement from integration to nationalism as well as developing marketing theories that legitimized its use.”
Across a variety of media, the movement towards the incorporation of African Americans, with previous history as an indication, would be tenuous. For example, the film industry did manage to incorporate blacks more fully into major movies roles during the 1970s. But if movies are any accurate depiction of reality, then the reality of blacks was filled with sex, violence and crime. Such were the themes in particular of the “blaxploitation” films of the era. But, as Robert Weems argues, what these films more accurately convey is the fleecing of African American moviegoers. As in other media, the profits collected from these films went primarily into the pockets of white businessmen. However, “blaxploitation” films did offer some benefit to African Americans in the recording industry. These films were musically scored by popular African American recording artists—Shaft was scored by Isaac Hayes, for which he earned an Academy Award; Superfly was scored by Curtis Mayfield, whose soundtrack album went platinum; and Troubleman was scored by Marvin Gaye.

In the 1970s, African Americans made important inroads into the music industry with an increase in the number of black-owned and operated radio stations. The control over broadcasting content that comes with ownership status gave blacks significantly more influence over the tastes and movement of youth music. In particular, they allowed black deejays considerable weight over styles of music on the radio, which they complemented as well with influence on the streets. In the case of hip hop, street deejays at house parties and later in clubs were instrumental not only in cultivating it but in developing it.

Hip hop is more than a music form; it is a cultural movement that developed in the “gang-ridden, drug-infested streets” of the Bronx in New York City in the late 1960s and 1970s. It began as gatherings—“basketball court parties”—that were centered around internationally-inspired musical sounds and were made up of urban youth who were lacking other positive social
outlets. Clive Campbell, a.k.a. DJ Kool Herc, is considered by many to be the founder of hip-hop. Having grown up with the unique musical forms of his native Jamaica, he brought those sounds with him when his family immigrated to the Bronx in 1967. In his book *Hip Hop Culture* (2006), Emmett G. Price draws the lineage of hip-hop’s success from the Harlem Renaissance and similar art movements in various cities across America throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He argues that the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the artistic expression of the Black Power movement, revisited the ideologies originally expressed in the Renaissance movements earlier in the century. But post-World War II Bronx had seen significant decline from its pre-War standing as a space to realize the “American Dream.” By the 1970s, the Bronx was considered to be “the worst neighborhood in America” and was rife with drugs, crime and gang warfare. According to Price, “Gang affiliation offered the social status that money could not buy.” A seminal moment in gang warfare occurred in December 1971 when hundreds of gang members met at the Bronx Boys Club to discuss alternatives to violence and at which a truce was called. A 14-year-old Afrika Bambaataa, who would become a central figure in the rise of hip-hop, was present at that meeting as the rising leader of the Black Spades. Bambaataa believed that the importance of hip-hop was in its ability to empower and change the lives of the otherwise disenfranchised. Indeed, as one author writes:

“Afrika Bambaataa, recognized by many as one of the central figures in the rise of hip hop, has consistently maintained over the years that the culture’s political potency can be traced back to the early days of the movement. As a pioneering DJ, Bambaataa experimented with the notion that in addition to being a source of amusement hip hop could also be a force for social change. As much as anyone, he understood why hip hop mattered in the lives of ordinary youths. Hip hop’s real power and true significance, Bambaataa professes, resides in its capacity to empower young people to want to change their lives. Before many others did he believed there was something notably serious about the pleasure-seeking ambitions that characterized hip hop back in the day.”
Hip-hop offered an alternative as turntable, dance, graffiti, and lyrical wars in many ways were substituted for gang warfare. Early DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash “battled” each other in turf wars throughout the Bronx, simulating much of the same bravado embedded in gang behavior but with much less deadly and much more positive and empowering outcomes.

Lisa Sullivan calls figures like Bambaattaa, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel, and Kool DJ Hercs the “bridge generation” because they formed the passage from the civil rights generation to the hip-hop generation. The hip-hop generation, then, is commonly considered to be the generation of black Americans born post-Civil Rights and, as such, is the first generation to grow up free of legalized segregation and with a sense, though somewhat conflicted, of “authentic” blackness. Yet many youth living in impoverished inner-city environments failed to see how the promises of the Civil Rights Movement had been realized for them.

As a movement, the expressions of hip hop were deeply rooted in the urban African American experience—hip hop was a manifestation of that experience. The voice of hip hop in the 1970s was a politicized voice. As one author explains,

“Hip hop evolved during the 1970s as a liberation movement in the form of a diverse culture; it was a next-generation civil (human) rights movement sparked by ostracized, marginalized, and oppressed inner-city youth... It is a means and method of expression thriving on social commentary, political critique, economic analysis, religious exegesis, and street awareness while combating long-standing issues of racial prejudice, cultural persecution, and social, economic, and political disparities.”

Continuing through the 1980s and 1990s, artists and activists used hip-hop culture to show the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement—“its inability to satisfy the aspirations of the masses.” Through hip hop, these youth expressed rebellion against the social institutions that had for so long limited them, they exerted control over their own stylistic expressions,
and ultimately they created an entire industry over which many of them maintained artistic and economic control.

As a musical form, hip hop deejays had started out by looping breaks—“the most percussive portion of each record”\textsuperscript{115}—on turntables to create new and innovative sounds from compilations of existing music. MCs soon took up the rhythmic style with “rapping” and by 1978 their importance on the cultural scene was outgrowing that of the DJs.\textsuperscript{116} While the definition of hip-hop is somewhat contested,\textsuperscript{117} hip-hop is generally considered to be made up of at four or five components: music (DJing), dance, graphic art (graffiti), oration (MCing or rapping), dance (b-boying and b-girling), and fashion.\textsuperscript{118} In 1979, the Fatback Band and Sugar Hill Gang recorded two of the first rap albums. The phenomenal success, particularly of the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” album, drew outsiders to the hip hop scene.\textsuperscript{119} The cycle of “innovation, success, competition and crossover”\textsuperscript{120} of black artistic development across a variety of mediums was evident, as well, with hip hop. Somewhat of a mixed blessing, hip hop was “discovered” by white performers and audiences, as well as white media which have a knack for “ripping any cultural phenomenon out of its cultural roots.”\textsuperscript{121} At the same time, the appropriation of hip hop and its style into mainstream culture meant that it was here to stay,\textsuperscript{122} and its increasing influence into the 1980s and 1990s would have a global impact, particularly in the consumer sphere. Developments in advertising and other media in the 1970s—and activism such as the NAACP’s appeals to the FCC against discrimination in advertising—would help to pave the inroads for hip hop and the popularity of African American hip hop artists, as a few black actors began appearing in mainstream media in print and on screen endorsing a variety of products.

In 1973, General Foods hired Bill Cosby to endorse Jell-O. Ford Motor Company followed in Jell-O’s footsteps in 1976, hiring Cosby on as spokesperson, as later did Ideal Toys, Texas
Instruments, Coca Cola, Kodak and other corporations. Research showed Cosby to be one of the most believable and warm celebrity figures.\textsuperscript{123} Cosby soon shared company with a host of other African American celebrity endorsers: singers such as Whitney Houston for Diet Coke, Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie and Ray Charles for Pepsi-Cola, and sports figures such as O.J. Simpson, William “The Refrigerator” Perry, Herschel Walker, and later Michael Jordan.\textsuperscript{124} While these were viewed as strong and positive representations long sought by the African American community, research in the 1970s and 1980s gave a different picture of the situation. Research shifted from merely looking at incidences of depiction to looking at the types of products black models used, the settings in which they were found, and the occupations in which they were depicted. These studies demonstrated that if Americans were to view their world according to advertising, then successful blacks would be confined to professions as athletes and entertainers.\textsuperscript{125} But increasingly into the 1980s, representations of African Americans in mainstream media increased.

However, as representations in media signified some positive changes, urban blacks felt increasingly estranged in the political and economic systems. Through the 1970s, black Americans had increased their representation in the ranks of elected officials, with particular inroads in local elections.\textsuperscript{126} But confounding circumstances associated with the economic downturn of the 1970s took a particularly hard toll on urban blacks. On one hand they were some of the hardest hit economically by the crisis; on the other hand, the recession helped to carve a path towards the right wing politics of Ronald Reagan that reduced support for civil rights expansions and many of the programs that had helped to provide support and opportunity for the African American community.\textsuperscript{127}
Images of Violence and Hardship: 1980s and 1990s

“A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling on you but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go through
You'll grow in the ghetto, living second rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alley way”

Ronald Reagan’s election to the presidency in 1980 signaled a change in the political milieu with a “New Right” that sought to reverse or eliminate many of the social welfare programs dating back to the New Deal. These changes were met with increasing instability in many inner-city neighborhoods, whose residents were predominantly black. The Reagan-era approach, alternately called “supply-side” or “trickle-down” economics—or as dubbed by challenger George W.H. Bush in the primaries, “voodoo economics”—was to provide incentives for businesses and the wealthy that, as a result of their increased investment, would create more jobs and lower prices for the middle and lower classes.

However, some have argued that these benefits for middle and lower classes did not come to fruition. For example, by December 1982, unemployment had risen by 10.8% and at a rate for African Americans that was twice that of white Americans. As the 1980s progressed, the income gap between the wealthiest and the rest of the population, particularly the poor, continued to increase. Black conservatives were appointed to key positions in both the Reagan and Bush Administration. These appointments and the conservative agenda in general were approached by conservative blacks as an opportunity to be viewed as respected individuals rather than as stereotypes; but the majority of blacks viewed the conservative agenda as an attack on civil rights, arguing that blacks appointees did not exercise meaningful power within the Republican
Party and that their appointments were mere tokenism. In contrast, black politicians within the Democratic Party held significant positions and represented a large and influential constituency. Since Democrats were often the majority in Congress during the Bush-Reagan era, black representation within this party was significant in quelling cutbacks in the civil rights agenda, as demonstrated by the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, and the Fair Housing Act of 1988.

Even as African Americans overall remained the poorest group of Americans, the 1980 census some important improvements in educational opportunities, housing options, and rising incomes. More than ever before were able to realize the opportunities from which they previously were excluded. Continuing the trend of the 1970s, increasingly more blacks ran for and many were elected to political offices across America, from the local to the national level. America’s largest cities elected black mayors, with their numbers rising over six-fold in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, these mayors were met with decreasing budgets and increasing hardship for residents, in large part the result of white business flight to suburban areas and severe federal cutbacks in funds. Between 1982 and 1989, federal funds to cities were reduced from $33.7 billion to $12.1 billion.

On the national scene, a prominent example of political involvement was the rise of civil rights activist Jesse Jackson to presidential nominee in 1984 and again in 1988. Jackson, who had worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Operation Breadbasket, went on to found People United to Save (later changed to Serve) Humanity (PUSH) after King’s death. He appealed to a “rainbow coalition” of disenfranchised people, providing a direct contrast to the effects of Reagan-style politics that he argued had served to further marginalize the already underrepresented.
But with Jackson’s bids at the presidency unsuccessful and with Conservative politics becoming further entrenched with messages that depicted African American youth as criminals, many turned their attention to the disheartening statistics of black incarcerated youth and police brutality. One author argues that “the general white perception of black men as criminals increased following Bush’s election” in part because of campaign programs such as a Bush ad featuring “Willie Horton, a black convict who had raped a white woman while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison.” Jackson and others cried foul and accused the campaign of appealing to white racism, but Bush did not abandon the tactic.

The perceived fear of blacks in the white community and the black community’s perception of the police as symbolizing white dominant culture have a precedent that extends well before the 1980s. The Kerner Commission Report of 1968, for example, found that there was significant distrust of police within urban black communities leading up to the race riots of 1967: “To some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes. The atmosphere of hostility and cynicism is reinforced by a widespread belief among Negroes in the existence of police brutality and in a ‘double standard’ of justice and protection—one for Negroes and one for whites.” The report also found that the government’s response to the race riots had been primarily “to train and equip the police with more sophisticated weapons.” It seems, therefore, that the authors of the report were suggesting that fear was prompting more fear and the resulting responses were fueling greater hardship. Thus, there were a complex set of historical circumstances feeding the political, social and economic environment of the 1980s. Among these enduring issues was the one of mass media representations.
African American participation in the advertising industry has been shown to have an impact on the types of appeals and representations of minority consumers. But in the 1980s, minority representation within the industry was declining. Many advertisers shifted their dollars out of black-owned agencies in favor of mainstream agencies, whose employment numbers demonstrated a decrease in the minority employment. Given that, perhaps it is not surprising that during the 1970s and 1980s, studies of blacks in advertising demonstrated that according to advertising, most successful blacks were either entertainers or athletes. Nonetheless, the use of blacks in advertising was heightened by these black celebrities. While it was not until 1992 when Cover Girl signed its first African American model for mainstream appeal that black female models had high-profile, mainstream contracts, a number of black female entertainers were prevalent on the advertising and marketing scenes in the 1980s. For example, Whitney Houston performed in national spots for Diet Coke and Pepsi sponsored the tour of Tina Turner in 1987. But predominantly the images were of men and in large part they are afforded the credit for heightening the status of African Americans in advertising. Kern-Foxworth credits the 1980s successes of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* album and Bill Cosby’s top-ranked “The Cosby Show” with developments in the use of blacks in advertising. While Bill Cosby had already entered the advertising landscape in the 1970s as spokesperson for such high-profile brands Del Monte, General Foods’ Jell-O, Ford, and Coca-Cola, Michael Jackson’s major commercial successes ushered in the 1980s. Jackson’s *Thriller* album was released in 1982 and became one of the most widely sold albums in history. In the wake of this success and throughout the 1980s, PepsiCo hired Jackson for a series of highly publicized and popular advertisements. And of course, Michael Jordan, whose success on the basketball court and in commercial endorsement will be
addressed in great detail in Chapters 4 and 5, amassed more advertising endorsements than any other black athlete up to that time.\textsuperscript{153}

Overall, research showed some improvement both in frequency and role portrayals of African Americans between the 1960s and the 1980s. However, in general, the increase in frequency properly projected neither the proportion of African Americans in the population nor their relative status and spending power.\textsuperscript{154} Recognizing continued problems in the advertising industry regarding its approach to minorities, the Black Media Association in North Carolina began monitoring the advertising industry in the early 1980s. This group, made up of black professionals working in the media industries, began a letter-writing campaign to the advertising industry, addressing both positive and negative actions and portrayals.\textsuperscript{155} These efforts were followed throughout the 1980s by various groups, including small and local organizations, that spoke out against negative representations of blacks in advertising—in employment positions and in the imagery advertisers produced.\textsuperscript{156}

The news media, too, was ambivalent about the progress that had been realized towards greater and more positive representations of African Americans. While some argued “the question of race [had] become pretty well buried,” others argued representations had not changed significantly enough.\textsuperscript{157} Some placed the blame on advertising agencies, suggesting that they were not responding quickly enough to the rest of America despite their client’s interest in maximizing profits regardless of color.\textsuperscript{158} The debate was similarly unsettled in the athletic endorsements. A 1988 \textit{Wall Street Journal} article showed two charts, one with the most popular athletes and one with the top sport endorsers of 1987. While eight of the top ten most popular athletes were black, only one of the top sports endorsers—Michael Jordan—was.\textsuperscript{159} By 1989, \textit{Advertising Age} had said that of the top ten sports endorsers, three were black (Michal Jordan,
Bo Jackson and OJ Simpson) and those numbers would continue to grow; and Brian J. Murphy of the *Sports Marketing Letter* had placed the numbers of African Americans at two of the top five and four of the top 10 sports endorsers. Some argued that even though race may become immaterial at the level of ascent reached by Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson, it is still a major factor for other athletes who have not reached the same heights. But others pointed to the success of Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson with Nike, along with other black athletes whose sports-oriented endorsements had helped propel them to stardom, to argue that the tide was changing for African Americans in advertising, perhaps because a figure like Michael Jordan “almost has the power to change the course of attitudes and thinking all by himself.”

Therefore, many turned to Michael Jordan as a symbol of breakthrough in American race relations.

At the same time, the urban youth of America were developing and deploying their own forms of black representation and expression. In large part, they were doing so through the styles and music of the hip hop industry they were creating—as, in the 1980s, hip-hop began its rise as a global industry. African Americans had long been making significant contributions to American music and to the music industry. Between 1973 and 1983, Berry Gordy’s Motown Records, which he founded in 1959, was ranked as the most successful black company in the country. Gordy founded Motown Records on the tradition of “developing, packaging, marketing and distributing the music of black America. His Motown sound marked not only the first time that black music crossed over into the mainstream white market but also the first time that mainstream music was black music.” Yet, as this history has shown, the popularity and contributions of black artists and music were exploited by white artists who would take over the sounds and by white companies who would take over the profits.
eventually went the way of many before and was sold to white-owned corporations, the company had successfully introduced some of the most influential sounds of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including the Jackson Five, Stevie Wonder, the Temptations, and the Commodores. One noted historian argues, “For more than the past twenty years, the recording industry, more than radio, television, or film, has provided blacks with the best means of advancement into high management positions.” And some artists like Michael Jackson and Prince, who participated in revolutionizing the music industry, were able to gain and maintain autonomy over their own careers.

Hip-hop, too, was subjected to some of the same impositions by white America as previous black music; however, as author Manthia Diawara argues, in making a contrast between rock-and-roll and hip-hop, “[Y]oung blacks have retained financial control over hip-hop, reducing the rest of the world to consumers of its social concerns.” By 1980, on the heels of the 1979 release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang, hip-hop was being recognized as a legitimate money-maker and with the 1984 Fresh Fest tour of Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, Whodini, Fat Boys, and Nucleus grossing $3.5 million, hip-hop was becoming a national phenomenon. The “Golden Age” of hip-hop, between 1987 or 1988 to the mid-1990s, saw the rise of “message” or “political” rap. But the social and political commentary of rap music dated back to its early days and founders. From rap’s first decade in the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, now often referred to as “Old School” or “Back in the Day” and before rap became commercialized, rappers were developing socially conscious messages that grew out of their own hardships and disadvantage in their communities.

Bambaataa organized the Zulu Nation around the principle of political action that would help mobilize and empower disadvantaged and marginalized youth and provide a centralized space
for the expressions of hip hop.\textsuperscript{171} Pioneers Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five are frequently credited with having recorded the first socially conscious raps.\textsuperscript{172} The 1982 success of their hit single, which was later featured in their album of the same name, brought the message of socially conscious rap into the marketplace.\textsuperscript{173} The end of the video for “The Message” subtly takes up an issue that would come to dominate rap music—the issue of police brutality. As Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five stand on a street corner talking, the police arrive, engage them in a brief exchange and push them into the back of the police car:

\begin{verbatim}
Freeze
Don't nobody move or nothin'…
Oh man, we're (Right in there) Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five
What is that, a gang?
No
Shut up
I don't wanna hear your mouth
Shut up
Officer, officer, what is the problem?
You the problem
Hey, you ain't gotta push me man
Get in the car, get in the car
Get in the god...
I said, "Get in the car"…
\end{verbatim}

Rap’s graphic treatment of police brutality, other forms of violence, and of sex made it increasingly controversial.\textsuperscript{174} Despite the antiviolence, antidrug lyrics of many rappers, including KRS-One,\textsuperscript{175} rap’s more violent tendencies created great controversy and fear among both whites and blacks, particularly when crossing generational and economic divides.\textsuperscript{176} The success of Run-DMC, which had “aimed at addressing racism, classism, social neglect, and urban pain”\textsuperscript{177} and had helped to propel the visibility and commercial appeal of rap, was also plagued with the criticisms that they were promoting violence.\textsuperscript{178} These fears were only increased by the misogynistic and defiant messages of “gangsta rap,” the late-1980s and 1990s battles between East Coast and West Coast rappers, the violent incidents at rap concerts across the country, and
violence, gangs and drugs that increasingly became associated with inner-city communities.

But while most people could understand a clear connection between economic depravity, gangs, drugs, and violence, a class of seemingly innocuous consumer products became implicated in the circumstances of inner-city youth. In fact, athletic wear and sneakers, in particular, became a meaningful part of inner-city life and what many considered a culture of violence.

Sneaker fashion dates back at least as far as the 1950s and was popularized in music, movies, and through celebrity. Tommy Tucker, and later Sammy Davis Jr., Johnson Davidson, Elvis Presley, and Stevie Wonder, sang a million-seller pop anthem called “High Heel Sneakers.” Sneakers were on the feet of Woody Allen as he escorted Mrs. Gerald Ford to a black tie benefit and Mick Jagger wore them to marry Bianca. By 1978, sneakers had “achieved grace, dignity, had crossed social, ethnic, cultural and classlines, and [had] high tailed into the world of high culture, haute cuisine, and heavy thinkers.”

The sneaker phenomenon of the 1980s emanated from a combination of basketball and hip-hop. Early hip-hoppers started wearing sneakers for fashion and would go to great lengths to keep them clean, precisely match their clothes, and differentiate themselves with fat or colored laces, brand names, and shoe variations. An additional fashion trend came directly from the prisons in which a great number of inner-city youth found themselves. RUN-DMC biographer Bill Adler describes the phenomenon thus:

“If you are wearing sneakers with no shoelaces, you are imitating the fashion in a prison. But in prison it’s not a fashion. They issue you no shoelaces so that you can’t do something desperate with them. You can’t hang yourself, you can’t attack somebody with them. But out on the street, you know, guys go to prison, now they’re back home. And they decide, A, they like the way it looks and they like the way it feels so guess what, even though they’re free now, they’re not going to put shoelaces back on their sneakers. And then you get kids, like Jam Master J who says, hmm, that looks really cool. And he starts wearing his shoes the same way, and you have a fad.”
The connection between hip-hop fashion and incarceration further alienated those critical of the movement, both from within and outside of the black community. In particular, the older members of the black community expressed concern about the messages and momentum of hip-hop messages presented through lyrics, lifestyle and fashion. An African American medical doctor from Queens, NY, Dr. Gerald Deas, went so far as to express these concerns through an amateur rap song of his own entitled “Felon Sneakers.” Here is a hint of the lyrics:

Peace, Black Brother…..
Your felon Sneakers can’t fit the bill
You got to know yourself to be really chill
And you rob, you rape, you shoot and kill
You’re wearing those sneakers but you lost your will.183

The song goes on to suggest that by tightening up their sneakers and finding different goals, Black youth will find success.

But rap group Run-DMC and manager Russell Simmons directly contradicted Deas’s argument when they crafted their response, the rap song “My Adidas,” which garnered the commercial support of Adidas and found tremendous success in doing so. Run-DMC had gone against the grain of the pop element of hip-hop, who wore flashy clothes in the disco-era tradition. Instead, Run-DMC wore clothes on stage that they would wear on the street, including their beloved Adidas. At a concert to which they had invited Adidas executives, Run-DMC performed their hit song “My Adidas” and invited the Adidas-wearing audience to hold up a shoe. The image of 20,000 fans holding up their brand in response to a call from a rap group was a phenomenal sight. As Adidas marketing director Angelo Anastasio said of his presentation of this event to the owner of the company, “If you can believe it, it was such an incredible coup, I thought, for me and my team here in L.A. to have Adidas allow me to have three young African-Americans rap about their company, which is a German company, very conservative.”184 Run-
DMC and Adidas signed a groundbreaking $1 million deal in 1986 and subsequently released the Run-DMC line. French director Mathieu said of the importance of sneakers, “Run-DMC really made the world understand that the sneaker is to hip-hop what the crucifix is to Christians. It’s a religion. It’s your identity.” Following in the footsteps of Run-DMC, other rappers began to take up their own brands, expressing their affiliations in their fashion and in their lyrics: just a few examples include Fresh Gordon’s “My Filas”, Heavy D and Nike, Busy Bee and Converse, and the Beastie Boys and Suede Adidas.

But, as the documentary, “Just for Kicks” depicts, the hip-hop sneaker phenomenon “soared to new heights with the emergence of a winged, bald, and black superhero that would eventually knock the footwear industry off its feet.” That superhero was, of course, Michael Jordan. In a series of events and a confluence of social and economic factors that will necessarily be articulated in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5, Michael Jordan, in collaboration with the characters and direction of Spike Lee, helped propel Nike not just onto the hip-hop scene but to the top of it: “On the streets of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the Air Jordans became the drug dealers and the rappers shoe of choice, worn as a status symbol and the icon of a flamboyant lifestyle. Rappers passed the craze down to their fans, and in spite of itself, Air Jordan became a hip-hop urban brand and the object of unprecedented desire and dangerous attraction on the streets.” As the Nike brand became embedded in the hip-hop scene, it also became embroiled in the more violent aspects with which that scene was associated. Thus, the next two chapters explore the historical moments leading up to the 1980s and early 1990s when Nike, Michael Jordan and other key players became deeply and symbolically involved in tensions of race relations that were erupting in violence in urban areas across America.
Conclusion

While the country was experiencing significant social, political, and cultural movements developing in the late 1950s, the advertising industry was moving towards the Creative Revolution in which the creative approach to advertising was altered. The election of John F. Kennedy brought national attention to issues of civil rights and this charge was picked up and carried by his predecessor President Johnson. The Kerner Commission Report depicted a divided America, with white America oblivious to and yet implicated in the destructive conditions of the racial ghetto that created a cycle of social and economic disadvantage. In their struggle for equal rights and equal representation, Civil Rights activists pointed to problematic media depictions. The advertising industry responded to these changes, though the response was hesitant and slow. While advertisers were clearly cognizant by this time of the market potential of African Americans, they expressed an unfounded fear of white backlash. Black activists pressed major corporations to improve their approaches to black communities and found great success in doing so. But while representations of African Americans in advertising did increase in number and become more positive in tone during and subsequent to the Civil Rights movement, critics were mixed about the overall progress that had been made and some were concerned about the lack of authenticity in these increasing depictions. At the same time, moving forward into the 1980s a variety of major black figures gained a great deal of advertiser attention and made significant inroads into mainstream media in ways previously unimaginable. These figures included Bill Cosby, O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston and, most notably due to his prominence, unprecedented endorsement support, and positive image, was Michael Jordan.

The energy and emergent progress that was evident during the Civil Rights era was quelled by a changing political and economic environment of the 1970s. While African Americans
experienced some improvements in education, housing and incomes, many still failed to feel the
effects of these gains. The consumer movement that built steam as a result of the economic crisis
of the 1970s failed to represent the most economically deprived and did not provide a voice for
the black community. The home-front effects of the war in Vietnam hit African American inner-
city communities particularly hard. In the midst of growing disparities between the rich and the
poor and increasing alienation of some of the most devastated inner-city communities, the black
youth who represented the first generation to grow up without legalized segregation and with the
effects of the Civil Rights movement failed to see how that movement had benefited their
communities. They began expressing this sense of alienation through the politicized voice that
they developed through hip-hop. Music and sport had long provided spaces for advancement for
African Americans; the hip-hop culture combined these two spaces with lyrical messages and
street fashion that formed its sound and aesthetic.

Despite the strains of hip-hop that expressed a depoliticized violence and sexuality that were
the source of many fears and criticisms of hip-hop from both within and outside of the black
community, the core of the hip-hop culture and the spirit out of which it developed was one of
empowerment and expression of the hardships of black, urban life. The sneaker phenomenon of
the 1980s was a fashion expression of the interaction of a variety of social forces that came
together in urban environments, including basketball and hip-hop. Sneakers were a part of the
street fashion that had taken hold well before Michael Jordan signed his deal with Nike in 1984.
Hip-hop artists had used specific athletic brands and developed out of them expressions of
affiliation, solidarity, meaning and status. With emergence of Michael Jordan, whose incredible
and entertaining athletic ability and “good” image transcended racial divides, the sneaker
phenomenon reached new heights. As athletic wear and particularly sneakers became hot
commodities across the country, they held a great deal of symbolic clout in inner-city communities. As such, they were commodities with great potential to represent improvement in the greater American symbolic language; at the same time, the hyper-commoditization of sneakers led to tragedy that played out in media attention to the “sneaker killings.”

This story goes beyond successes of Michael Jordan on the court and in his endorsements of Nike shoes to explore the impact that he had on the advertising industry and the symbolic life of America. Michael Jordan’s ascent as an icon of sports and of the American dream of success and consumption coincides with a changing advertising landscape that began earnestly to reflect the struggles of black Americans for inclusion and positive representation. The history of African Americans’ relationship with advertising and consumption and the story of Nike, Michael Jordan and the “sneaker killings” are mutually informative because they contextualize the complexities of inclusion and representation, of the economic, social, and political situation of the black community, and of the physical, social and symbolic importance of consumer goods in the struggles of black Americans. Therefore, the next two chapters explore the history of Nike and the development of Michael Jordan as a hero and an icon, the complex set of circumstances involved in the growth of the Nike and Michael Jordan phenomenon and the discourse surrounding the “sneaker killings” and crimes involving Air Jordan shoes and other brand-name athletic wear.
Notes

3 Ibid., 469.
4 Ibid., 473.
5 Ibid., 474.
7 Ibid., 269.
8 Ibid., 265-267.
9 Ibid., 270.
10 Ibid., 270.
11 Operation Breadbasket and other such programs that Jesse Jackson was instrumental in establishing eventually served as the foundations on which Jackson would make his runs for Presidency in the 1980s.
18 Ibid., 76.
19 Ibid., 77.
20 Ibid., 79; Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry*.
22 Ibid., 40.
23 Ibid., 116.
27 Ibid., 116-117.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
34 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 135.
35 Barlow, Commercial and Noncommercial Radio, 203.
36 Ibid., 207.
37 Ibid., 234.
38 Ibid., 235.
39 Ibid., 235.
40 Ibid., 235-236.
41 Ibid., 237.
42 Ibid., 288.
43 Ibid., 234.
45 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 133.
52 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 150.
53 Ibid., 151.
55 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 158, 169.
56 Gelber, Black Men and Businessmen: The Growing Awareness of a Social Responsibility.
57 Ibid., 3.
58 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 207.
59 For a detailed examination of “The Golden Age” of African American advertising agencies, see Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 207.
60 Ibid., 206.
61 Diawara, In Search of Africa, 485.
63 Ibid., 207.
Ibid., 202.
Ibid., 257.
Ibid., 505.
Andreasen points out that his work is concentrated on disadvantaged consumers in major urban centers due in large part to the availability of data and, as well, to his own personal research interests.
Ibid., 3; Andreasen argues that the first wave of consumerism took place at the turn of the century during the Progressive era and revolved around public concern over corporate monopolies and food and drug safety. The second wave occurred in the late 1920s and early 1930s arising from the Depression and the New Deal. Ibid., 2-3.
Ibid., 6.
Ibid., 59.
Ibid., 60.
Ibid., 74, 84.
Ibid., 74.
Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 98.
Ibid., 259.
Ibid., 118.
Ibid., 126.
Ibid., 126.
Ibid., 126.
Ibid., 255-256.
Ibid., 256.
Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, 90.
Ibid., 88.
Barlow, Commercial and Noncommercial Radio, 242.


Some authors also argue that along with the Bronx, and more specifically the South Bronx, Harlem was a significant site of hip-hop development. See, for example, Garofalo, Crossing Over: 1939-1992, 57-127.


Ibid., 336.

Price, Hip Hop Culture, 6.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid., 9-10.


Ibid., 22.


Ibid., 336.


Price, Hip Hop Culture, 1.

Diawara, In Search of Africa, 237.


Ibid., 111.


Barlow, Commercial and Noncommercial Radio, 244.


Ibid., 113.

Dates, Advertising, 475-476.


Ibid., 514.

Ibid., 514.


132 Ibid., 514.
136 Ibid., 519.
137 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry, 264.
140 Ibid., 285.
141 Hine, Hine and Harrold, African Americans: A Concise History, 520.
142 Ibid., 520.
145 The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 11.
146 Ibid.
147 Chambers, Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry.
148 Ibid., 264-265.
149 Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, xx; Not all studies indicated that African Americans continued to be relegated to stereotypical roles into the 1980s. A study by Zinkhan, Cox, and Hong (1986) concluded that a shift began to occur in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s in which advertisers broke from past stereotypes and began to depict African Americans in occupations and career positions equal to those of whites. See George Zinkhan, Keith Cox, and Jae Hong, “Changes in Stereotypes: Blacks and Whites in Magazine Ads,” Journalism Quarterly 64, 568-572. For a detailed account of research on addressing the frequency and types of portrayals of African Americans in advertising, see Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, especially Chapters 6 and 7.
150 Ibid., 54.
151 Ibid., 49.
152 Ibid., 49-50.
153 Ibid., 53.
154 For a detailed synopsis of this research, see Chapter 6 of Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.
155 Ibid., 119-120.
156 Ibid., 121-124.
158 Ibid.
160 Hubbard, AdVantage: Black-White Lines Fade in Athlete Endorsements.
Ibid.


Ibid., 321.

Ibid., 320-321.

Ibid., 321.


Ibid., 337.


Despite KRS-One’s anti-violence stance, there is clear tension in his treatment of violence, as can been seen in his production of various instances of “violent rap.” See, for example, the acclaimed album *Criminal Minded*, which includes such songs as “9mm Goes Bang,” which is a first-person account of violent crime.

Ibid., 62-63.

Ibid., 62.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.
Phillip Knight’s Blue Ribbon Sports officially changed its name to Nike, Inc. on May 30, 1978. But it was not until 1985, with the signing of then-Rookie of the Year Michael Jordan, that Nike became NIKE—the icon of American culture and consumption. This was the beginning of a “golden run during which Nike had been ‘reinvented,’ … during which [Knight] and Michael Jordan and many other Nike guys (“‘Guys’ is generic around here, as Knight commented one day) had conspired so profoundly to mark the general culture that, through their labors, Nike had altered the look and sound and feel and even the abiding fantasies of everyday life.”  

Numerous books have calculated the history and impact of this emblematic relationship between Nike and Michael Jordan. Others have included chronicles of the early days of the company and its countercultural running ethos. In contrast, this project is not a history of the Nike corporation or a biography of Michael Jordan, but rather it is a socio-historical analysis of the discourses surrounding the social concerns over the so-called “Sneaker killings” of the 1990s and the criticisms of advertising and consumption practices in addressing urban America. 

In order to establish the history and context of the “sneaker killings” and expectations on Nike, Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and their advertising campaigns, I consider the development of the Nike brand and the people behind it. Further, I address to what extent the collaborative image of Nike and Michael Jordan came at a time when the black community was looking for and developing new expressions of their social experiences within American society, particularly as it was lived on the streets of urban America. 

The distinction between Nike’s early days and running culture and its post-Jordan brand image are clear not only in the organization of the various histories of Nike, but also in the
development of the company’s economic and symbolic reach, its internal organization and consumer use, its advertising and its depiction in popular media. The following history is presented with the goal of developing a more sophisticated understanding of consumer engagement in the marketplace than has previously been addressed in analysis of Nike and other brand-name consumer goods, and is a re-conceptualization of the Nike story, as presented in other texts, for the purpose of understanding the social experience of Nike.

The Birth and Growth of Nike Through the 1960s

Nike’s material inception has been traced to Hayward Field, the domain of legendary University of Oregon and Olympic track coach and Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman, whose dissatisfaction with available options inspired him to hand-craft running shoes for his athletes. An undergraduate Philip Knight came under the supervision and inspiration of Bowerman as a middle distance runner for the University of Oregon in the 1950s. Nike’s ideological birth was several years later in an MBA paper at Stanford on a small business, in which Knight conceived a plan for running shoes made with cheap Japanese labor and distributed in the United States. The original market was high school and college track team members. Knight began to implement this plan on a post-graduate trip to Japan in 1962 where he approached Onitsuka, the manufacturer of Tiger shoes, to discuss distributing Tigers in the United States. In his initial meeting with Onitsuka, Knight is said to have “created” Blue Ribbon Sports on the spot when asked the name of his company. Knight offered the shoes to his former track coach Bill Bowerman, envisioning him as a potential client; but Bowerman was impressed with Tiger’s offerings and suggested that he and Knight collaborate on this venture. Thus, Nike’s material and ideological roots were bound in a gentleman’s agreement between Knight and Bowerman on
January 26, 1964, with each man agreeing to contribute $500 to their new partnership called Blue Ribbon Sports. That first year, Knight sold $8,000 worth of Tiger shoes and he spent the next two years promoting and selling his Japanese import shoes to athletes at track meets and out of his parents’ basement in Portland, Oregon for $6.95 a pair, later increasing the price to $9.95 to imply quality while still undercutting market leader Adidas. Through the 1960s, Knight’s company hung its hat on a small and specialized performance-based athletic shoe market that targeted serious runners.

In 1965, Knight hired his first full-time employee, Jeff Johnson, who agreed to work on commission. Like Knight, Johnson was a middle distance runner. The two had met briefly in 1962 in an intramural track meet at Stanford. They shared a middle-distance mentality characterized by the fact that “middle-distance events such as the mile require both speed and endurance, as well as the mental agility to decide when to sprint and when to stay even with the pack.” This middle-distance mentality and a shared passion for running propelled the early Blue Ribbon Sports players. In 1966, Johnson opened the first BRS retail outlet in Santa Monica, CA. That same year, Knight and Bowerman put their gentlemen’s agreement on paper, forming an official partnership; and in 1967 BRS, Inc. was incorporated. Shortly after, another Bowerman runner, Geoff Hollister, joined BRS selling shoes for a $2 per shoe commission; and in 1968 Bob Woodell, a track and field enthusiast whose promising career was cut short by a paralyzing accident, joined the BRS team. The early BRS employees saw in their jobs an opportunity to remain disciples and become missionaries of their beloved sport. Knight and his company went from selling $8,000 worth of shoes in the first year to $83,000 after three years of existence and had accumulated a group of men whose ardor for spreading the mission of their sport was seemingly more meaningful than the income associated with it. The history of these early days is
fraught with stories of impulsivity and debauchery, with the trappings of a fraternity, and was epitomized in their bi-annual management retreats endearingly termed “Buttfaces” that, in addition to idea-development, included drinking, practical jokes and relationship building among the core group of men in management.\textsuperscript{15}

Growth of the company seemed rapid, with sales virtually doubling such that by 1969 BRS sales were between $300,000 and $400,000.\textsuperscript{16} Despite this, BRS was faced with various financial and supply problems in its early years, and the company went through public offerings and private debenture offerings, as well as dealt with contract issues with its supplier in Japan. Their relationship with Onitsuka had grown shaky and Knight began plans to set his company on stronger footing with a new line that would bare its own trademark separate from Onitsuka Tigers.\textsuperscript{17} The future of BRS was under enough jeopardy at the time that Bowerman advised people close to him not to take investment opportunities in the company.\textsuperscript{18} In the meantime, the company image continued an uneasy evolution as it entered the 1970s.

**The 1970s Fitness Revolution**

Jeff Galloway, former Olympian, marathoner and the first athlete to compete in Nike brand shoes, includes Bill Bowerman in the company of seven runners and teachers whom he credits with having changed America’s approach to fitness. Bowerman traveled to New Zealand where, under the tutelage of runner and coach Arthur Lydiard, he learned the fitness routine of jogging. He was so impressed with the results of the jogging routine that he wrote several pamphlets on it and began to hold morning runs back in Eugene.\textsuperscript{19} “The seeds of the jogging movement,” Galloway writes, “had been firmly planted in American soil.”\textsuperscript{20} Other runners and authors throughout the 1970s, including Jim Fixx with his 1977 best-seller *The Complete Book of*
Running, helped to propel this movement into the mainstream. These runners were turning to performance shoes like those of Blue Ribbon Sports and the new Nike shoes introduced in 1971. During this era, Nike went from a small company that specialized in performance-wear for athletes to a company that, even with marketing that continued to target the serious athletes, began to service mainstream, recreational runners whose numbers increased dramatically during the jogging boom of the 1970s.

By the early 1970s, tensions were rising with Onitsuka. Knight developed a plan to obtain financing from a Japanese trading company, Nissho Iwai Corporation, in order to begin manufacturing and importing BRS’s first product line independent of Onitsuka. Nissho Iwai essentially was bailing Nike not only out of their relationship with Onitsuka, but also out of a variety of questionable financial practices including checks written against insufficient funds and banking relationships floated on reputations of athletes, suppliers and sales representatives. Knight asked Carolyn Davidson, a graphic design student who he had met while teaching accounting at Portland State University, to design a logo for the side of the shoes BRS wanted to develop under a new trademark. He and his fellow BRS employees were looking for something to compete with the functional logos of Adidas, Puma, and even their Tiger shoes. But Davidson argued that the functional aspect of support, built into logos like the Adidas stripes, and concept of movement were difficult to unify graphically: “Support was static, she explained; movement was the opposite.” For $35 in 1971, Davidson created what looked like a fat checkmark that became known as the Nike Swoosh. That same year, Jeff Johnson came up with the name Nike, inspired by a dream he had the night before a one-day deadline to get a name on the shoeboxes of a new supply of shoes. Nike is the Greek goddess of victory whose wings, Johnson thought, looked a bit like the stripes of Davidson’s checkmark logo. No one seemed particularly to like
the name, but they went with it anyway. In an effort to avoid violating their exclusive contract with Onitsuka, the Nike line represented a variety of sports, from running to basketball, to wrestling, tennis and casual shoes. The new Nike line, Swoosh logo included, debuted in 1972 at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon and BRS saw a gross of $1.96 million for the new Nike brand products. But the Nike development was met with disorder, unpredictable quality, financial troubles and legal difficulties that ended in severed relations with Onitsuka, the Tiger manufacturer. Lawyer Rob Strasser was assigned the Nike/BRS case against Onitsuka. In 1977, Rob Strasser would be named marketing director at Nike and became a key, though controversial, figure in the development of the Nike brand and will be addressed in greater detail in the proceeding discussion. At this point in 1972, amidst the severing of old ties and the development of new ones, “Blue Ribbon Sports was starting over.” By 1976, with the jogging boom and with promotional endorsements of the new Nike brand by various track and field athletes and tennis stars such as Ilie Nastase and Jimmy Conners, revenues had increased to $14 million and then doubled in 1977 to $28 million.

However, it was not until May 30, 1978 that Blue Ribbon Sports officially changed its name to Nike, Inc., with BRS, Inc. surviving as a subsidiary. Sales having more than doubled each year since 1976, Nike became the top athletic shoe company in America in 1980, with $270 million in sales. They continued to expand their operations, opening the Exeter Research and Development Lab in Exeter, New Hampshire, hiring the first industrial designers in the athletic shoe industry, completing an initial public offering of 2,377,000 shares of Class B common stock, and witnessing British runner Steve Ovett become the first athlete to win the Olympics wearing Nike shoes. The following year, the subsidiary BRS, Inc. merged into Nike, Inc., leaving Nike as the surviving entity.
In an era of “high-tech” consumer goods, Nike became known for its performance-inspired high-tech shoes. Nike had introduced the Tailwind in January 1979. The Tailwind was unique for its polyurethane-encapsulated “supergas” chambers developed by an aerospace engineer, M. Frank Rudy, and it was the precursor to the Air Force I basketball shoe introduced in 1982 and to the Nike Air line that ranged from Air Jordans to Nike’s “Revolution” with visible air. Coupled with the development of athletic-inspired fashion that was growing the athletic-wear market in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Nike moved into a position of dominance, claiming one third of the global running shoe market and ousting German-born Adidas from its number one position in the U.S.

Entering the 1980s

By the end of 1982, Nike shoes had made quite a name for themselves, in large part through promotions. In 1981, 75% of Nike’s $18 million advertising and promotions budget was

![Figure 1. % of Market Share of Branded Athletic Shoe Market (from Rikert and Christensen 1984)](image)
dedicated to promotions\textsuperscript{31} and Nike’s annual sales had jumped to $457.7 million from their 1977 mark of $28.7 million.\textsuperscript{32} In 1982, the company’s profits had increased 80% to $49 million on a 52% jump in revenues to $693.6 million, supported by the running-shoe base and forays into apparel and foreign markets.\textsuperscript{33} While running remained the largest in sales with $236 million, the Nike product line had expanded in a variety of directions by adding additional performance features and by moving into leisure and apparel, into other target markets including non-athletes, and into other sports such as soccer, basketball and tennis.

The company worked to maintain its commitment to technology and its core of performance, spending $8 million on research and development in 1983.\textsuperscript{34} The Nike footwear line grew from 63 basic models in 1978 to around 185 in 1983 and the shoes were being sold at suggested retail prices ranging from $15 to $90.\textsuperscript{35} On the Olympic track, every men’s track world record holder was set by athletes wearing Nike shoes.\textsuperscript{36} That same year, Nike decided it was time to introduce itself on a national scale through two television commercials aired during the New York Marathon. Up until this point, Nike had focused its advertising budget on serious athletes and spoke to them through targeted sports media with messages about the technical superiority of the shoes or the spirit of athletic endeavor.\textsuperscript{37} Some at Nike believed that the use of “stars” in ads should be minimized because “runners realize these people are paid large sums and wear special make-ups… The consumer should not feel as if we’re trying to manipulate them through ‘star’ emulation.”\textsuperscript{38} They were wary of potential disconnect from the athlete and the spirit of performance. At the same time, a competitive spirit and a desire to grow the company inspired them. It was time to go national and build their image.

These two national advertising spots, created by advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy, were entitled “Evolution,” which gave a brief history of running from primitive to modern man
and “Trophy,” which demonstrated pride in the world athletes who wore Nike shoes. Art director Dan Wieden and copywriter David Kennedy had worked on Nike advertising at William Cain agency, creating ads that emphasized technical aspects of the shoes. The two left William Cain, taking the Nike account with them, and started their own agency baring their names. In keeping with his promotional attitude, Knight’s first words to Dan Wieden reportedly were “I’m Phil Knight, and I hate advertising.” Even when Nike conducted advertising in these early days, the focus remained on athletes. “The Nike empire,” writes one journalist, “was built on the theory that advertising should appeal to the elite athletes, and once they were won over, this success would trickle down to the masses.” Nonetheless, Wieden & Kennedy and Nike began to develop a fruitful relationship that earned acclaim for the advertising agency, propelling it to the top of the industry, and earned popular regard for the developing Nike brand.

Wieden & Kennedy Enters the Ad Industry

The story of Nike’s relationship with Wieden & Kennedy is in many ways the history or foundation of Wieden & Kennedy. As Dan Wieden articulated, “A lot of our creative outlook…and frankly some of our management style has been developed by working closely with Nike. Because they’re the kind of client they are, we become the agency we are.” Nike originally hired a Seattle advertising agency, John Brown & Partners, but found their work on collateral materials such as posters, catalogues and counter displays to be too expensive and too inefficient for Nike. In the late 1970s, Nike hired Peter Moore to work freelance developing these materials. Moore found himself fascinated by this growing company that was populated by sports enthusiasts, not business executives and whose head of marketing, Rob Strasser, did not
know what it meant to develop an image. Moore recollected a conversation in which Strasser asked him what it was exactly that he did:

“‘Well, I’m a graphic designer. There are two sides to this business. There’s the advertising side to this business which does media and television and stuff like that. There’s another side to this business which does catalogue, poster, corporate identity programs and creates the image because I don’t think advertising campaigns can solely be responsible for creating the image of a corporation. And companies need an image to build on and that’s what I do.’ ‘What’s an image?’” Strasser’s response was, “‘What’s an image?’ And he said, ‘Look, I’m a lawyer. I’m not a marketing guy.’”

Moore also found that while he himself was sharp with graphics, his own treatment of words was less so. To alleviate this weakness as his work for Nike increased in 1980, he teamed up with Dan Wieden, a copywriter he knew at William Cain advertising agency in Portland.

In the early 1970s, Dan Wieden had gone to work freelancing for McCann advertising agency. During Wieden’s time there, McCann underwent some structural changes and hired a Chicago prominent art director named David Kennedy. It was at McCann that Wieden and Kennedy first met. After about five years, Wieden left McCann with a man named William Cain, and the two recruited David Kennedy over to the newly formed William Cain advertising agency. At Nike, Peter Moore was made Creative Director and Rob Strasser remained marketing manager; Rob Strasser and Moore “became the guardians of Nike’s image” and they hired William Cain as Nike’s advertising agency to promote that image.

By the time that Dan Wieden and David Kennedy left William Cain in 1982 to open their own creative shop with Nike as their client, Nike had signed athletes from a wide variety of sports and the company was beginning to shift endorsement focus from running to basketball and tennis. According to Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, authored by former Nike employee and wife of Rob Strasser, J.B. Strasser and her sister Laurie Becklund (1991), "[Rob] Strasser was signing athletes in every sport, even minor ones like
racquetball. But in the late '70s, he and nearly every other shoe man realized that basketball and tennis were the sports that meant the most in the endorsement business. They had also started a lucrative practice of signing college basketball coaches (as opposed to their competitors, who continued to focus on professional athletes). While Nike competitors like Adidas were openly buying athletes and sponsoring events such as the Olympics, “Nike was quietly acquiring the best of the ‘becoming’ American athletes, those gonna-bes that would give Nike the reputation of the shoe preferred by young, hot players. The decisions weren’t made by pouring over studies or statistics. They were made when Knight and Rob Strasser, often tipped off by good people,… saw an athlete and liked him.” This approach was a precursor to the relationship that would develop four years later between Nike and Michael Jordan.

Thus, in 1982 when Wieden & Kennedy opened shop and created the first two national Nike advertisements—“Evolution” and “Trophy”—Nike was growing rapidly enough that they would soon require a large-scale, national branding campaign to coincide with the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. They wanted to make a shift in their marketing budget from athlete promotions to advertising in preparation for the Olympics, but Wieden & Kennedy, with five employees, was too small. In 1983, just one year after Wieden & Kennedy opened its doors with the Nike account, Nike did an account review and divided their advertising budget between Los Angeles-based Chiat/Day and Wieden & Kennedy. Chiat/Day managed the horizontal advertising, including the famous I Love L.A. campaign and the Cities billboard campaign, as well as some apparel advertising. While the effectiveness of these campaigns was debated, they were highly publicized and drew a good bit of industry attention. In the meantime, Wieden & Kennedy maintained the vertical advertising. Dan Wieden speculated that Nike maintained a relationship with them because they knew the market, they understood that the advertising had to be real to
the individual market segments and that Nike did not want to cut themselves off from an agency that knew and understood their ethos. Wieden was right. Even as Nike was making the shift to Chiat/Day, there was evidence that what they really wanted out of an advertising agency was one that knew them and knew sports. Rob Strasser philosophized about what a Nike advertising agency should be:

“Authentic. We know sports and we think we know guys. The agency must know sports. They don’t have to be stat freaks or trivia buffs, they have to know sports. Competitiveness, camradery, face, all the gut that makes sport, sport. They must feel or know the thread that weaves it’s way through the athletes. That same thread in Moses Malone, Alberto Salazar, John McEnroe. They must know guys, not fashion. They must recognize hot, not fashion.”

In 1985, Nike reviewed its agency situation and determined that they needed to pick one agency. In a memo to Rob Strasser and Peter Moore, Cindy Hale outlined the strengths and weaknesses of Chiat/Day and Wieden & Kennedy. In her evaluation, Chiat/Day was aggressive and produced big ideas such as the Cities Campaign and a more recent Michael Jordan “NBA” television spot that was the first in a long line of popular Jordan ads, but the agency was self-promotional, slower, operationally weaker, their big ideas also sometimes turned out to be sensationalistic, and they had a tendency to blame Nike for their own advertising failures. On the other hand, Wieden & Kennedy believed in Nike as something special, they were improving operationally, and they had a proven record of demonstrating Nike’s important technical superiority with “flair.” However, they remained a risk because their work was untested on a large scale and their growth had made them hungry for more, which made them vulnerable to their own self-promotion.

But importantly, Wieden & Kennedy did an excellent job of promoting the air technology and had developed that as an idea on which Nike could hang its hat. In addition, the wildly popular Lou Reed spots developed for Honda by copywriter Jim Riswold impressed Nike. Riswold joined Wieden & Kennedy in 1984 and went onto create some of Nike’s most popular
and powerful advertising, including the “Mike and Spike,” the “Bo Knows,” and the Charles Barkley “I am not a role model” campaigns, landing him among *Newsweek*’s top 100 most influential people. In 1985, soon after the initial Chiat/Day-developed Michael Jordan spots, Nike began to shift its business back to Wieden & Kennedy, and Riswold began contributing his “keen sense of cultural pitch and tone” to some of the most important creative material in advertising history.

As far as Nike’s decision went, a 1985 Nike brief reiterated, “We want to continue to work with a tight group of people. We are not interested in planning, research, or squads of account people.” They wanted “chemistry and creative force, not account service or media buys,” according to advertising manager Cindy Hale. For Dan Wieden, Wieden & Kennedy was growing, maturing, and preparing to accept Nike back. He recounts that the whole time Nike was with Chiat/Day, “we never dropped the ball with Nike because we knew that was our home. That was our emotional and spiritual home.” By 1986, Nike had withdrawn its business from Chiat/Day and returned the entirety of its $10 million in billings to Wieden & Kennedy.

**Nike Shoots for Basketball**

The hugely popular advertising developed by Chiat/Day surrounding the 1984 Olympics was not enough to make up for the slow in market growth that had begun by 1983, when Nike posted its first drop in earnings, and for the fact that Nike had made some grave miscalculations along the way that ranged from structural and managerial to sport orientation and image control. In June 1983, Knight stepped down as president and COO of Nike, Inc. and named Robert L. Woodell, who had been with the company for 15 years, as his successor; Rob Strasser, who had been managing director of European Operations for the previous two years resumed his
responsibility as vice president for U.S. marketing. This change in leadership occurred at a time when the athletic shoe business was experiencing a major downturn in business and consumer tastes were shifting, with sales of Nike’s less expensive running shoes down 25 percent. Phil Knight noted in the 1984 Annual Report, “Our domestic footwear marketing is changing, edging away from athletic looks to a renewed demand for fashion and traditional styles. These changes resulted in inventory valuation losses over three times greater than in 1983.” And while the company argued that they were not imitating trends and competitors and that their focus remained on the athlete, one response they had to this decline was to introduce their first casual line, the “Freestyle.” Nike documented its first losses ever in 1984 with a 29% decline in earnings in that fiscal year, citing a downturn in gross profit margins and increases in operating expenses in areas like apparel and advertising and promotion.

Beyond its structural problems and internal struggles that eventually led Knight to reassume his position from Woodell, the company had neglected opportunities in the aerobics market, which had grown 56% from 12.1 million participants in 1981 to 18.7 million by 1983 and allowed way for Reebok to make significant strides. Reebok had entered the U.S. market in 1979 in the midst of the running boom. Its predecessor, Foster & Sons of Great Britain, had outfitted the feet of the 1924 British Olympic track team nostalgically rendered in the 1981 movie Chariots of Fire. Reebok began distributing their leather sneaker to aerobics instructors around the country and it was not long before they were spotted on the feet of movie stars and musicians. Reebok’s growth began to outpace that of Nike, with a significant jump in sales from $13 million in 1983 to $66 million in 1984 propelled in large part by the aerobics boom.

Nike, on the other hand, had either overlooked or dismissed the aerobics market. When asked who was responsible for missing aerobics, Peter Moore suggested that much of the blame rested
with Phil Knight: “He missed, you know. He didn’t miss often, but he missed that, clearly. Just
didn’t see it. Didn’t believe that a woman’s thing, one, didn’t believe that a woman’s thing could
have that much impact; two, didn’t believe that the soft leather thing could have any potential
because it was not performance.”76 Charles Robinson, who had helped arrange Nike’s
relationship with Nissho Iwai and sat on Nike’s Board of Directors, argued that because Nike’s
ethos had developed out a macho athletic environment, “In the eyes of the company,
psychologically and theoretically, women are second rate citizens” and therefore historically had
limited participation in Nike.77 On the other hand, Nike’s early advertising demonstrated gender
parity, with both men and women in the ads. Rob Strasser attributed this to the spirit of running,
which was enjoyed by men and women; but clearly, Nike was a company with male-dominated
management.78 This focus would have serious consequences for Nike. By the fourth quarter of
1984, Nike was citing declining earnings, which they attributed to slow moving products and
writedowns on some of the Nike products to market value.79 However, some promising growth
was found in racquet sports (tennis and squash), field sports, and basketball shoes, the latter of
which was up 22 percent.80

Just over a year after Woodell’s ascent to the Nike presidency and under declining profits,
Knight would take back the reigns.81 Strasser and Becklund (1991) speculate that some company
insiders believed Knight had set Woodell up in office to take the fall for a decline that had been
long in the making. While it appears that Woodell himself did not accept that argument, it is
clear that there was tension building among some of the early employees and Knight. This
tension presaged the eventual departure of many of the original Nike men who helped Knight to
build the company and to launch the promotional careers of Michael Jordan and other famous
sports stars.
But in the meantime with Knight back in full charge, part of his turnaround effort was increased advertising and fewer athlete sponsorships,\textsuperscript{82} with more support behind the ones that they maintained such as the recently-signed Michael Jordan. In the midst of several losing quarters and a declining outlook for Nike’s base, the Air Jordan line would be Nike’s shining star. As Phil Knight said, “I believe we can take pride in the fact that despite losing quarters we were still able to produce the hottest selling product the athletic shoe industry has ever seen—the Air Jordan line.”\textsuperscript{83}

Nike, still with the image of a running shoe company, had developed momentum based on passion for and legitimate ties to sport and the athlete; this passion manifested in locker-room style strategy meetings that Peter Moore likened to the movie Animal House\textsuperscript{84} and rowdy boys’ club relationships, all revolving around a love of “the game.” Rob Strasser articulated the kind of people Nike sought by saying, “I want mistakes, I want fucked ideas. Failure makes for better, in a lot of cases. I want people who listen, who hear, who think, who bleed, who laugh, who don’t worry about time sheets and looking good. People who sweat, who work and who love what they are doing.”\textsuperscript{85} By the mid-1980s “Nike was a slightly countercultural, decidedly down-in-the-dumps, somewhat cash-strapped running-shoe company at the far end of a jogging boom. Industry experts and securities analysts agreed that Nike had ‘run out of feet’.”\textsuperscript{86} Up to this moment in Nike’s history, Knight had focused the company’s marketing on promotions, which had seemed more cost-effective than advertising. But as more and more athletes entered the promotional market demanding increasingly large compensation for brand associations, the value of such promotional activities declined.\textsuperscript{87} At the same time that Nike was citing their promotional and advertising budgets as part of their expense woes, they determined that Nike needed to make cuts in athlete endorsement contracts and to move their energies to superstars\textsuperscript{88} and “from small-
event sponsorships to television commercials”, and they decided they needed to make these moves in the basketball arena. They looked to Converse, who was making significant inroads with only a handful of NBA players, in contrast to Nike’s more than 120 players.

The sport of basketball had changed since 1972, when Nike had signed its first endorsement. But by the early 1980s, Nike had learned some hard lessons about endorsement deals. NBA star Darryl Dawkins, well-known as a Nike man, walked onto the court in 1982 wearing different shoe brands on each foot, one Nike and one Pony. For the first time ever, Nike sued an athlete for not wearing its shoes. Instigated in no small part by budgetary concerns, Nike came up with a plan to “let” players out of their Nike contracts if they were able to find better deals elsewhere; this would free up their financial obligations to players and allow them to focus on a few carefully picked rising superstars.

Among the list of players considered was Michael Jordan, who was a self-proclaimed “Adidas nut” but wore Converse on the courts because it was part of his team’s uniform. Nike guys, including Rob Strasser and Peter Moore, had started watching Jordan his junior year at the University of North Carolina, at a time when the company was in deep trouble with inventory overhang, with Reebok vying for position, and with Knight’s departure. Sonny Vaccaro, a basketball promoter who had been in the ranks with Nike since 1977, had pushed Jordan’s name to the top of the list. Vaccaro had long suggested that Nike quit its concentration of the NBA, which was too expensive, and focus on college basketball and had been instrumental in orchestrating this early move towards NCAA coaches in the late 1970s. Vaccaro bet his job with Nike on Jordan, arguing, “I’d pay him whatever it takes to get him,” opting to sign Jordan alone over ten other guys for the same price. Hesitant to spend the money it would take to get Jordan, Strasser decided, “unless it was possible to make one big marketing package—tie the brand, the
product, the advertising, and the athlete into one personality—... they should forget it." Having forayed into various other markets, such as leisure wear, in an attempt to regain position and recoup their losses from having missed the aerobics boom from which Reebok profited, Nike "was clearly a company in a frantic search for its thing." Nike was also a company that was about to have to face its shareholders with quarter-ending results in August 1984 of a 65% decline in earnings.

Thus, as Strasser put it, "If Jordan does what we think he can, and if we can execute, this can be big. Nike is going back to sport, where we belong." But for Nike, these were a lot of "ifs." The company was taking a huge risk. What if Jordan did not perform in the NBA? What if he was injured? Contracting Jordan would be a huge risk taken not only on his potential, but also on the potential of the market to support signature products. He was little known by the public other than serious college basketball fans. Creative Director Peter Moore described the movement toward Jordan thus:

“It’s pretty clear that he’s a hell of a basketball player and he seems to have a pretty decent personality. At least our guys, the guys that were scouts for Nike, you know, say that the guy is a good kid. So Rob comes to me and says, I wanna get this guy because we need to get, we need something to happen, but I don’t just want to sign another basketball player. I wanna make something out, I think we can make something out of this guy. So, we meet with his agent, a guy named David Falk, and we go back and forth, and David Falk says I wanna call this thing Air Jordan. Um, and in addition to that, we built a whole program around it where it was an autographed shoe and nobody in the team business had ever done this. I mean, a signature shoe in a team business has not ever been a big thing. So we did it..."

Such signature endorsements were generally reserved for athletes in individual sports, like track and field or tennis, whose successes could be attributed to their own personal success and could be more directly connected to the brand. Despite this precedent, Rob Strasser shook hands with sports agent David Falk, with whom he had already done about fifty athlete endorsement deals,
at a Saturday night post-Olympics party “on a deal that would leave Nike’s past in track and field behind, and catapult the company into a very different future.” Thus, a new era, not only for Nike but for sports promotions as well, was born.

The Air Jordan Launch

Never having met Michael Jordan, the Nike executives flew the rookie and his family to Portland for the Nike pitch. Peter Moore had already discussed the Jordan concept with Falk, whose idea it was to call the potential brand “Air Jordan,” and began to conceptualize the creative image that they would ask Jordan to build. Moore felt that “Air Jordan” was not a bad name and that it made sense because “Nike had this thing called Air that nobody ever understood yet, but we had it and it was sitting in these shoes. And this guy could fly and his name was Jordan, so it seemed a pretty good idea.” So at the same time that the Nike executives were watching the investment in the Olympic athletes of their Chiat/Day-produced Cities advertising campaign, they also had their eye on Jordan as he helped lead the U.S. to a victory over Spain in the Olympic Finals in Los Angeles. People were amazed by his performance and thought, as the Spanish coach articulated, “He’s not human. He’s a rubber man… Michael Jordan? Very, very good. Very quick. Very fast. Very, very good. Jump, jump, jump.” Rob Strasser and Peter Moore took the lead in developing the presentation for Jordan and they only had a few weeks to do it. As was typical of the Nike marketing and promotional process, these two men relied not on market research data to develop their strategy, but rather on sports news—the morning sports page and ESPN at night—and on their understanding of the athlete. They would talk about what type of design and image would be comfortable for the athlete, and they made their decisions
about this by listening to Jordan and by examining their own reaction to and feelings about him.\textsuperscript{105}

Nike had Chiat/Day put together a video of Jordan highlights using the Pointer Sisters “Jump.” They offered him a trademark, print ads, posters, and perhaps most importantly, drawings and samples of the unique shoes and clothes in the colors of the Chicago Bulls that would become Jordan’s signature. Basketball players had always worn white shoes. But according to Moore, “Nike had been one of the first companies to bring in bright colored basketball shoes. So, the idea was to say let’s take this symbol, put him in some colored basketball shoes because he’s going to be spectacular and let’s call attention to him by doing this. Because otherwise, he is just gonna be another guy just wearing a logoed shoe.”\textsuperscript{106} Thus, between Nike, who had been the running shoe company that got away with marketing bright athletic shoes and Jordan, who they felt could get away with almost anything, they were going to break the color barrier on the basketball court. Even more, they were going to build a program around an autographed shoe, something that had never been done in the team business before. Upon Falk’s urging, they were going to treat Jordan like a tennis star.\textsuperscript{107} They told Jordan, “You are going to be a brand. Air Jordan is going to be a sub-brand of Nike.”\textsuperscript{108}

But both Jordan and Knight seemed to lack initial enthusiasm for the proposed relationship. Knight had stopped by the meeting to say hello to the Jordans but, according to Moore, Knight “was scared we were going to spend a fortune doing it. Basically, he was disgruntled with the company and couldn’t figure out what to do with it. Basically, he had been a performance athlete all of his life, started a company that had become a performance company, had skyrocketed, and then suddenly hit some competition, some hard times, and didn’t know quite what to do with it.”\textsuperscript{109} At the same time, Jordan attended the meeting with Nike only because his mother
persuaded him and he did so with Adidas still in his mind. It seems that even as Jordan left the
meeting with Nike, he was still intent on signing with Adidas.\footnote{110}

As yet unconvinced by the Nike pitch, Jordan saw Converse and Adidas. Converse told
Jordan he would be an athlete at the same table as—and with no more pay than—basketball’s
best like Dr. J and Larry Bird. And Adidas, with a bevy of basketball endorsements and a lack of
motivation to front the money for another, was not prepared to support Jordan in the way Nike
was.\footnote{111} Even so, Jordan was so intent on Adidas that he told them that if they even came close to
matching the Nike deal, he would go with them.\footnote{112} Falk had secured Jordan the third highest
package for an NBA rookie when he negotiated a $4 million, five-year package that would score
him about $600,000 in his first season with the Bulls;\footnote{113} and despite the earnings losses of Nike at
the time, Falk was able to negotiate a Nike offer of $2.5 million over five years, plus annuities,
signing bonuses, and most importantly a stake in the success of the Air Jordan signature brand.
Rather than giving Jordan a lump sum only, they offered a percentage of the profits of the
products bearing his name and, in doing so, gave him investment in the success of the brand. To
back up the efforts, Nike also guaranteed to spend at least one million in promotion, an amount
that they actually far exceeded in the end.\footnote{114} Adidas did not come close and a legendary
partnership between the rising star and the struggling Nike was born.

Nike executives announced the still-unsigned deal with Jordan, along with corporate
restructuring moves that included Phil Knight’s return from hiatus as Nike’s president, at the
1984 shareholders’ meeting in an apparent attempt to pacify concerns about the company’s
financial struggles. Stock was at $9.00, close to book value, and Nike would be tightening the
rope on manufacturing costs, inventory, and would be laying off about 10% of its work force.\footnote{115}
As accounts of the meeting suggested, “There didn’t seem to be much response from the crowd
to the deal they hoped would turn the company around. Clearly, few shareholders had ever heard of Michael Jordan, who had yet to play a regular season game in the NBA.” Fortune did a short article questioning Nike’s decision to sign such an unprecedented deal at a time when the company appeared to be sinking. But they were searching for something to give the company a boost, and Jordan seemed to be just that. Jordan’s relative anonymity would turn to infamy beginning with a 1985 spot from Chiat/Day called “Jordan Flight,” which highlighted the incredible grace and prowess of Jordan and his new relationship with Nike.

In fact, the very thing that Moore had developed to call attention to Jordan was also what reinvigorated attention on Nike—color. Jordan wore his red and black Air Jordan Nike shoes for the first time in a preseason Bulls basketball game at Madison Square Gardens in September of 1984. The NBA banned the shoe for violation of the league’s “uniformity of uniform” clause, the violation of which would be result in a $1,000 penalty to the player the first violation and $5,000 the second, and a Bulls forfeiture for the third time. Strasser advised Jordan to wear the shoes for the opening home game and promised that Nike would cover the fine, but they relented to the stress of Chicago Bulls general manager Rod Thorn and Jordan ended up wearing a white Nike shoe with a red Swoosh that first night. In his next game, Jordan wore his new signature red and black shoe for $1,000.

**Figure 2. The famed red and black Air Jordan I**

(www.air-jordans.com)
The shoes were the hit of the game. Steve Aschberner, sports writer for the *Chicago Journal*, said, “Michael Jordan is not the most incredible, the most colorful, the most amazing, the most flashy, or the most mind-boggling thing in the NBA. His shoes are.” This was strong publicity for the new signature shoes. Moore summed up the move by saying, “So, anyway, we ended up signing him. Big deal, got the shoes made, then had the shoes banned which was even better because now everybody wanted to buy them. And we did the ad, we did a television thing around him and I think the closing line was, ‘Who said man was not meant to fly?’”

Strasser and Moore planned a television advertisement that would take advantage of this new publicity and the appeal of shoes that had been banned.

With the shoe not yet even in retail stores, the men worked with Chiat/Day to create a thirty-second spot featuring Jordan simply bouncing a basketball, while the camera scanned him from head to toe. The voice-over spoke, “On September 15, Nike created a revolutionary new basketball shoe. On October 18, the NBA threw them out of the game. Fortunately, the NBA can’t keep you from wearing them. Air Jordans from Nike.” Thus, the commercial did not clearly state that the shoes were banned because of their colors, and instead implied a connection to the revolutionary features. NBA Commissioner, David Stern, who had banned the flashy shoes approved the ad because it was funny and because by that time he had realized the benefit that “Air” Jordan was going to have for the growing NBA. The NBA’s last big superstar, “Dr. J.” Erving, had entered the scene over a decade ago, but with Jordan’s arrival the league felt a revival, as cable television ratings shot up 20% in a year and game attendance rose. The NBA figured that Jordan pulled in fifty season tickets every day at about $500 a shot. By the fourth week in the season, Bulls attendance had doubled over the previous year, and gate revenues were
up 50 percent. The Bulls had won 65 percent of their games.” The New York Times Magazine related the following:

“Rod Thorn, the former general manager of the Bulls, called Falk and complained, “Dammit, David, you’re turning the guy into a tennis player.’
‘Exactly,’ said Falk. The league office backed the Bulls. And although all the principals deny that the confrontation was choreographed in advance, the result was a Punch and Judy show in which the team and the league played heavies and everyone—Jordan, Nike, the Bulls and the league—benefited from the publicity.”

Jordan’s popularity quickly began to grow. And, for the first time, Nike had an opportunity to pull together the product, the athlete, and the demand for an unprecedented success in America. Unfortunately, with ten weeks left until the December launch to the sales force, Nike did not yet have a product in development. Rob Strasser felt that he had learned some lessons about the process of marketing in his role as Marketing Director. He felt that marketing was not primarily about ideas, but rather about execution, and to execute the launch of Air Jordan, he was going to have to reach his hand in every part of the company. Rob Strasser considered this realization to have been the moment “Nike discovered marketing, and the day Knight would get his wish to ‘make it all tie’.” Nike Advertising Manager Cindy Hale considered the Air Jordan campaign to be not only Nike’s but also the athletic footwear and apparel industry’s first integrated marketing and advertising campaign. But the execution of this new understanding of marketing not only changed the way Nike did business; it was disruptive for the company, as a new “Launch Group” headed by Rob Strasser was developed to streamline the rollout and was taking precedent over other projects long in the pipeline. Nike was continuing to make cutbacks and saw Reebok sales for 1984 multiply to $65 million from just $3.5 million in 1982. In the quarter ending in February 1985, the Nike that had been one of the fastest rising companies in corporate history was now reporting losses of $2.1 million.
The energy surrounding Jordan was building as Nike came closer to the launch. A May 1985 launch memo out of Exeter, Nike’s research and development lab, suggests “Air Jordan is Nike’s answer to the necessity of bringing ‘Air’ packaged in full grain leather, into an affordable price range. This product is a functional statement from the outsole clear up to the upper design.” According to this memo, the wholesale price was $35.00, with the retail to be set at $64.95. A children’s Jordan line retailed for less at $39 a pair and an expected fall launch of infant Baby Jordan would retail the shoes at $24.95 a pair.

The uncertainty overshadowing the movement toward the launch was, as it always is, the consumer response. Nike aired Chiat/Day’s commercial that showed Jordan’s developing trademark flight through the air and ended with the question “Who says man was not meant to fly?” during the NCAA Final Four Tournament on April 1, 1985. The advertisement was a testimonial of “Jordan’s ability to fly like a bird and the implication that the padded technologies bound to his feet had something to do with his agility and grace.” The Air Jordan line was released in stores that month and Nike received the answer to the consumer response question. The initial sales projections of 100,000 pairs of Air Jordan shoes were exceeded by over one million, with sales topping $100 million in Jordan’s first season of 1984-1985. Critics accused Nike of hyping the demand before the supply was ready. The initial release was, in fact, in limited quantities and limited to markets such as Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Sales exceeded company expectations with more than 1 million pairs sold in less than a month. Sports supply stores had waitlists of buyers. While 90 percent of retailers were selling the shoes at the $64.95 suggested retail price, others were selling them for as much as $80, while still other buyers were purchasing shoes not even in their sizes and reselling them on the street for $100. Retailers were reporting that kids and their parents were fighting in stores to
get the shoes. One retailer was quoted as saying, “Imagine, these young kids are coming in who will grow out of them in a few months and their parents are buying them at $64 a pair.”

Regardless of the price Nike had set for the shoes, the over-demand for them was creating a situation in which consumers themselves were inflating the price of these coveted shoes. NBA spokesperson Terry Lyons, when asked if he had a pair of Air Jordans, replied, “I can’t wear them around here… I’m afraid they’d be taken away from me on the way to work by some kid with a gun.” This statement would foretell things to come.

Peter Moore summed up events by saying,

“That television commercial, together with the shoes, together with the poster of the flying man, together with the whole in-store thing, it was just an instant success. It was just bam. And that showed us that with a small group of people—the whole thing was put together by 8 people at Nike—controlling the whole package from the product to the advertising to the in-store to the way the kid dressed and acted, you had this whole entire thing together and you control the image. And you could also control the volume. How loud did you wanna make it? How scarce did you wanna have it? We had kids, we had people lining up in stores before they opened, an hour before they opened, to get this product. You know, it was a phenomenal thing. And it was the first time it had ever been done. And it did break the fever. I mean, it did take, it broke the fever, didn’t solve the illness, but it broke the fever.”

Retailers cited the limited releases, the outrageous colors, Jordan’s charisma, and Nike’s commercials for the tremendous success. By the end of fiscal 1986, sales of Air Jordan shoes hit $88 million. Nike saw Jordan as their shining star and determined that he “ought to be a part of the brand” in the future. The news media proclaimed the Air Jordan basketball shoe “a slam-dunk success at $65 a pair.” In the basketball category, Nike was leading.
In the ensuing eight years, Nike’s advertising budget went from under $20 million to over $150 million, and new Michael Jordan shoes came out with each new selling season. Soon after the initial Jordan advertising, Nike reevaluated their advertising agencies. Cindy Hale, Nike’s advertising manager, argued in a memo to Rob Strasser and Peter Moore that they no longer needed two agencies and should pick one. Wieden & Kennedy, who believed “Nike was special,” had built themselves up operationally and were more prepared than before to take on bigger projects, and they had a strong ability to communicate technical information. While their media planning was as-yet unimpressive, there was evidence of movement to improve on this. Hale concluded, “Wieden-Kennedy has turned out some real turds but their work the past 6 months has been increasingly mature and right-on. I think Wieden-Kennedy is a better long-term investment.” In the end, they chose the agency that they felt would treat Nike’s future like their
own, the agency that had been formed around Nike back in 1981—Wieden & Kennedy. A memo on the matter concluded that effective on November 1, 1985, Wieden & Kennedy would recoup all new business with a monthly fee of $60,000.\textsuperscript{146}

Initial industry reports indicated both Nike and Chiat/Day had denied rumors of having severed their relationship even as November 1985, but by June 1986 it was clear that Chiat/Day would no longer hold the Nike account.\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Advertising Age} reported the decision as having to do with cuts in their promotional budget after two quarters of loss, and a decision to deemphasize their television and image-based advertising that had been the jurisdiction of Chiat/Day. Instead, Nike would focus on less costly print campaigns and would “retain a consistent look, dictated by the company’s Creative Director Peter Moore and VP-Marketing Rob Strasser, who played a major role in the determining that look.”\textsuperscript{148} Other indications suggested that physical distance and relationships between the agency and Nike played an important role in the decision. Moore complained that Nike did not get enough of the “heart of Chiat/Day, which was a guy named Lee Clow, who was their Creative Director.”\textsuperscript{149} Clow attributed the change additionally to the relationship between the agency and Nike. Clow described it in this way:

“I was basically the creative director Los Angeles, Chiat/Day Los Angeles at that time but basically if you ask Peter or Rob, as they got more annoyed with some things I’ll tell you about, I’d like to not make this overblown in this deal, but it’s true. When they came to the agency, they said, “we don’t want all the bullshit that comes with an agency. We want some guys that know how to make ads. And they basically latched onto me and said Lee’s the guy that we want. And, as we had some successes with our work, Jay would be seen quoted in the press talking about Nike and he’d be seen talking about Nike with a… taking a little bit too much credit for finding Nike’s center, finding the athletic core and showing Nike the way kind of shit… first I heard Moore and Strasser saying “what is this shit Chiat’s talking, we never even met, we never even talked to Chiat. What does he know about Nike?” And pretty soon I found out that Phil Knight had also seen Jay talking about Nike and that gave Phil an uncomfortable feeling. Here’s this guy I never met taking some kind of credit for Nike. And I think that was one of the real detriments to our ongoing relationship that, you know, that these people at Chiat/Day, who weren’t the people that they believed worked for Nike, were out
there taking some kind of credit for this thing, combined with, very interesting
dynamics, combined with Reebok was on a role with stuff, and they were sitting
there questioning everything, saying, well, what’s Reebok doing that we’re not
doing.”

Despite Chiat/Day’s impactful and award-winning advertising for Nike, Wieden & Kennedy
recouped the entirety of Nike’s business and took over advertising for the Air Jordan line; they
thus continued a relationship that would be the foundation of one of the most popular icons in the
world, developing creative material that would secure a place for Nike, Jordan and Wieden &
Kennedy in corporate, marketing and advertising histories.

**Jordan Broke the Fever, But Didn’t Cure the Illness**

Nike still needed to come up with the next big thing. Air Jordan had helped reinvigorate Nike
but was not going to save the whole company, nor did the Jordan line enjoy a smooth upward
climb. Nike still had to contend with the growth of Reebok and their soft leather aerobics shoe,
along with the female market that Nike did not seem to understand. Additionally, Nike had
allowed retailers to over-order on the second round of Air Jordans, they had too many products
in the market, and the inventory of shoes and apparel was rising, as was retailer demand for
fashionable Reeboks instead of performance Nikes. When Jordan broke his foot and was forced
to sit out for sixty-four games, Nike had to face the risk they had taken by investing so much in
one man.

The first years of Jordan’s collaboration with Nike have been touted as a turn-around for the
company. But in order to turn around, they had to contend with some troublesome internal
problems. The mid-1980s was a tumultuous time for Nike. By May 1985, Nike had already laid
off ten percent of its work force and closed down their domestic Exeter, NH factory, moving the
research and development lab closer to Nike headquarters. Nike’s “Black Friday” of December
5, 1986 did not help the situation, as they fired another ten percent of the domestic workforce.\textsuperscript{154} Through 1985 and 1986, there was an exodus of “old-timers” as they quit or were fired “because they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, work through the system… [W]hen sales plummeted, profits slipped, and another company was succeeding in the same market, blame fell close to home.”\textsuperscript{155} Gone were the days when an employee would be mocked for wearing a coat and tie, when tequila fountains and practical jokes were staples at sales meetings, and where the locker-room mentality that had defined the ethos of Nike dominated. Nike and news reports insisted that Rob Strasser, who had recently taken a 5-month hiatus from the company, was not a part of the layoffs of 1985 and 1986. Discord had been growing and Strasser had become a controversial figure among Nike employees. John Jaqua, a member of the Nike Board of Directors and an attorney himself like Strasser, felt that while Rob Strasser had made significant contributions and did well with the Jordan launch, he did overstate his own role at times and was at least partially responsible for mistakes in the aerobics market that led to Nike’s decline in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{156} Advertising manager Patsy Mest Stobie, who worked under Rob Strasser, also concluded that he was a controversial figure, but attributed this to his “creative mind.”\textsuperscript{157} And Nelson Farris, who joined the company in 1973, just after Strasser, and who eventually become Director of Internal Relations, considered Strasser’s risk-taking nature to have been a major contribution to the company, in line with the contributions of Phil Knight.\textsuperscript{158} By 1987 he and other company insiders who had grown their careers as they grew Nike, would resign from the company under a strained connection with Knight and the Nike they once knew.\textsuperscript{159} The company had changed.

Nonetheless, the long-term financial picture was looking up thanks to Air Jordan sales and some tightening of the company.\textsuperscript{160} In 1986, Nike reached the coveted billion-dollar mark, but this accomplishment was overshadowed by the fact that Nike was number two to Reebok and
was dampened by the major layoffs that occurred that year. Knight was disgruntled and Rob Strasser knew that they had to come up with something that would rebuild the brand. Once again, Nike turned to Air.

**The Air Apparent**

From the first air shoe, the Tailwind, in 1978, putting and keeping air cushioning in the shoes posed technical problems that resulted in heavier shoes and shoe blowouts. Over the years, the air pack had gotten smaller and smaller because of the difficulty of putting the bag in polyurethane. When the Air Jordan shoes came out, the air bag was so small it seemed almost ridiculous to claim, but no one seemed to care. But in 1985, when Rob Strasser and Peter Moore were looking for their new idea, an old one resurfaced. The research and development people at Exeter had played with a concept soon after the rollout of the Tailwind called “visible Air” to deal with consumer uncertainty about what benefit the cushioning Air provided. The Exeter people had been trying to construct bigger bags and showed Rob Strasser and Moore a shoe with a hole cut in it so that you could see the bags. Moore recounts,

> “Well, I thought that was an ingenious fit and I told them I didn’t give a damn if the thing worked or didn’t work, I mean, if the hole did something or didn’t do something. But, it was a great way of finally showing somebody what this thing with air was. Because people didn’t grab, they didn’t understand, we could do diagrams and anything else you wanted, but they didn’t get it. They didn’t really know what it was. This thing you could feel it, touch it, if you poked a hole in it, it would go sssss. I mean, it was visual… and they had had it for awhile.”

Nike had been sitting on this idea for a while, but now they knew they needed something to make the technology tangible to consumers.

Not everyone was enthused. Some Nike men still maintained the old Nike mentality that Moore called the *Sports Illustrated* attitude. He was referring to Nike’s counterculture attitude that exalted the purity of the sport. For years, Nike snubbed the idea of doing a *Sports Illustrated*
ad because it would be too commercial.\textsuperscript{162} The flashy, hyped commercial sphere epitomized for them in the \textit{Sports Illustrated} style was at odds with their notion of the Nike they knew, a company connected directly to the athlete and built on the athlete and whose message was one of performance and function, not flash. These attitudes, he argued, were surfacing in some of the response to the “visible Air.” In other words, “It wasn’t pure. It didn’t do anything”\textsuperscript{163}—the visibility of Air did not change its functionality and was for show. But others like Moore felt that showing Air provided consumers with something tangible to connect them to functionality of the technology. Moore’s response to it took precedent, and the potential he saw in it began to take shape.

At the same time, other ideas were brewing that soon became packaged together under the Air line as the Air Pack, with the Air Max shoe that included the visible air concept, and a cross-trainer called the Air Trainer. But the Nike name had taken some crippling hits and key Nike executives began to think that Nike’s brand value had diminished so much that the Nike name was going to hurt the Air Pack. As Lee Clow explained it, “Nike had been having this incredible success—success that sometimes comes to these young entrepreneurial companies and can almost get out of hand if you don’t manage it properly. The kind of euphoria of ‘Hey, we can put our logo on anything and it will sell.’ And the idea that you can design all different kinds of fashion and because it’s Nike and the success was mushrooming.”\textsuperscript{164} Previously, Nike had been able to sell products that may not have lived up to the name simply because they had Nike on them; now that they had the right product, they worried that the Nike name would devalue it.\textsuperscript{165} Clow explained that Nike had been in a euphoric, “we can do anything” phase; coupled with the overwhelming success and proliferation of the brand that the company was not equipped fully to manage and the free-form and disunified communications strategy that had developed as a result,
this “we can do anything” approach was coming back to haunt them. With every misstep, their shoes had been showing up in discount houses and inventory dumps—Rob Strasser likened Nike to “a whorehouse.” Coupled with near-ubiquitous brand recognition in the United States, which would make their renegade posture hard to maintain, devaluation of the brand was a problem that would take quite some time to rectify.

But Rob Strasser and Peter Moore had a strong investment in the Nike image they had helped develop. Rob Strasser introduced a discussion of “what is Nike?” Nike executives knew that the majority of sneaker purchases sold for fashion, but the company was built on the belief that their job was to serve athletes and to promote performance technology. Fashion was simply referred to as “the f-word” if it was discussed at all. In reexamining Nike’s core, they determined, “It’s not soft leather. It’s great athletes and great endorsements and great posters using those endorsements… And it was this only technical thing we had called air. The only thing that made us different from Reebok or Tiger or New Balance or anybody. We had this thing called Air.”

They decided to rebuild the equity of the Nike logo and brand based on Air and a return to the core of performance on which Nike had been built.

While Nike had built its brand on strong endorsements, this new Nike Air package was being developed without an athlete. Instead, it was built on a “Revolution” that was based on the technology unmatched by their competitors. Wieden & Kennedy developed the famous Nike “Revolution” ads featuring the Beatles’s song of the same name and suggesting that Nike Air technology would revolutionize the industry. Nike dedicated $7 million of their total $22 million advertising budget to the “Revolution” campaign that would run from March through May of 1987, with the majority of the exposure on television. They further supported the launch with $40 million in promotions and endorsements. With sales and earnings continuing to drop in the
1987 fiscal year, Nike had turned to the 12 models of the Nike Air line to reposition the company and counted on this line to present a message of quality and performance. Many, including Knight, attributed Nike’s rejuvenated run for the position of industry leadership to the Nike Air line of shoes, which retailed for up to $110 to $135 per pair and helped bring the company to the $1 billion mark. The new Nike Air models that had started under Rob Strasser were a huge hit and enough to have industry insiders thinking that Nike was back. Nike had returned from its venture into fashion marketing to its core as an athletic performance company, and they were looking for ways to continue to reinforce that message. On the heels of the “Revolution” campaign and after a bit of trial-and-error, Nike would reiterate to the world their core as an athletic performance company and their theme of empowerment with the now-infamous “Just Do It” tagline.

One barrier to unifying Nike’s overall philosophy as one of empowerment comes in the form of a commercial that ran in the Spring 1988, just before the “Just Do It” slogan broke. The commercial, “Lesson about Intimidation” was criticized in the advertising trade press. Steven Silberman of Advertising Age wrote, “The ad for Nike basketball shoes is certainly one we can do without. Showing three black youths ascending the subway steps and associating their appearance with ‘intimidation’ is precisely the sort of stereotyping that the black community finds offensive. The fact that the characters are wearing Nike shoes does not soften this impression, and may even be lost among other images. I hope Nike will reconsider this ad.” There are several problems with Silberman’s critique. The ad depicts five young men, with three in the foreground, exiting the subway at Uptown and the Bronx, New York. Of the five, only two of the three in the foreground are black and neither of the men in the background appears to be one man is carrying a basketball, and since five men could make up a basketball team a viewer
could reasonably assume that the message is one of intimidation controlled by the rules of sport. However, the music is menacing and the men are wearing street clothes, complicating interpretations of the message and conflicting with messages of empowerment since intimidation implies disempowerment on the receiving end.

But with the first “Just Do It” commercial that aired on July 1, 1988 and featured 80-year-old distance runner Walt Stack, Nike’s focus returned. The impact of this campaign was tremendous. The message was one of empowerment—“it speaks to the restraint and inhibition in everyday life that keep people from the experience of transcendence. Nike provides a language of self-empowerment—no matter who you are, no matter what your physical, economic or social limitations… The phrase is wonderfully ambiguous… The Nike philosophy challenges us to confront, and hopefully, to overcome barriers.” In 1999, Advertising Age ranked the tagline “Just Do It” as second only to DeBeers’ “A Diamond Is Forever” among their list of most memorable slogans of the 20th Century and the slogan became so much a part of social milieu that Time magazine would use those three words—Just Do It—to capture the ethos of the baby boom generation. The “Just Do It” campaign contained a variety of athletes and popular figures, including the cross-training Bo Jackson.

While the Air Jordan and the “Revolution” campaigns had been pushing various types of Air, Nike was looking for a way to advance the cross-trainer. Bo Jackson, who was tracked by Nike representatives since his college days, seemed a perfect fit. Coming up on 1986, Bo Jackson was known well enough to be able to expect a large incentive to go with Nike. Like they had done with Jordan, Nike pitched an athlete image with a logo and apparel line. Nike signed a $100,000 a year contract with Bo Jackson and only days later, the Heisman Trophy winner turned down a very lucrative contract to play football for the Tampa Buccaneers so that he might take up a
“hobby” of playing baseball with the Kansas City Royals that would earn him a comparatively meager salary.\textsuperscript{181} The potential of this risk did not go over well with Phil Knight, and Rob Strasser was not pleased with the initial result, either.\textsuperscript{182} But the longer-term payoff was the stuff of legends. By 1988, Nike had leveraged the impeccable image and graceful skill of Michael Jordan, had introduced one of the most famous slogans, “Just Do It,” into the lexicon and had capitalized on Bo Jackson’s multisport capabilities in advertising their cross-trainers in spots that gained both industry and popular acclaim.\textsuperscript{183} Revenues were up 33\% over the previous year and Phil Knight proclaimed, “We had a glorious youth, a stumbling adolescence, and we hope to come out as a tall, strong adult.”\textsuperscript{184}

The following sections explore the growth of Nike’s image through the development of the Spike and Mike campaigns, which made a commercial connection to the inner-city, hip-hop culture that had long been associating itself with name-brand athletic wear, the introduction of Bo Jackson into the “Just Do It” campaign, and the development of the wildly popular “Bo Knows” advertising. On the heels of the “Revolution” campaign, which brought Nike back to its core of performance technology and put the company in position to vie for industry leadership, the Spike and Mike and the Bo Jackson campaigns helped solidify their return to the top.

**It’s Gotta Be the Shoes**

By the mid-1980s, Michael Jordan and Nike had become so closely linked that a Chicago Bulls teammate suggested to *Sports Illustrated* that they should call the company “Mikey.”\textsuperscript{185} While Nike was called “Mikey,” Jordan was being called “Air” and “His Airness.” In the minds of many, Nike and Jordan were tantamount. Jordan’s cultural clout was growing and his heroic image was building. But still, the second round Air Jordan shoe was ahead of its time and Nike
was not putting dollars behind it because it was not selling. Wieden & Kennedy copywriter Jim Riswold along with agency producer Bill Davenport came up with a concept that would team Jordan with up-and-coming film director Spike Lee. Riswold recounts that he and Davenport saw a movie trailer for Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) and noticed that Lee’s Mars Blackmon character never took off his Air Jordans. Air Jordans were so essential to Mars Blackmon’s “sense of identity that he refused to take the shoes off while making love.”

Intrigued by this idea, Riswold penned the :30 “Hangtime” ad, the first in a series of up to seventeen spots in a sixteen year long “Spike and Mike” campaign of ads featuring Mars Blackmon that include “Cover,” “Nola,” “Can/Can’t,” “It’s Gotta Be the Shoes,” and “Aeronautics,” all of which are based on characters in Lee’s films. Riswold and Davenport easily recruited Lee, whose interest in basketball and Michael Jordan was incentive enough to accept the idea of a Mike and Spike spot. When the idea was initially conceived, Rob Strasser was still on leave from the company and was not comfortable signing off on the idea, so they filmed a tape of Jordan pitching to Knight from the lines of Lee’s film *She’s Gotta Have It*, asking, “Please baby please, do a commercial with Spike,” referencing scenes from the film in which Mars begged Nola Darling not to dump him. Consumers eventually would see these lines recycled in Lee’s “It’s Gotta Be the Shoes” spot for Nike, in which Mars Blackmon begged Nike to send him a pair of new Air Jordans.

However, Knight did not respond to the initial pitch and pleas to the newly-instituted vice-president, Brendan Foster, were fruitless. Foster felt that Air Jordan, with its supply problems and inability to bring Nike completely out of the market chasm, had been a failure and he was not willing to supply the line with more advertising dollars. According the Strasser and Becklund (1991), “Moore walked out of the meeting thinking that Nike no longer gave a shit about the
athlete. Nike had come full circle from the days when it was out to service athletes, not merely profit by them. Now the marketing manager and the owner of the company barely even acknowledged Jordan’s existence. Whether that was true or not, the idea was tabled for the time being and at the very least Jordan clearly was not forgotten by all.

When Rob Strasser returned from leave and filled an undefined position working with Peter Moore, the two men turned their sights back to Michael Jordan. They met with the Jordans and discussed a concept of longevity. Increasingly, Michael Jordan was contributing to the Nike meetings and his maturity seemed evident to the Nike men. Rob Strasser and Moore presented three options to move forward, the last of which entailed making Michael Jordan a label in his own right and updating the now-juvenile logo to better reflect the distinctiveness and timelessness that they knew Jordan could represent. With that, they unveiled the “Jump Man” logo—a simple and clean silhouette of Jordan’s famous poster dunk—that has since been emblazoned on Jordan shoes, apparel and in the minds of millions around the world.

**Figure 4. Nike Jumpman Image**
(www.nike.com/jumpman23)

Moore argued, “You should never change a logo unless the brand it represents has changed. We have that case here.” But the men were worried that Knight wouldn’t approve of it and Moore speculated, “We have probably the one human being in all of sports history we can make
industry history with here. I sure hope Knight knows that.” Soon thereafter, both Rob Strasser and Moore left Nike; but Wieden & Kennedy’s Jim Riswold remained persistent about the concept of a Spike and Mike campaign and “badgered his Nike contacts” for several months until they agreed to support the idea. The campaign broke in February 1988 to promote the new Air Jordan II line with a series of commercials that built on the original “Hang Time” concept to include the character of Mars Blackmon in Air Jordans.

**Inspiration from the Street: “Spike and Mike”**

The development of the idea for the “Spike and Mike” commercials was inspired by Spike Lee’s independent use of Air Jordans as signifiers of a specific aesthetic of the cultural style and moment he was portraying in his films. The movies were referencing cultural products, the meaning of which had been developed on the streets, on basketball courts, and through the advertising which, in turn, referenced Lee’s films and played off of decades of advertising that had implied various athletic abilities resulted from the consumption of branded products. Lee has been credited with having made “a more indelible impact on Hollywood and the Hip-Hop generation” than any other filmmaker. Spike Lee’s films countered Hollywood’s exploitation of the African American and hip-hop culture, and offered powerful social commentary that he also translated into the advertising work he did. Whatever impact one might attribute to Lee, few could argue that he has not been controversial; in fact, Lee himself has admitted to seeking controversy, even at the risk of offending, if it brings important issues into public discourse. Indeed, Lee helped issues of race and prejudice to the forefront of late 1980s and early 1990s concerns. His 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* has been called “the standard bearer for Hollywood
on race relations” and was named the most important film of the 1980s. Lee himself has been labeled a cultural hero.

When Spike Lee included a scene in Do the Right Thing in which the character “Buggin’ Out” was outraged by a cyclist who inadvertently scuffed his bright and clean Air Jordans, he was doing so not as part of a paid deal with Nike, but rather as a reference to the sacredness instilled in this commodity through inner-city cultural practices and his desire “to wardrobe as realistically as possible.” His “rebelliousness and candor” have brought attention to his films and have also made him appealing to the core market of 14 to 24 year olds so desired by advertisers like Nike. But some scholars have critiqued the reciprocal use of Lee’s characters in Nike advertising. One author calls Mars Blackmon’s appearance in Nike ads an insidious example of cultural colonization: “Through that character above all, Lee set the power of street style and speech to work not just in the service of an imagined racial community but an imaginary blackness which exists exclusively to further the interests of corporate America.” Others have countered that the manner in which appropriation occurs is an important factor in determining how a message should be judged, and that Nike avoids appropriation for the sake of “badge-value” in the Mike and Spike campaign and in some of its subsequent social responsibility ads.

In contrast to critics who have argued that Nike has, with no sense of subtlety, claimed that Michael Jordan’s incredible athletic ability is a direct result of his Nike shoes and thereby has misled consumers, others have argued that in fact the Spike and Mike campaign relies “on an assumption that consumers would not be persuaded by the old claims anymore—that the advertisers are sharing an in-joke with viewers that this stuff has always been baloney.” With such an unlikely candidate for dunking as Mars Blackmon, viewers know that no shoe will help
them dunk like Jordan and so the idea is for laughs. The ads poke fun at Michael Jordan, Mars Blackmon and Nike. In this view, the ads are much different from and more than attempts to convince consumers that they, too, can “Be Like Mike” (to draw from a Gatorade slogan) if only they wear his signature shoes. The ads are ironic and reflexive, drawing from consumers’ historical understanding of advertising conventions and developing Nike as “a self-effacing company with a sense of humor.”

These commercials were also an important creative break for Nike; as copywriter Jim Riswold claimed, the Spike and Mike ads were some of the first Nike ads to use humor. The use of humor, in his view, while still centered on Nike’s core of sport and performance, was a friendly way of introducing a large company to individual consumers. But a cultural reading of the ads demonstrated to many viewers, through Lee’s use of language and imagery, that Nike was now engaged in a larger social history of race and advertising. For some, this was another example of white corporate appropriation of black style. But the relationship between Spike, Mike and Nike represents and is embedded in a history and system of cultural exchange more complex than white corporate appropriation of black language and imagery, and the relationship had a tremendous impact on American understanding of race relations as criticisms and debate over the affiliation developed and flourished, building both a brand and an icon.

If recall is a measure of success, these campaigns were just that, having been listed among the top 10 best-recalled ads by Advertising Age in late February and March 1990. Fortune magazine called the spots legendary: “You can’t really overstate their importance in painting Nike as the brand of athletic performance… These ads changed the mechanics of everything we do. They redefined what is celebrity.” They also redefined the relationship between advertising and race. Of this new relationship, Spike Lee indicated, “Never before in the history of American
business has a company put a black individual as the face of a company, and what Phillip [Knight] did was revolutionary.” Others recognized the collaboration similarly as a groundbreaking shift in representations of African Americans and as just good business sense. A Newsweek article pointed out, “The athletic-wear giant is one of a growing number of companies that have begun to use ads made not only with, but by, blacks. The reason isn’t hard to figure out: blacks have become a powerful consumer force… To reach them… marketers are striving for ads with an ‘authentic’ feel for black music, language and lifestyles.” Indeed, the authors argue, the Spike and Mike ads had “the look and feel of a rap video.”

Nike had given Spike Lee creative control over the series of ads. And copywriter Jim Riswold deferred to Lee’s understanding of the culture, with Lee adjusting the scripts “to fit Mars’ hip-hopping patter.” Indeed, there is evidence to the fact that Nike recognized as early as 1986 the importance of urban youth in setting trends, and they did organize at least some of their marketing around the potential of this market. Advertising Age reported that for the first time, Nike was focusing on the black consumer market in a national campaign with Wieden & Kennedy-developed print ads to run in Ebony, EM and Essence and cable television commercials on Black Entertainment Television (BET). The decision was based on market research that indicated the trend-setting potential of the black community.

But according to both Spike Lee and Nike representatives, the use of black language and imagery did not mean they were “targeting” black youth any more than other youth demographic. They employed this strategy because they believed it would appeal to a more general consumer market—that is, anyone in the market for a sneaker. Having black endorsers in basketball was more authentic, according to a Reebok spokesperson, because basketball was dominated by black athletes. Consumers, particularly in the youth market, were turned off when
they sensed that a message lacked authenticity. Phil Knight, not one to shy away from controversy, said of their decision to use figures such as Michael Jordan, “Distinctive personalities are important, but you don’t have to be loved. And color really doesn’t matter. A lot of people have written that we’ve signed these black stars to sell to kids in the inner city. We didn’t… We are looking for great personalities who cut across racial lines.” In fact, only 13.8% of Nike’s shoe sales in 1990 were to minorities. The trend-setting power of the black, urban market was the inspiration for this relationship and by the mid-1980s the urban market liked Nike. Nike would work to solidify that connection through some of its most prominent advertising campaigns.

**Jordan’s Nike Career**

In the meantime, the outward success of Nike and their advertising was not fully reflected in their internal relations. Michael Jordan, having watched the much of the Air Jordan team leave and hearing the news of departures by top management including Rob Strasser and Peter Moore, grew concerned that his line would not get the attention he expected. He met with Strasser and Moore, who had started their own company together, to discuss his future. The three agreed that he should never leave Nike and relinquish the successes there; but they also agreed that since Nike had never acted on a Jordan-based casual sportswear line previously suggested by Strasser and Moore, it would not be a conflict if Jordan started his own company to develop this idea with Nike a part of it. According to several accounts Knight refused the idea outright saying, “Michael Jordan without Nike won’t mean anything.” Knight’s remark took aim at the three men, Strasser, Moore and Jordan, who under Nike had built an icon. Nonetheless, on Strasser and Moore’s advice, as well as that of his parents, Jordan accepted an approximately $20 million,
7-year Nike offer in March 1989, essentially ensuring Michael Jordan’s entire basketball career would be in Nike shoes.²²³

For Nike, this multi-million dollar agreement was a good investment. Of the $1.2 billion in Nike sales in 1988, basketball accounted for $213 million, and the Air Jordan line was given much of the credit for this success.²²⁴ For the first time since 1986, when Reebok had secured Nike’s previous position as market-share leader in domestic athletic shoes, Nike had regained its position with 26% of the domestic market to Reebok’s 23%.²²⁵ While this success ran across Nike’s business lines, the basketball shoe segment showed a 35% sales increase with the prominent Michael Jordan advertising campaigns and the cross-trainer, promoted by Bo Jackson, posting a 51% sales jump. Of the market share duel between Nike and Reebok, the Wall Street Journal’s G. Christian Hill wrote, “Reebok evidently has regained some of that valuable commodity with The Pump, which competes with the Nike Air Pressure shoe in two categories: the highest-priced sneaker ever, and the most gimmick-laden sneaker ever.”²²⁶ For almost five years, Reebok and Nike had been battling it out to gain the lead in the $5 billion U.S. athletic shoe market. Reebok had debuted The Pump, which retailed in 1989 for $170;²²⁷ Nike’s nemesis to the Pump was the Air Pressure Shoe that was part of a 1990 line-up of shoes featuring Air technology and retailing between $100 and $135.²²⁸ Nike also unveiled in 1990 the new “Air Command Force” basketball shoe with a campaign featuring NBA rookie David Robinson²²⁹ and claimed a solid lead in the close battle with Reebok, securing 28% market share after several years in which it was too close to call.²³⁰

For Jordan’s part in his new deal with Nike, he had secured a larger marketing strategy that created a specialized segment based around Air Jordan, “a package that connected the shoes, colors, clothes, athlete, special Air Jordan logo, and other visual images, and the television
advertising that would set the other elements of the marketing onslaught into motion."\(^{231}\) The Air Jordan III was developed with the now-famous Jumpman image, fashioned after the spread-legged pose of Jordan in flight towards a dunk. According to former architect-turned-Creative Director Tinker Hatfield, who took over the design for the Air Jordan line, this was the first shoe to truly reflect Jordan’s personality at the time.\(^{232}\)

**The “Bolympics”**

After the Spike and Mike series, Riswold turned his efforts back to Bo Jackson for a series of spots that was termed the “Bolympics” in Nike circles.\(^{233}\) He had already debuted promoting the cross-trainers in three ads of the “Just Do It” series. In 1989, Jackson signed a lucrative deal with the L.A. Raiders. In a commercial that broke on July 11, 1989 during the Major League Baseball’s All-Star game, Bo was seen playing eight sports (an international version added soccer and cricket for a total of ten).\(^{234}\) A series of athletes offered testimonials of his various abilities and he was paired with Bo Diddley in a revelation of Bo’s limitations. The 60-second spot written by Jim Riswold, art directed by David Jenkins and directed by Joe Pytka was pronounced a Nike and Wieden & Kennedy success.\(^{235}\) Nike reportedly paid Jackson $1.4 million over four years between 1986 and 1990 to endorse their products\(^{236}\) and dedicated $10 million on the campaign.\(^{237}\) In fact, Nike advertising manager Scott Bedbury had encouraged Knight to double their investment in the “Bo Knows” spots to $12 million. The financially strapped company put all advertising support for running and basketball on hold to invest everything they could on the campaign for the back-to-school season.\(^{238}\) The incredible risk paid off as fans watched Nike stars like Michael Jordan and John McEnroe line up in a testimonial that Bo knows everything… but Diddley.\(^{239}\)
As Adweek critic Barbara Lippert points out, much of the hype surrounding Bo Jackson comes not from a consistently proven record (he had not yet played an entire football season and his stats in baseball were yet to prove him an all-star) but from the promise of his potential: “In our culture of hype, it’s actually fitting that the only place he’s reached his full potential is in advertising. Nike TV spots have brought attitude advertising to sports.”

A great deal of media attention offered free, added value to Nike’s investment in the campaign, and as sales of the new cross-training shoe rose, Nike commanded 80% of that market. Of the ads featuring Bo Jackson, even Reebok Chairman and CEO Paul Fireman thought them some of the best he had ever seen. Media critic Bob Garfield attributed the success of the Bo Jackson commercials to the authentic connection between a multisport player whose “cross-training grit is legendary” and Nike’s message: Just Do It. Jackson, in his actions and his reputation, stands for the idea.

Together, a relentless effort from the Nike Air “Revolution” campaign, the Spike Lee/Michael Jordan commercials and the “Just Do It” campaign series with “Bo Knows” brought Nike back to its core of performance—making performance fashionable—and helped the company regain its market lead in 1989. More than that, these campaigns became deeply engrained in American culture and vernacular, and secured Michael Jordan’s and Bo Jackson’s places as the first and second most famous athletes in the world and placed them on the thrones of “demigods.”

Certainly the story does not end here and Nike, as any company, continued to rise and fall in the market, but these campaigns in the latter part of the 1990s helped to make Nike a icon, emblematic of the complex processes of globalization—the swoosh, the revolution, the empowered call to action “Just Do It,” the company of Michael Jordan, the once counterculture running shoe company that became a badge and a casualty of urban cool; it was also the company that purportedly had low-wage, underage, foreign workers laboring in
shameful conditions to sell shoes for a company that had black kids killing each other in the name of their brand.

![Figure 5. Nike Annual Revenue: 1979-1992](Source: Nike Annual Reports)

**Figure 5. Nike Annual Revenue: 1979-1992**

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**Conclusion**

Histories of Nike tell of a company born out of a strong, passionate, and inspired connection to sport and competition. The company was founded by former track and field athlete Phil Knight, and employees were either athletes or sports enthusiasts. In the early days, sport was primary and competition was embodied in dedication to the company as in dedication to a team. Nike co-founder and track coach Bill Bowerman was instrumental in popularizing jogging as a mainstream activity in the United States, the derivative of which was growth of the Nike business. He was attracted to Knight’s idea to build an athletic shoe company because of his dissatisfaction with the current market for performance shoes, and he saw in BRS and Nike the
potential to provide athletes with more advanced shoes that were developed with their specialized needs in mind. Bowerman himself created some of Nike’s most advanced prototypes, such as the waffle sole, and was an inspiration for Nike’s research and development focus.

In the face of disputes with their supplier, Knight and BRS created Nike—not from consumer research data and sophisticated strategic market calculations, but off of a deadline and a dream. Carolyn Davidson’s $35 fat checkmark was coupled with an image of the winged goddess of victory that predates the supergas technology known to consumers as “Air” and any thought of the unified grace and power of Michael Jordan flying through the air to the net. The Swoosh of the logo did not yet reverberate with the swoosh of a Jordan net shot. The iconic imagery of Nike was constructed from an amalgam of serendipity, skill and calculated risks. The rapport built in the public eye between Nike and superhero Michael Jordan was not “magic,” but it was the result of the gravitation of various and complex forces that both shaped and was shaped by the world in which it exists.

In the early days of the company, BRS employees were selling the shoes out of their cars at various sporting events. Knight’s hiring practices were not based on previous experience or formal education in a position, but rather on his perception of people’s passion for sport. Based on this approach, he placed his friends and early insiders in key positions. When Rob Strasser was named head of marketing in 1977, he did not even know what an image was. As the company grew, they put the majority of their promotional budget into endorsements. Reflecting on their business success Phil Knight told Forbes, “The secret to the business is to build the kind of shoe professional athletes will wear, then put them on the pros. The rest of the market will follow.” With the introduction of the first Nike shoe to the market in 1972, with strong endorsements from and ties to track and field, and with the jogging boom, Nike began to
compete for market lead and by the early 1980s outpaced number one Adidas. With such growth in the market, Nike finally decided it was time to introduce itself on a national scale through advertising.

But financial and supply problems were looming for this company whose growth had overtaken its capacity. Phil Knight stepped down as head of the company, only to return a year later among image and control problems, and Reebok’s looming threat to their recently secured market lead. The company lost focus and dabbled in fashion as they tried to recoup from the neglected aerobics market. To regain position, they were determined to move away from the “f-word” they had courted to compete with Reebok and return to their core of athletic performance. Nike cut the number of endorsement deals and instead turned to potential and rising superstars like Michael Jordan. Their history of intuitive decision making aside, the risk of putting all of their resources on only a few athletes was not lost to the top Nike executives. Not only were they facing the potential that Michael Jordan could be hurt or not reach his potential, they were testing the market with the first signature shoe connected to a player from a team sport. By most accounts, the risk was far outpaced by the reward.

Air Jordans were launched at a suggested retail price of $64.95, not atypical of athletic shoes at the time; but facing over-demand, retailers and consumers alike took matters into their own hands, pricing and selling the shoes for upwards of $100. Some critics claimed that Nike had purposefully over-stimulated and undersupplied, but Nike was a company trying to come out of difficult times instigated by problems of oversupply. Their Air Jordan launch provided the company with the necessary support to trudge forward, but the mid-1980s were difficult years for the Nike, as they went through several rounds of layoffs and losses both financial and of seasoned executives who had helped build the company. Michael Jordan, too, entertained the
idea of leaving Nike but by that point the two had become synonymous in consumers’ minds and Jordan recognized the power of this relationship, deciding to reinforce it further with a long-term Nike contract and the eventual development of his own Nike-based Jordan brand.

Nike’s advertising budget grew significantly over the 1980s as the company began to reclaim ground in the market with their visible air that made their technology accessible to the consumer, and that they supported with now legendary campaigns including “Revolution,” “Just Do It,” “Bo Knows,” and the “Spike and Mike” advertising. Nike enjoyed incredible growth since the introduction of Air Jordans in 1985 and the basketball category was registering $415 million by 1989; with the help of Jackson’s image, Nike regained its position from Reebok as the number one sneaker company by the end of 1989.248

By 1990, Nike was back on top. But as leaders, they were called to account for their involvement in a variety of social concerns, from their labor practices abroad to their endorsement practices at home. In 1990, media attention on a series of crimes involving inner-city, black youth and athletic wear took aim at Nike. Numerous reports had surfaced of violence in the inner-cities in the name of Air Jordan shoes and other brand-name athletic wear and goods. These reports gained great media attention after New York Post columnist Phil Mushnick lashed out publicly at Nike, Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson for inciting violence by promoting their high-priced goods to poor, urban youth, instigating an equally public response in The National by Spike Lee. A series of high-profile media reports in the early 1990s addressed the issues brought up by Mushnick and Lee and brought the situation to the attention of mainstream America. The following chapter builds on this understanding of Nike’s history to explore the company’s cultural clout and their connection to the black community with whom they were increasingly associated.
Figure 6. "The Biggest Players: Shares of the 1990 Basketball Shoe Market, in Percent"

Figure 7. Suggested Retail Price of Select Nike Shoes (1982)
(derived from Rikert and Christensen 1984)
1 Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 5-6.
6 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 13.
7 Ibid.; Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 336.
10 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 47.
12 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 66.
14 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 68.
17 Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 62.; Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 70.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 9.
21 Rikert and Christensen, Nike (E1): The Announcement, 1-2.
Rob Strasser is a controversial figure in the histories presented by Nike employees. John Jaqua, a member of the Nike Board of Directors and himself an attorney, felt that while Rob Strasser did make significant contributions and did well with the Jordan launch, he did overstate his own role at times and was at least partially responsible for mistakes in the aerobics market that led to Nike’s decline in the early 1980s. Abstract of interview with John Jaqua, November 20, 1990, Eugene, OR, (Archives Center, National Museum of American History: Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992). Advertising Manager Patsy Mest Stobie, who worked under Rob Strasser, also concluded that he was a controversial figure, but attributed this to his “creative mind.” Interview with Patsy Mest Stobie, Former Advertising Manager, Nike, Inc., Beaverton, OR, November 20, 1990 (Archives Center, National Museum of American History: Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992). And Nelson Farris, who joined the company in 1973 and eventually became Director of Internal Relations, considered Strasser’s risk-taking nature to have been a major contribution to the company in line with the contributions of Knight. Interview with Nelson Farris, Director of Internal Relations, Nike, Inc., Beaverton, OR, August 23, 1990 (Archives Center, National Museum of American History: Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992). Rob Strasser’s wife and former Nike employee, Susan Strasser, co-authored a book about Nike entitled Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There (1991), New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.


Hyde, The Aura of Sneakers—They've Got Heart, They've Got Sole, B1; Rikert and Christensen, Nike (E1): The Announcement.

Jabs, Nike: The Shoes that Go 'Swoosh', F5.

Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 336.


Rikert and Christensen, Nike (E1): The Announcement, 1-2. See also Figure 7.

Ibid.

Ibid.

50 This book is a detailed account of the birth and growth of Nike up through the departure of many of the early Nike executives who helped to build the company. The book is passionate and prosaic, but also demonstrates a questionable focus on the importance of Rob Strasser to the success of Nike. Most accounts of Rob Strasser’s position at Nike do, indeed, afford him a great deal of influence in building Nike’s image, but he was a controversial figure. It is difficult to disentangle some of the recollections that may be borne out of resentment over broken ties and those that depict an “unbiased” account of the details about key figures in Nike’s development.

51 Ibid., 259.

52 Nike would receive a great deal of criticism for this practice, as did the coaches who accepted Nike offers. The problem for critics was the commercialization of college sport, which was perceived to have a detrimental effect on the integrity of the game and on University decisions. In the 1990s, when columnist Phil Mushnick incited a flurry of media attention to criticisms of Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and Nike for their role in selling high-priced athletic shoes to inner-city kids who would go to violent lengths to obtain them, Mushnick also included Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson among the guilty. While his involvement did not receive as much of the media attention as that of Michael Jordan and Spike Lee, the relationship between basketball coaches and branded athletic wear did receive a lot of attention elsewhere in the media. While this is an important factor in the overall story, I have chosen, as did most in the media, to focus on Michael Jordan and Spike Lee when considering the “sneaker killings.”

53 Ibid., 258.

54 Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992 Series 1, Sub A, Box 1, Folder 5.

55 Jack Feuer, "Portland Power: Wieden Runs Off with Nike Shoes," AdWeek (June 9, 1986); Interview with Rob Strasser.


Cindy Hale, "Re: 12 Months of Advertising Or Where Do We Go from Here?" 1985 (Archives Center, National Museum of American History: Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992), Series 1, Sub A, Box 1, Folder 8.


Feuer, *AdForm Follows Nike's Function: The Image That Always Runs True.*


Nike’s more expensive, higher-end running shoes maintained previous year sales records, and Nike still held 45% of the running shoe market and 40% of the basketball shoe market (Richard W. Pollay, "The Distorted Mirror: Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising," *Journal of Marketing* 50, April 18, 1985, 18-36). Additionally, despite declines in many areas, three shoe lines showed improvement, with basketball up 23% racquet sports up 10% and leisure shoes up 14% (Kathleen Low, "Nike Reports Quarter Earnings Decline 66%," *Footwear News*, October 15, 1984, 2).


Ibid.


Ibid.


80 Ibid.
82 Pollack, Nike Struggles to Hit Its Stride, 17.
84 Interview with Peter Moore.
85 Ibid.; Strasser, Memorandum: Thoughts on Advertising.
86 Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 7.
87 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 409-410.
89 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 424.
90 Ibid., 421.
92 Ibid., 425.
93 Interview with Rob Strasser.
94 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 425.
95 Ibid., 426.
96 Interview with Peter Moore.
97 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 437; Eleanor Johnson Tracy, "Nike Loses its Footing on the Fast Track," Fortune, November 12, 1984, 74.
98 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 428.
99 Ibid., 436.
100 Interview with Peter Moore.
102 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 420; Interview with Rob Strasser.
103 Ibid.; Interview with Peter Moore.
104 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 431.
105 Ibid., 432.
106 Interview with Peter Moore.
107 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 429.
108 Ibid.; Interview with Peter Moore.
109 Ibid.; Interview with Peter Moore.


112 Ibid., 435.


116 Ibid.; *Interview with Rob Strasser*.


121 *Interview with Peter Moore*.

122 Recio, *Michael Jordan Scores Big—On and Off the Court*, 78.


126 Ibid., 455.


131 Antilla, *Air Jordan Shoe Puts Retailers Through Hoops*.


134 Ibid., 22.


138 *Interview with Peter Moore*.

139 Low, *Air Jordan Raises Nike's Hopes*, 22.

144 According to the *Oregonian* on June 4, 1986, Wieden & Kennedy had become one of Portland’s largest agencies in five years.
145 Cindy Hale, “Re: 12 Months of Advertising or Where Do We Go from Here?” 1985 (Archives Center, National Museum of American History: Nike Advertising Oral History and Documentation Collection, 1976-1992), Series 1, Sub A, Box 1, Folder 8.
146 Hale, *Re: 12 Months of Advertising or Where Do We Go from Here?*
149 Interview with Peter Moore.
152 Interview with Cindy Hale.
157 Interview with Patsy Mest Stobie.
159 Strasser and Becklund, *Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There*; Williams, Rob Strasser, *Nike Veteran, Leaves Company*, 2-3; Interview with Rob Strasser.
161 Ibid., 478.
162 Interview with Peter Moore.
163 Ibid.
164 Interview with Lee Clow.
166 Interview with Lee Clow.
167 Strasser and Becklund, *Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There*, 485; Interview with Rob Strasser.
169 Interview with Peter Moore.
172 Nike's sales dropped 17.9% and earnings declined 39.4% in the 1987 fiscal year that ended May 31, and they continued to lag behind Reebok in market share. See Seckler, Nike Profit Off 39.4% but Silver Lining Appears, 4.
173 Footwear News reported that the Nike Air line would roll out 12 models and support them with a stepped-up consumer advertising campaign that would promote the message of quality and help to re-position Nike as a performance shoe company. See Seckler, Nike Profit Off 39.4% but Silver Lining Appears, 4. New York Times reported the roll-out would be for 11 models. See Dougherty, Air-Sole Introduced by Nike, 25; Jon Wiener, "Exploitation and the Revolution," Advertising Age, June 29, 1987; Katherine Weisman, “The Air of Victory,” Forbes, May 2, 1988, 9.
174 Ibid. 8; Silverman, Nike Claims its Light-Air Shoes are at Edge of the Tech Frontier, 4.
175 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 509.
176 Seckler, Nike Profit Off 39.4% but Silver Lining Appears, 4.
177 Silberman, Steven (1988), Advertising Age, April 4, 20.
178 Jonathan Brinckman, "Nike's 'just do it' Slogan Celebrates 20 Years," The Oregonian, July 18, 2008.
179 Goldman and Papson, Nike Culture, 20.
180 Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 146.
181 According to Strasser and Becklund (1991), “Bo turned down a $4.6 million contract to play football for Tampa Bay and signed a three-year, $1 million baseball contract... with the Kansas City Royals when they drafted him in the fourth round” (495). William Gildea (1989) reported Jacksons contract with Tampa Bay to be a reported $7 million in comparison to $585,000 with the Kansas City Royals.
182 Interview with Rob Strasser.
184 Weisman, The Air of Victory, 9.
185 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 508.
188 Ibid., 147.
190 He just did it, 12; Rick Reilly, "He's Gotta Pitch It," Sports Illustrated, May 27, 1991, 74.
191 Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 509.
192 Ibid., 509.
193 Ibid., 525-526.
194 Ibid., 526.
195 Ibid., 527.
196 Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 147.
205 Reilly, He's Gotta Pitch it, 82.
207 Ibid., 102.
208 McQuarrie et al., Roundtable on Advertising as a Cultural Form.
209 Reilly, He's Gotta Pitch It, 82.
210 Goldman and Papson, Nike Culture, 42.
211 Reilly, He's Gotta Pitch It, 74; Interview with Jim Riswold.
212 Goldman and Papson found that a deeper reading suggested, as in subsequent Nike ads, that Lee "addressed the language of racism on the basketball court, pleading for more ecumenical understanding and respect for diversity" (1998, 113).
215 Nike Jumpman 23, www.nike.com/jumpman23/historyofflight/, accessed December 15, 2009; Spike Lee is mistaken in fact because other black figures had adorned company images prior to Michael Jordan, but he is correct in concept because never before had an American company placed an African American on the face of the company in the way that Nike did with Michael Jordan.
216 Mabry and Adams, A Long Way from 'Aunt Jemima', 34ff.
Strasser and Becklund, Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There, 534; Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 148.


Swift, Farewell My Lovely: The Good Ol' All Purpose Sneaker is Obsolete in a World of Hyped-Up, High-Tech, High-Priced Athletic Shoes, 77-85.

Jordan E. Goodman and Penelope Wang, "Nike Puts New Sprint in Its Step," Money, March, 1990, 59. For a play-by-play account of the market battle between Nike and Reebok, see Labich, Nike Vs. Reebok: A Battle for Hearts, Minds and Feet, 90; see also Grimm, Nike Take a Bow, S22.

Silverman, Nike Claims its Light-Air Shoes are at Edge of the Tech Frontier, 4.

Grimm, Nike Take a Bow, S22.

Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 148.

Nike, Nike Jumpman 23.

He just did it, 12.

Farhi and Writer, Surgeon General Hits New Malt Liquor's Name, Ads.


Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 143.

Ibid., 144-145; Barbara Lippert, "For Nike, Bo Brings Natural Talent to another Hobby," Adweek, July 31, 1989.

Ibid.

Katz, Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World, 144.

Fireman was not, however, willing to give Nike the kind of dramatic success as others did in their recovery of the number one market spot. Fireman said, "I think that’s one of the best campaigns I’ve ever seen… A great campaign. I think they did a marvelous job of recovering No. 1. [But] remember, when Nike started downhill, they went down by 20% to 30%. It was pretty dramatic. So when people say they’ve had a tremendous rise, they covered the same ground as part of that rise.” See "Reebok Chief Looks Beyond Nike,” Advertising Age (January 29, 1990), 16.


What I mean in calling Nike an emblem and a casualty is that, as with all things cool, Nike was subject to the frivolous and ever-changing nature of “cool.”

Patricia Davies, ""Hot Shoes: Nike and its Rivals have Persuaded North Americans to Shell Out More than $5 Billion a Year on Shoes Like These. We Ventured to the Heart of the Nike Empire to Find Out How They Do It,” The Globe and Mail, April 21, 1990.

CHAPTER 5: *DO THE RIGHT THING*—MICHAEL JORDAN, SPIKE LEE AND NIKE IN MARKETING TO BLACK CONSUMERS

“Took a poll ‘cause our soul took a toll
From the education of a TV station…
I like Nike but wait a minute
The neighborhood supports to put some money in it
 Corporations owe dey gotta give up the dough
To da town or else we gotta shut ‘em down”
-Public Enemy

In the late 1980s, despite what many perceived to be the dominance of black athletes in sports, race equity was still an issue. Some critics argued that regardless of their accomplishments, black athletes could not get as many endorsements, would not be paid as much, and would not be projected as positively as their white counterparts. The *Wall Street Journal*’s charts of the most popular athletes had demonstrated that while eight of the top ten most popular athletes were black, only one black athlete was represented among those with the most endorsements. In contrast, *Advertising Age* reported that three of the top ten endorsers—Michael Jordan, Bo Jackson, and O.J. Simpson—were black and argued that those three examples were only the beginning of a growing trend, but this did not alleviate continued concerns that adequate and appropriate representation was an issue. For example, despite the immense success in public response to the Bo-centered Nike ads, some felt that Jackson was underappreciated by marketers and pointed to the comparatively fewer endorsement deals he had. But others argued that black athletes such as Charles Barkley, Wilt Chamberlain and James Worthy had increasingly entered the endorsement business over the past decade, and turned to Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson as “the biggest team-sports figures in the 10-figure sports endorsement industry” to point out the *impact* of black participation. And the impact of these two sports celebrity figures was indeed immense.
Jackson was named the best-known sports endorser in 1989 and was second only to Joe Montana in 1990; even despite a hip injury, Jackson was ranked in the 10 most sought-after sports endorser of 1991.\textsuperscript{6} And \textit{Sports Illustrated} named Michael Jordan Sportsman of the Year in 1991, calling him “a hero for the wired world” and “the first new age athlete.” Author David Halberstam considered Jordan and “pre-HIV” Magic Johnson, with Bo Jackson as a possible contender, to be the only two black men to have become true crossover heroes—“that is, they receive more commercial endorsement deals from the predominantly white, middle-class purveyors of public taste than do white athletes”—in the 45 years since Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball. The 1980s was the first decade to see the rise of an African American athlete to a truly global icon. For many, this icon was symbolic of the realization of a long struggle for positive representation and acceptance and a beacon of change to come. He was the right person in the right sport at the right time. Others were more skeptical that Michael Jordan symbolized a new world for African American opportunity, not only pointing to the destitute circumstances of many blacks living in impoverished circumstances with little access to quality education, positive and realistic role models and workplace opportunity, but also arguing that through representations of Michael Jordan, black culture was once again appropriated for white commercial gain. While some felt he transcended race and signaled a symbolic space where people of all backgrounds could come together, others felt that representations of Michael Jordan presented a “neutered” identity\textsuperscript{8} or whitewashed race.

Thus, recounting Nike, Inc.’s history and relationship with Michael Jordan does not do justice to the greater impact experienced not only in the American cultural landscape, but globally, as well. Since Michael Jordan has been such a persistently discussed and explored figure since his rise to fame, this chapter examines the discourse about Michael Jordan in popular
and scholarly work and how he was interpreted and implicated in the controversy over sneaker-incited violence in the early 1990s.

**The Price of Nike, the Cost of Violence**

Chapter Three discussed a brief history of sneakers and demonstrated how as early as the 1970s, sneakers worn in a specific style and in certain communities were considered “felon shoes.” As Erin Patton, form Jordan brand manager and self-proclaimed member of the hip-hop generation pointed out,

> “Some companies, including Nike, have received their fair share of criticism for manipulating the desire and the aspirational nature of certain consumers, particularly those within the inner-city environment who may not have necessarily the means or the ability to reconcile their own value system against a commercial message and make appropriate decisions. But as it relates to the notion that I was suggesting—aspirational being connected to lifestyle—and because of dire circumstances or just making ends meet and being in an environment where times are tough and the budget, the belt, is always tight, there was a consistent desire to aspire to a better lifestyle. And that’s where hip-hop music began to communicate, in many ways in a positive sense, began to communicate what that looked like to many of us who couldn’t walk outside and see it… what the finer things in life looked like… There are other brands, and we’ll stick with Nike for a moment, who inadvertently have found themselves representing that kind of badge or that same symbol associated with an aspirational lifestyle.”

The criticism to which Patton was referring erupted in the early 1990s, but had roots in the 1950s as editorialized in John H. Johnson’s “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs” and resurfaced in the 1980s; the 1980s and 1990s version of the criticisms of black consumption were centered on the issue of the high prices of some popular brand name goods, later incorporating concerns over the influence of celebrity sports heroes in promoting them.

As early as 1983, critics were taking issue with the high price of certain athletic brands. In the *Dallas Herald Times*, Lori Gray (1983) wrote, “While Nike is a magic name among American children, Nike sneakers are not necessarily any better than more modestly priced
sneakers such as Converse, Kinney or Thom McAn. These sneakers are well made, but they don’t have the same glamour.” Nike’s response to Gray, by way of Jack Welch, Director of Corporate Relations, was that Nike products are superior and that other lower priced sneakers are not truly athletic footwear. Further, he argued that Nike would spend over $9,000,000 in the following year on research and development in their state-of-the-art research laboratory and that Nike worked with top athletes and record-setters. Welch writes, “If Nike is indeed a magic name among American children, as you wrote, it is so because they are wise enough not to be deceived by counterfeit appearances and a few dollars off.” That same year, a 14-year-old was shot and killed in Harlem Park Junior High, reportedly for his Georgetown jacket, and was only one in a line of media-reported crimes in the name of brand name goods, including Nike.

Critics were citing promotional expenditures, particularly in the practice of college athletic endorsements and in advertising dollars spent, as the bulk of the cost of high-priced athletic wear. In response to criticism by Pete Calabro in the Enterprise (Ala.) Ledger, Welch defended Nike’s use of promotions by arguing, “You are totally in error when you state that promotional expenses increase the retail value of Nike shoes. They do not since they are a normal cost of doing business.” Calabro’s intention was to expose a connection between the increased price of shoes that is passed on to the consumer and the amount of advertising and promotional dollars spent by the major athletic shoe companies, including Nike.

This connection between advertising dollars and the cost of shoes was not put to rest. In an Advertising Age article on June 29, 1987, Jon Wiener discussed the outrage surrounding the use of the Beatles’ “Revolution” to promote the new Nike Air line. Wiener was relating people’s annoyance over Nike’s use of a song that represented part of their political lives to sell $75 a pair of sneakers, but the real contention was over the use of the Beatles’ song rather than the price of
the sneakers. Not everyone was critical of the “Revolution” campaign, though. *Adweek* critic Barbara Lippert wrote, “I’m still not convinced that a running shoe makes a revolution. But Nike’s use of the Beatles’ original recording of *Revolution* in last year’s campaign seems to have worked. The new campaign is not about co-opting ‘60s songs or memories. Rather it’s direct, intense, beautifully shot and very smartly written series of spots that makes a place for everyone on the athletic chain, from Olympians to the sports-impaired.” The “Air Revolution” campaign, which was touting what was known internally as the “Air Pack,” was indeed innovative for a variety of reasons. Not only did it introduce what Nike considered breakthrough air technology, but it was the first time a Beatles song was featured in an advertising campaign.

Nike spent $23 million in advertising in 1987, the year that the “Revolution” campaign was introduced, and dollars dedicated to advertising continued to rise such that by 1989 Nike was spending $50 million. Similarly, Reebok increased its advertising expenditures from $12 million in 1987 to $60 million in 1989. Correspondingly, sneaker sales rose approximately 23% a year during those years. In a 1990 *Sports Illustrated* article, E.M. Swift reasoned, “those costs, obviously, are passed on to the consumer. It costs only $15 to $20 to manufacture a pair of sneakers that retails for $60 to $100. The rest is profit and promotional hype.” The debate over the cost of high-priced brand name athletic-wear started to heat up in 1987 and flared in 1990 with a series of news reports specifically associating Nike products with violence on the streets and reigniting questions of Nike’s relationship with the African American community.

**False Promises? Fashion Frenzy?**

A 1987 *Washington Post* article outlined one issue of the overarching debate—the issue of false promises from branded and advertised goods. The question was:
How many kids are being suckered by such ads into believing that a particular athletic shoe can turn them into stars? How many young boys are being misled into abandoning their academic studies for dreams of riches in the National Basketball Association? But the underlying question was “why do we believe that youngsters who buy Adidas ‘Patrick Ewings’ or Nike ‘Air Jordans’ expect to wind up as NBA all-stars?... The unspoken premise of [the] outrage is the widely held view that what is normal for middle-class or white kids is unhealthy and exploitative for lower-class black ones. It’s not the suburban Little Leaguer who comes to mind when we think of child athletes pursuing false dreams; it is the ghetto youngster working tirelessly on his spin move.”

And a growing concern, though by no means a new one, was how much young people (and their parents) were willing to spend—or what they were willing to do—to obtain the products of these false promises. Parents were spending thousands of dollars more on clothes for their teenagers than for themselves; teenagers were spending the entirety of their own money earned from jobs and “sometimes drug sales” to outfit themselves in Fila, Louis Vuitton, Guess?, Polo, Pierre Cardin, and a variety of other fashionable brands at the time, including Nike; school Principals were banning various fashion trends to try to refocus attention on studies. Some argued that these youth were susceptible to the styles of their favorite musical groups, to advertising, and to the expensive tastes of peers who resorted to dealing drugs and stealing to obtain high-priced, highly fashionable items; further, these tastes reportedly were class-differentiated. While wealthier students went for more understated fashion to appear as if fashion just happened, the appearance of wealth was more important to lower-income students for whom expensive clothes meant status. When the desire to maintain expensive tastes seemed to turn increasingly violent people wanted to know who to blame. The sneaker companies, visibly outfitting so many urban youth and drawing public attention with multimillion dollar branding campaigns, attracted increasing attention. Among the campaigns, and ones that used the vernacular and aesthetic of the urban America linked to media images of branded violence, were those developed by Nike, Wieden & Kennedy and Spike Lee.
According to *Adweek*, Lee felt that the images he presented in Nike spots like “Hang Time” and “Cover” were “fun” and went beyond the stereotypes that are found in most advertising targeted to black consumers by a corporate America that “is not unaware of the fact that the purchasing power of black consumers ranks in the billions… Those companies know it. They’ve got market research and they go after a specific audience. They know we smoke more Kool cigarettes, drink more Old English, and Schlitz Malt Liquor.”

Historically, advertisers had been criticized for targeting black, urban consumers with harmful products like alcohol and tobacco. But Nike marketed shoes and athletic wear and promoted sport, all considered part of a healthy lifestyle for mainstream America.

Others, however, were not inclined to let sneaker companies like Nike off the hook and, in 1990, critics unleashed a swell of criticisms and debates about what came to be known as the “sneaker killings.” That year, Americans purchased 393 million pairs of brand-name athletic shoes for $11.7 billion dollars. Many were concerned about the chunk of that corporate profit earned from the inner-cities. The developing argument was that sneaker companies were exploiting, if not creating, circumstances in which impoverished inner-city youth were going to greater and greater lengths to obtain high-priced brand-name goods that they could flash around to gain acceptance and status. Nike marketing chief Tom Clarke responded by arguing, “Our higher-end shoes are basketball shoes and basketball is in its highest form in the inner city. The fact that our shoes sell well there is a function of how important basketball is to those communities.” Indeed, at least by the late 1980s, much of the inspiration for the Nike product aesthetic was drawn from early adopters and trend-setters in the inner cities. Tinker Hatfield, the Nike architect-turned-Creative Director who was responsible for some of the most famous shoe designs ever produced, recounts, “We go into the streets, looking for the early adopters, people
who start fashion trends. We traipse around in dangerous places. I spent most of last week in the inner city of Los Angeles.” In this way, there was an exchange of cultural material between Nike and the urban street and court environments.

As reports began to surface of several incidences in which young men were killed specifically for their Nike Air Jordans, the media began building a pipeline from the All-American hero and icon Michael Jordan to violence and drugs on the street. In March 1989, when 17-year-old Demetrick James Walker was handed a life sentence for killing 16-year-old Johnny Bates for his $125 Air Jordans, *New York Post* columnist Phil Mushnick equated Michael Jordan and other athletes with prominent endorsement deals to drug dealers. In his article, “Shaddup, I’m Sellin’ Out… Shaddup,” he accused Lee of turning on the very community he professed to help by bringing their plight to the mainstream public. The prosecutor in the Houston case against Walker pointed the finger at sportswear marketers for the kind of images they created. In response to criticisms, Nike’s Director of Public Relations, Liz Dolan, said, “It’s a little unfair to blame us, a sneaker company, for the problems in the inner city. What we can do is put forth positive role models. There may come a day when we do advertising using our athletes to do some public service message.” But critics were not stayed by Dolan’s public relations efforts. Not a week after Dolan made those remarks, *The Washington Post* writer Tony Kornheiser challenged Michael Jordan to use his position to influence industry prices of sneakers in an effort that he felt would minimize the conflicts on the streets.

Between February and May 1990, there was an upsurge of media attention on and debate about athletic and Nike-related crimes. Critics argued sneakers represented status that was either implanted or fostered by advertising, and Nike and other sneaker companies were directly targeting and selling overpriced shoes to kids who couldn’t afford them; kids were skipping
school out of embarrassment when they didn’t have the right shoes or the newest shoes,\textsuperscript{35} schools were banning brands because they were disrupting education and imposing on safety in schools,\textsuperscript{36} which was only exacerbated by sportswear companies’ courting of high school and college coaches\textsuperscript{37} and through sponsorship of the new programs and materials for schools;\textsuperscript{38} that kids’ desire for these status symbols led to a life of crime as they turned to selling drugs to fuel their shoe habits,\textsuperscript{39} that basketball was the sport of choice for drug dealers\textsuperscript{40} and, as such, Nike had become the uniform of choice for gangs and drug dealers,\textsuperscript{41} and Nike reps were encouraging retailers to court drug dealers as a lucrative market.\textsuperscript{42} “Bejeweled and sneaker-clad drug dealers” had supplanted the pimp as the model for emulation for many inner-city youth.\textsuperscript{43} Critics placed blame on “dollar-driven athletes”\textsuperscript{44} who exploited their power as role models\textsuperscript{45} to help develop mass appeal for sneaker companies’ products. The combination of this mass popularity and pure greed led sneaker companies like Nike to hike the prices of their products\textsuperscript{46} and to defend their actions by disingenuously arguing that the high prices were warranted because they were high-tech athletic-wear when, in fact, the majority of the sales were for street style and not athletic use.\textsuperscript{47}

The issue was not just that sneaker companies were marketing high-priced shoes—to whom they were marketing these high-priced sneakers was underlying the criticisms. Some articulated their concerns more bluntly than others. \textit{U.S. News & World Report} columnist John Leo, for example, felt that Nike in particular should shoulder some of the responsibility for incidents over their high-priced sneakers because, he wrote, “the line ‘Just Do It’ means one thing to the middle class, and something else to people mired in the ghetto. To the middle class, it means get in shape, whereas in the ghetto it means, ‘Don’t have any moral compunction—just go out and do
whatever you have to do in your predicament.' There’s an immoral message imbedded in there." Such transparent discriminatory and single-minded remarks did not go unchallenged.

Dan Wieden of Wieden & Kennedy called Leo’s comments racist and argued that advertisers do have social responsibilities, but “you have to look at the product you’re selling and, in the case of Nike, it’s an excellent product. How can you say you’re not going to advertise that product to a certain group because they might not be able to afford it? You’d be making a lot of assumptions about that group. And how, exactly, would you go about excluding that group from all the other customers?” Nike public relations director Liz Dolan reiterated Wieden’s sentiments, arguing “Because we use black endorsers, some people seem to make the assumption that we’re targeting this unruly mob of black youths out there that would do anything for a pair of Air Jordans, that you show a black kid a $100 sneaker and he’ll go steal it. That’s really a racist perspective.” While it is not surprising to hear Nike and their advertising agency defend themselves against the outcry of critics claiming the company was engaging in socially irresponsible and immoral behavior, others outside of Nike, the athletic wear industry and the advertising trade press took issue with the criticisms.

Critics of the critics argued that everyone, adults and kids alike, are prone to reach for status symbols, that it was absurd to hold superstars and Nike accountable for human nature, that there was a clear double standard, if not blatant racism, to hold black athletes to higher expectations than white athletes who were left untouched by critics, that it was patronizing to presume to tell poor people and black people how to spend their money, that stars like Michael Jordan appeal to a mass market, not just black youth who make up only 9.8% of sneaker buyers, and that part of Jordan’s appeal was that he was a positive role model not just for
conquering the basketball court but for his business success\textsuperscript{57} and for the fact that he had attained status by working hard within the social system and through legal means.\textsuperscript{58}

Further, they argued that sneakers are just a symptom of much larger social issues—issues larger even than Michael Jordan\textsuperscript{59}—and that it is unfair to pin systematic social ills on athletes and sneaker companies,\textsuperscript{60} particularly since the actual number of incidences involving Nike and other athletic brands were relatively few in the context of all other violent crimes in the United States\textsuperscript{61} and because statistics on shoe sales did not indicate that high-priced sneakers dominated the market. Rather, Reebok’s $170 Pump sales accounted for only one tenth of 1\% of the entire industry and Nike’s top-selling sneaker went for $58, with half of all units in the basketball category selling for between $30 and $60.\textsuperscript{62} Further, they argued that companies cannot be blamed for responding to consumer demand\textsuperscript{63} and that the market would correct itself as the companies responded to criticisms and concerns from the public.\textsuperscript{64}

Some news articles reported on specific cities such as Atlanta, where police estimated that more than 50 robberies occurred in four months in the name of branded athletic wear, and Chicago, where in one area police were receiving an estimated 50 reports of incidents over jackets and a dozen over athletic shoes each month.\textsuperscript{65} However, there are no strong statistics on exactly how many youth or adults were attacked or killed for athletic wear in general or for Nikes in particular. News articles on the issue recycled the same few examples and the same arguments, most of which were addressed in a \textit{Sports Illustrated} article by Rick Telander (1990).

\textbf{The Development of “Sneaker Killing” Reports in the 1990s}

Phil Mushnick, the \textit{New York Post} columnist who had likened Michael Jordan to a drug dealer, has been credited with igniting the media debate. A common theme across Mushnick’s
arguments, as he himself suggested, was that of the high prices of sneakers and, because the endorsers he was criticizing were pushing wears with such high costs, he believed that the company and endorsers lacked social responsibility. Mushnick had taken such direct aim at Michael Jordan, Spike Lee and Nike, as well as Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson, that Lee made a very public response of his own through The National Forum, blaming Mushnick for building controversy in an attempt that Lee called “thinly veiled racism.” Lee argued that since the commercials are directed at a much larger audience than only black youth, Mushnick’s logic suggested that “poor whites won’t kill for a pair of Jordans, but poor blacks will… It is crazy to think that all black kids who can’t afford the sneakers are resorting to selling crack to buy them. Any kid who is selling crack is not doing that just to sport a pair of Jordans.”

Further, Lee questioned the value of singling out three of the most important and positive role models for black youth when white athletes have sneaker commercials that are reaching the same markets as those by Jordan and Lee. Michael Jordan called the criticism ironic arguing, “You build me up to be a role model, then you blame me for the crimes that kids commit.” Lee proposed that there are much more pressing problems to address, such as the conditions that might lead black youth to place so much import on a pair of sneakers. In other words, he repositioned Nike shoes from the cause of violence as Mushnick purported to a symptom of a larger social issue and perhaps even as victims in an ideological system that relentlessly works to denigrate successful and positive popular black figures.

Mushnick, however, did not stand down, calling Lee a “Snike oil salesman.” Speaking directly to Lee, Mushnick wrote,

“You’re working off a copy of the plan Rev. Al employs. You’re taking heat, so you press the ‘R’ button and everything’s supposed to go away. Clear-thinking people are sick of that garbage. Afro-American educators, for example, are reporting an epidemic that’s breeding violence in their institutions. No Spike, I
didn’t tell them, they told me, and I’m telling you—in inner-city kids are not attending classes because they’re embarrassed by the condition of their sneakers. Kids are being robbed and murdered for the latex perversions you pitch as status symbols.”

Mushnick pointed to community program coordinators and police officers who indicated from the ground level that high-priced, high-status sneakers led poor, black youth to drug dealing and served as clear indication of power and status in their communities. He concluded, “Your Nike job, Mars, is to pitch sneakers to children who can’t afford them… You’re making chumps of the people who admire you, Spike. You’re just the messenger for a white-owned company that’s paying you to suck the cash out of kids’ pockets that were empty to begin with.” Mushnick’s argument was picked up and reported in other media venues, as in Rick Telander’s *Sports Illustrated* cover story on the issue.

**Figure 8. Sports Illustrated cover of May 14, 1990**

![Sports Illustrated cover of May 14, 1990](image)

The situation hit the cover of *Sports Illustrated* on May 14, 1990, reaching a national audience with the seemingly ironic headline, “Your Sneakers or Your Life.” Author Rick Telander’s headline was a reference from a classic Jack Benny skit in which a robber threatens, “Your money or your life.” In the skit, Benny remains silent as the robber repeats his demand
and Benny finally replies, “I’m thinking.” The implication is that youth are so tied to branded athletic wear that they might contemplate the value of their own lives against it. Indeed, this seems to be part of the impact of Telander’s opening story of the 15-year-old Michael Eugene Thomas of Anne Arundel County, Maryland, who was strangled by a basketball buddy, 17-year-old James David Martin, in the Spring of 1989. Telander begins his article with a recounting of Thomas’s affection for his Air Jordan shoes:

“Thomas loved Michael Jordan, as well as the shoes Jordan endorses, and he cleaned his own pair each evening. He kept the cardboard shoe box with Jordan's silhouette on it in a place of honor in his room. Inside the box was the sales ticket for the shoes. It showed he paid $115.50, the price of a product touched by deity. ‘We told him not to wear the shoes to school,’ said Michael's grandmother, Birdie Thomas. ‘We said somebody might like them, and he said, ‘Granny, before I let anyone take those shoes, they’ll have to kill me.’”

The article juxtaposes Thomas’s death with the proceeding lines that depict Michael Jordan, on the verge of tears, reading an account of the young boy’s murder, connoting to the reader what had been building in the news media over the previous months—a clear connection between Jordan and the violence on the streets. Indeed, while Telander explores the variety of arguments that had been presented in the media, he does place blame squarely on the shoe companies who, he argued, with their annual $200 million advertising and promotion budgets targeting impressionable young people (young black males) who are desperate for self-esteem, “have played a direct role” in “a society that has created an underclass that is slipping into economic and moral oblivion, an underclass in which pieces of rubber and plastic held together by shoelaces are sometimes worth more than a human life.” Nonetheless, Telander does depict a more complex and nuanced situation previous than media accounts.

Jordan responded in disbelief that the image that he had promoted could be used for such harm. In his words, “I thought I’d be helping out others and everything would be positive. I thought people would try to emulate the good things I do, they’d try to achieve, to be better.
Nothing bad. I never thought because of my endorsement of a shoe, or any product, that people would harm each other. Everyone likes to be admired, but when it comes to kids actually killing each other then you have to reevaluate things.” [73] Most if not all of the social commentators who had addressed the issue agreed with Jordan’s assessment that the situation needed to be reevaluated, but there was little consensus and much debate over how to do that and, once evaluated, what actions to take. Even though critics like Mushnick, who felt that the responsibility rested on specific big-name companies and endorsers who held a great deal of cultural influence, Telander acknowledged that it was not just the “heavyweights” of Reebok and Nike or even just sneakers that were the material for crime, but “smaller players” like Adidas, Puma, Fila, Starter and other products like hats and jackets and sweatsuits. And it was not even really the material value of the products that led to crime, but the status—“these assailants aren’t simply taking clothes from their victims. They’re taking status.” [74] The shoes have held value on the streets that is not simply quantitatively different but qualitatively different than anything invested into the image by the company. While many felt that it was the high-price of sneakers that invested them with status, not all information from the streets corroborated this argument. A manager at Foot Locker, a major retailer of name-brand sneakers, was quoted by Telander in saying that the Nike Cortez at $39 was the hottest thing at the moment for reasons that were unclear to him.

A compelling part of the argument against Nike and other sneaker companies was that sales of the shoes were fueled by drug money and gang affiliation, and that not only were the sneaker companies aware of this fact but encouraged it. Telander asks, “Could any respectable U.S. corporation support the use of its products in this way? Absolutely not, say most shoe company executives contacted for this article. You better believe it, said a number of sports apparel
retailers, as well as some of the more candid shoe execs.” But the evidence that this occurred was anecdotal and the retailers who made the accusations were unwilling to name the companies whose representatives they accused of encouraging them to court drug dealers for fear of economic retribution. Nike, of course, flatly denied encouraging drug dealers and instead publicized an incident when they refused to fill an order from a large retail company that requested sneakers in new colors because they realized the retailer was requesting gang-affiliated colors.

While the issue of Nike’s and other companies’ involvement in specifically targeting and catering to drug dealers certainly is an important one, there is no clear evidence on which to publicly indict them. Given that, it is worth asking what effect this argument might have on Nike. In other words, if these companies were not pandering to drug dealers or even were actively discouraging them, would drug dealers quit wearing Nike shoes and would kids stop trying to emulate their fashion? Rick Telander’s interview with former drug dealer and Crips gang member Michael B. Green implies that the answer would be no. Green explained, “The shoes, the jackets and the hats are just symbols; everybody’s got a symbol.” Green, himself, was pursuing his education and making good grades in school before joining the Crips. According to his own account, he was not being served by the education system or his family structure and he was searching to be a part of something. The brand-name goods were the trappings of inclusion. These symbols represent something meaningful for those wearing them, whether it is status through the ability to buy or status through inclusion. Given this, Telander concludes by asking, “what should the shoe companies, the schools, the advertising industry, the endorsers, the media, parents—all of us—do about it? Do you know? Do you know? Do you know?” But neither he nor any of the other critics offered a response, except to suggest that
Michael Jordan tell drug dealers not to buy his shoes or tell Nike that he won’t promote their expensive, high-end shoes. For Nike’s part, they did pick up on the call, at least publicly, to deter drug dealers through a series of public service campaigns using their top athletes that were designed to promote education and, in at least one commercial, directly address drug dealers.

While Nike insisted that their public service campaign was not reactionary and had been planned before the controversy over sneaker crimes arose, the campaign was at the very least conveniently timed. Nike Director of Public Relations had intimated as much in March of 1990 when she spoke in response to the criticisms of Nike and other athletic shoe companies in saying, “What we can do is put forth positive role models. There may come a day when we do advertising using our athletes to do some public service messages.” And, in fact, that is what Nike did.

The company spent $5 million on the development and media for anti-drug, pro-education spots that were connected to their campaigns for the basketball, cross-training and tennis shoe lines. These commercials would not be relegated to late-night television but rather would run during the same major sporting events as their other ads and would feature heavyweights such as Bo Jackson, Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson, Michael Jordan, and David Robinson, all of whom had been implicated in the sneaker killings, and other athletic stars on the Nike roster such as John McEnroe. As part of each general campaign, Nike created an extra spot oriented towards a public service message, the first of which was a “stay-in-school” spot by Wieden & Kennedy featuring The San Antonio Spur’s David Robinson and Nike’s Force line of basketball shoes and apparel. In one spot, Robinson played off of his “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood” campaign to send a very direct anti-drug message: “Garbage is anyone who’s into drugs. If you’re into drugs, don’t get into my shoes. Mister Robinson doesn’t like garbage in
his shoes…” Ads written by Jim Riswold and directed by Joe Pytka and running during the Major League All-Star game in July 1990 showed that “Bo knows Shakespeare, calculus and philosophy because he stayed in school.” Another four spots in August and November featured Michael Jordan and Spike Lee as Mars Blackmon. As Nike pledged, these spots were featured in prime slots such as during the 1991 NBA All-Star Game where, after an intense discussion of gravity, Jordan and Lee tell kids, “Don’t be stupid; stay in school.”

**Operation Push Promotes Nike Boycott**

Just as Nike was rolling out the new pro-education, stay-in-school campaign with some of its major athletes, both black and white, presenting the message, Nike encountered another public relations challenge involving the black community. The Chicago-based organization Operation Push, founded by civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, initiated criticisms of Nike in late July and announced a boycott on August 11, 1990. As previous chapters discussed, PUSH had a long history of successfully implementing consumer boycotts to advance a civil rights agenda. In 1980, the group had successfully led a boycott of Coca-Cola that lasted over a month and ended with a $30 million agreement from the company to buy products and services from black-owned businesses. The organization, led by executive director Rev. Tyrone Crider, contended that Nike was reaping profits from the black community by using high-profile, highly-paid black athletes like Bo Jackson and Michael Jordan to sell their products to black youth but that Nike was not giving back to the black community in their own hiring practices of employees and black-owned businesses.

When black Nike endorsers defended the company, Jesse Jackson (who was no longer at the helm of the organization) argued that the athletes were not qualified to speak to corporate policy
because while they could defend the shoes they wore, they could not defend the corporate policy 
machine of which they were not a part.90 In their own defense, Nike pointed to the 75% of their 
charity efforts that went to minority-based projects, to their use of black endorsers, and to their 
affirmative-action hiring practices and 14.4% of their workforce that was minority.91 The 
company further charged that they had been targeted after Reebok purchased a full-page ad in 
PUSH magazine and called for an audit of the organizations revenue stream and membership list, 
a claim and request that the organization denied.92 PUSH pointed to the inequity between the 
profits generated from the black community and the lack of African Americans in top 
management positions and Nike advertising in black-owned media, as well as Nike’s refusal to 
engage in a dialogue on the issues.93

Indeed, the general industry statistics of black employment and participation were 
discouraging. When Nike appointed Georgetown coach John Thompson to its board of directors 
in response to these criticisms, he was the only high-ranking African American among the ten 
largest companies in the industry. Some within the industry argued that the underlying reason 
was that it was hard to find qualified blacks; but as a 1992 issue of Sportstyle pointed out, the 
discrepancy was more likely due to a combination of the “closed ranks of the industry” and 
larger social issues.94 Nike was no exception. For much of Nike’s history, Phil Knight had 
demonstrated a preference towards populating executive offices with close associates. Business 
expertise was not necessarily the criteria for hire, as company had grown up under the direction 
of former athletes and sports enthusiasts. Former marketing manager Rob Strasser was a lawyer 
whose understanding of image and brand development was learned on the job.

Further, historical evidence indicates that this was not the first time that Nike was lambasted 
for its hiring practices. In 1983, Nike faced a $1.5 million suit by three black employees who
claimed Nike had discriminatory practices that harbored racial slurs by other employees and included preferential treatment in promoting less qualified white employees. For his part, Spike Lee acknowledged the problems in the industry, but he argued that Nike was more open-minded than other companies and was working to rectify the problems, saying, "They want to do the right thing. No pun intended."

But Nike was facing a double-edged sword. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “Nike recently cited its absence from black media in response to another race-related controversy. The Beaverton, Ore., company has been under fire for marketing its expensive sneakers directly to poor black youth.” Nike was criticized both for sponsoring in black-oriented media and for failing to do so. One author likened PUSH’s efforts to extortion, questioning how placing a few blacks in top management positions was going to help poor black kids who desired the shoes. Despite PUSH’s relatively high-profile boycott, which gained national attention and was spotlighted through pickets of various Nike retail outlets in major cities, the boycott appeared to have little impact on Nike sales and, on the contrary, Nike sales were booming. *Advertising Age*’s Joe Cappo argued that what PUSH learned was “that young blacks are more loyal to Nike than to PUSH.” Further, Portland’s own leaders did not support the boycott. In the end, the major problem with the PUSH boycott was that it received little support from the consuming public. After a year and a half, claiming significant inroads and suggesting that Nike had made significant movement to increase African American leadership, PUSH called off the boycott. However, the failure of PUSH’s boycott does not represent a lack of concern in the black community for the problems to which they were drawing attention.

In 1991, the socially-conscious lyrics of Public Enemy’ “Shut Em Down” pointed to Nike’s failure to reinvest in the black community. As demonstrated in the lyrics at the beginning of this
chapter, Public Enemy suggested that they liked Nike but expected more from them. As Erin Patton articulated:

“The positive consciousness movement within hip hop started to look at companies and say, you know, wait a second, you’re reaping a lot of profits and benefits from this community so there should be some reciprocity… with Chuck D and Public Enemy with their song ‘Shut Em Down’ where they say, I like Nike but wait a minute, the neighborhood supports or puts the money in it. So it did create sort of a rub and pit the consumer at odds with those very companies they helped create and stimulate growth and market share for.”

Thus, a legitimate concern existed within the black community over their relationship with Nike, and these issues continued to resurface in a variety of ways.

In 1992, Spike Lee presented six commercials for Nike trainers as a film at Black to the Future 2, a British black film festival. The commercials were not backed by Nike, who paid nothing for them, but despite the fact that organizers at the festival felt they held cultural value, critics raised concerns that the commercials might contribute to sneaker crimes. As discrepancies between management salaries and day-laborers in third-world countries like Indonesia became increasingly prominent stories in the media, the reports implicated Jordan and Lee in the system. These issues have become a part of the sign value of Nike. A 1996 article suggested that Nike, Phil Knight and even Jordan and Lee had a “racket” going because “there is absolutely no better way to get rich than to exploit both the worker and the consumer.” That same year, Democratic Congresswoman Marcia Kaptur announced that the Jobs and Fair Trade Caucus Come Shop with Me campaign’s first “corporate vulture label” would be awarded to Nike. She presented this award, explaining:

“[T]hey have been spending $250 million a year out of the money they make off of you trying to convince you how good they really are. They bought so much advertising it is hard to turn on television without seeing it. Nike has virtually bought off the entire American sporting world to delude the American consumer about what is really… Now here at home Nike threatens to tear up our communities with their relentless marketing to our most vulnerable kids. You know what is happening. In some places in this country our children are killing
one another for these shoes. As Phil Mushnick, a sports writer for the New York Post, courageously pointed out when he refused to endorse Nike shoes, he said, 'I saw the prices going from $40 to $90 to $100 and then $150, and in full cognizance that people were dying for these shoes, inner city kids, too, the kids that Nike was targeting with their inner city role model marketing binge.'

Representative Kaptur, as critics increasingly and consistently had been doing through much of the 1990s, contrasted these problems of poorly paid foreign laborers and lost American jobs and the targeting of underprivileged consumers with inner-city role models with the profits reaped in by Nike executives and Phil Knight. The outpouring of criticism over Nike inevitably was bound in the very symbolism of the company. In September 1998, The New York Times reported, “the swoosh has become emblematic of all of Nike’s troubles: a fashion statement losing its edge; a sports pyramid that starts with cheap day labor and ends with poor kids trying to pony up $140 for the shoes, and the lost innocence of young athletes.”

Nike’s Strategic Response to Criticisms

The cumulative effect of criticisms lodged at Nike regarding their relationship with the black community did have an effect on the company’s practices. In the Fall 1990 Nike hired Los Angeles-based Muse Cordero Chen, the company’s first minority-owned advertising agency, to act as a “strategic adviser” for their anti-drug, pro-education campaign; they contracted with 18 minority companies; they planned $2 million to $3 million in spending in “highly specialized, ethnic media”; and they increased focus on minority hiring, reaching a self-reported 18 percent by 1992, and appointed the Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson as the first African American to their board. Though the company insisted that the high-profile anti-drug, stay-in-school campaign was planned before the criticisms of the company began to take root, the timing of and sports endorsers in the advertisements was at the very least fortuitous.
When Nike received feedback from parents and schools because kids were skipping school on release date to get the “freshest” pair of Air Jordans, the company changed their release dates to Saturdays to alleviate the problem.\textsuperscript{112} “Sensitive to the impact its four years of TV ads have had on kids,” suggested columnist Fred Pfaff in \textit{Inside Media}, Nike pledged $5 million to a $20 million integrated communications literacy project.\textsuperscript{113} When the Los Angeles Riots following the Rodney King verdict shook the nation, Nike sponsored commercials directed by Spike Lee in which, as himself and in the face of a slew of racial slurs demonstrated in the ad, Lee says, “If we’re gonna live together, we gotta play together” in an effort to promote racial tolerance. The ad premiered during the NBA Eastern Conference final\textsuperscript{114} and was touted as an example of an “authentically integrated ad.”\textsuperscript{115} In late 1991, Nike underwrote a five part, year long “Nike Cross Training Challenge” that kicked off with a “Bo Knows” program to combine athletic and academic education.\textsuperscript{116} We might assume that in developing social responsibility programs and campaigns that Nike was, on some level, accepting responsibility, even if it was reactionary.

In 1993, Nike took a different slant on the issue of responsibility with Charles Barkley’s direct gaze and firm stance telling viewers “I am not a role model. I am not paid to be a role model. I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I can dunk doesn’t mean I should raise your kids.” Barkley, who had initiated that conversation in remarks he made two years prior, wrote the matter-of-fact lines for that commercial, which was part of a campaign featuring other athletes. A media debate ensued over the validity of Barkley’s comments and what the public might expect from star athletes. While many were infuriated by his remarks or felt them naïve, others wondered how naïve the critics believed the consuming public to be. Goldman and Papson (1998), in examining the message of the ad, suggest that the significance of the ad rests in the fact that Nike had fore-grounded an
issue of social morality and sparked the kind of dialogue generally lacking in consumer-brand advertising.

Ironically, in 1994, Charles Barkley showed up in ads promoting Nike’s P.L.A.Y. program. Nike initiated P.L.A.Y., an acronym for “Participating in the Lives of America’s Youth,” to help improve children’s sports programs, including support in Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and to encourage volunteerism and the community level.¹¹⁷ To support the program, Wieden & Kennedy developed a campaign featuring Michael Jordan, Jackie Joyner-Kersee, and Charles Barkley that asked viewers to imagine a world without sports. In examining the aesthetic and cultural power of Nike advertising in their book Nike Culture (1998), Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson write, “Nike’s P.L.A.Y. campaign drew on race as a visual proxy for class relations… This campaign stressed the social alienation of poverty and its possible transcendence via sports. Nike positioned this campaign as motivated by a sense of crisis in our communities and playgrounds.”¹¹⁸ This campaign was one method by which Nike could publically and powerfully address the criticisms that it had been taking through the early 1990s. Goldman and Papson (1998) call this campaign “legitimation advertising” because in the context of scandals surrounding Nike and inner-city crime in the 1990s, the ads positioned Nike “as taking the moral high ground, apparently placing community interests above their own narrow market interests.”¹¹⁹ Critics considered it another way that Nike could put its name in front of young emerging consumers.¹²⁰

The role model issue was an important one because ultimately what many critics wanted to see was a hard and direct stance from Michael Jordan.¹²¹ Jordan did respond publicly and had a hand in the decisions about how to approach the criticisms. According to Erin Patton, the architect behind Jordan Brand launch in 1997, “MJ demonstrated real concern and compassion
for youth and was vocal and instrumental in the decisions we ultimately made.”122 When a 
Nightline producer approached Jordan to do an interview as part of a piece on violence and Air 
Jordans, Jordan agreed to participate. According to Patton, who also appeared on the show, he 
encouraged Jordan to respond to criticisms through the interview because “it would send a 
powerful message to parents and educators that he did care about youth and was not 
disconnected from their lives.”123 Jordan responded to a line of questioning about his response to 
violence over the shoes, to hero worship and to his own responsibility in the system:

“It’s a scary responsibility. It’s a responsibility that I really didn’t ask for but it 
was bestowed upon me and I have graciously accepted it. And I’ve tried to do 
everything possible from a distance to give motivation to the parent’s kids or the 
kids who don’t have parents or whatever respect. It is a responsibility and it isn’t 
something that you can constantly live up to each and every day because no 
matter how you look at it, you’re still just a human being… I think the importance 
of the shoes is truly materialistic. If it’s a situation to join in on a trend or a fad, 
it’s not as valuable as someone else’s life or someone’s safety. I think if you want 
to use it as a motivational factor… I think that’s ok… But the purpose in mind is 
to put out a product that suits the basketball enthusiast and hopefully it can be 
used in that way.”124

That tactic worked, said Patton, because the issue soon after died down. Michael Jordan did not, 
however, ever publicly tell Nike to lower the prices of shoes bearing his name nor did he tell 
consumers not to buy them, as some critics had called for him to do. That did leave the market 
open for other athletes to promote lower-priced sneakers on the basis of concerns expressed by 
critics of high-priced shoes.

In early 1990, Advertising Age reported that New York Knicks center Patrick Ewing entered 
a sneaker contract with Phoenix Integrated, a licensee of Champion Products, to create an Ewing 
brand line that purposefully priced shoes between $50 and $60 a pair to make them more 
affordable for kids and to send a different message than that sent by over-priced brand athletic 
wear.125 The first line of the basketball shoes in 1989 were priced at $25 to $40 to compete with 
mark-down brands and provide consumers a branded alternative to private label shoes.126 They
were envisioned as a mass-market shoe, but met with little early success until they were repositioned as a higher-end shoe targeted to specialty stores. The brand did well as a “strong East Coast, inner-city brand,” with sales of Ewing shoes were at $10 million in 1990.\textsuperscript{127} By 1991 when Next Sports received a multi-year license to selling and distribute the shoes in the U.S., the new price points for the shoes were between $45 and $110.\textsuperscript{128} Of the change, one executive commented, “Our shoes were probably overdesigned for the market they were intended to be sold to,” and another indicated that the target market with Ewing was high-end, inner-city retailers where the brand had become “much more of a success… through the stores that wanted top-of-the-line product.”\textsuperscript{129} They responded to retailers and the original vision of an affordable alternative to the high-priced sneakers touted by other athletes was altered to accommodate the market.

But there was a concert of voices from the athletic world interested in lowering the cost of shoes. Chris Webber was quoted as indicating that he left Nike because he did not want to promote $140 shoes to the inner-city where people could not afford them.\textsuperscript{130} Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets signed with Spalding in 1995 to retail a shoe model for under $40 because he wanted to sell a shoe that people could afford. The company wanted to capitalize on a market trend toward lower-priced athletic shoes.\textsuperscript{131} Of the contrast between his own shoes and those of Olajuwon, Jordan indicated an appreciation for his intention but argued, “I think that what we’re trying to attack is your basketball enthusiast who looks at the game in a very serious sense and looks for the best quality that enhances that ability.”\textsuperscript{132} He expressed that his game was different from Olajuwon’s and that it depends on the kind of product someone wants and the kind of game they play. In 1997, \textit{Footwear News} reported that sales of shoes priced at $100 and more had risen by 34% in 1996 and, after several years of growth in more modest price-ranges
and with a new $180 Nike basketball shoe indicative of the trend, the market appeared to be turning back to premium brands. However, with the “nuts and bolts of sales” still in the $60-$80 range, some basketball players concerned with the prices and companies interested in addressing the median and lower price points continued to court the more affordable market—Nike included.

Speaking of the developing Nike “Jordan” brand, Jordan indicated to Nightline’s Forrest Sawyer that they company was going to try to develop numerous Jordan shoes and various price points. He indicated that this move was a direct response to feedback he and the company had received from parents concerned over the prices. This way, he suggested, Nike could meet a variety of needs from those of consumers looking for a shoe to fit a fashion trend to those basketball players looking for the best equipment available. This line, he indicated, would debut in the $75 or $85 to $145 price range. Still other players and companies went even lower.

Shaquille O’Neal, for example, sold his Dunkman line at Payless with some success. And in 2006 Stephon Marbury launched his signature shoe, Starbury One, for $14.95 a pair at Steve & Barry’s retailers. Marbury had previously endorsed a $79.99 basketball for urban youth through the basketball apparel company And1. One of the unique aspects of Steve & Barry’s business is that their success, landing them in Business Week as the “fastest growing retailer you’ve ever heard of,” relied on word-of-mouth and not major marketing campaigns. Erin Patton, former brand manager for the Jordan brand, who helped Steve & Barry’s launch the “Marbury” line, recounts, “One of the first things I told the guys at Steve & Barry’s was they were not going to be able to scream the $15 price for an NBA athlete’s shoe and get the attention of urban consumers… That would have the opposite effect as these consumers equated price to status and would immediately discard the brand before it reached the shelves, rendering even
their budget-conscious parents helpless to force the buying decision on them.”138 The idea, instead, was to get consumers involved in the underlying “inspirational” philosophy of the Starbury brand by grounding it in Marbury’s story as a boy from Coney Island’s housing projects who could relate to the many youth who could not afford high-priced sneakers.

With the hip-hop culture as the framework for this philosophy, they developed a tagline: “This is my life, my vision. You feel me?” The campaign included subtle backhands at the dissatisfaction long brewing in urban areas over high-priced athletic shoes and drew from Stephon Marbury’s genuine connection to his community and desire to offer an alternative. The “Starbury Movement” was an initial success, garnering a great deal of attention from the press and from consumers who stood in long lines to get the shoes. The initial production run sold out in an unanticipated three days.139 Marbury responded, “To be a part of something like this. To change people’s lives is such a blessing. It’s bigger than basketball.”140 But, as Steve & Barry’s president said of the phenomenon, “Steph’s been the right guy at the right place at the right time. He really wanted to eliminate the pressure that parents and kids would often feel, when their self-esteem was so frequently tied to higher-priced items.”141 Though it is difficult to evaluate the long-term potential of this market plan because Steve & Barry’s, due to management issues having nothing to do with the Starbury line, folded two years later,142 it is clear that a market has developed in response to the criticisms lodged at Nike and other marketers of high-end, high-priced athletic shoes.

**Conclusion: Jordan’s Cultural Impact**

Many in both the popular press and in scholarly works have tried to define and assess the importance of Michael Jordan in contemporary life. But before evaluating the impact of Michael
Jordan, one must ask from whence it came. Why Michael Jordan? Why with Nike? And why at that particular historical moment did this cultural phenomenon develop? Some of the reasons behind Jordan’s success as a cultural figure have been addressed in this chapter. And while any attempt to explicate the circumstances of his popularity in a unified statement is certain to neglect some measure, there are several key factors that offer insight into this phenomenon.

First, Jordan’s success rests on years of hardship and struggle endured by the black community in the United States as they fought for representation in the consumer market, as a symbol of and driving force behind inclusion as equal participants in American society. While there are yet other timely factors involved in this story, such as developments in communication technologies that projected Michael Jordan into American homes and around the world, it is difficult to imagine a prior point in American history in which a black athlete, regardless of athletic ability, would have been able to flourish in the popular conscience to the extent that Michael Jordan has. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the historical relationship between race, consumption and advertising and demonstrate the difficulty that African Americans encountered in trying to gain recognition by American companies. This history includes the struggles of previous black athletes in trying to enter mainstream sport much less rise to the top, important gains of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that helped to garner increased frequency and quality of representations in the media, and the development of a black, urban youth voice in the sounds of hip-hop, to styles and language on urban courts and their use of athletic brands in creating an urban fashion aesthetic.

Speaking of Run-DMC’s hit “My Adidas,” music and hip-hop icon Russell Simmons explained, “When hip-hop become cool, so did the sneakers… This is who we are. It was a cultural statement but it was also a statement of our highest aspirations, who we wanted to be,
what we thought of ourselves. The clean sneakers was part of that. We’re gettin’ ahead.”

As explained in Chapter 3, the song was a response on the part of hip-hop artists to the criminalization of sneakers. According to Darryl “DMC” McDaniels, “You can’t just look at us cause we wear these sneakers and judge us… My Adidas went around the world. My Adidas changed people’s lives… I stepped on stage at Live Aid, which was unheard of.”

The music and the culture of hip-hop created images of the aspirational lifestyle that represented social and economic advancement long sought by the black community, images that many in urban environments could not access by looking out their own windows. Erin Patton, speaking from a position of personal experience, argues:

“There are other brands, and we’ll stick to Nike for a moment, who inadvertently have found themselves representing that kind of badge or that same symbol and associated with an aspirational lifestyle. I think the notion that very savvy inner-city consumers and urban consumers look at a commercial with Michael flying through the air and say, well I can do that so let me go out and do whatever it takes, go to whatever measures to get that shoe so I can be like Michael Jordan and play like Michael Jordan, even if it means I have to rob or steal or whatever. Coming from that same place, I know that that’s just not the case, that it was more of a desire to access that sort of product to reaffirm status and in some cases provide self-affirmation for a generation that was seeking that desperately and just by virtue of their own DNA, their own creativity and ability to brand-create and create brand and product attributes uniquely to their own preferences and consistent with their own behavior, that was sort of the nature of that generation and their ability to become brand creators… because there was a desire, it wasn’t so much how can Nike influence me to wanna be or think I can be whomever. I’m gonna take Nike and I’m gonna create around that brand or any other brand.”

Michael Jordan was a rising star at a time when Nike, reassessing its position within the athletic wear market after having encountered image control problems and its first ever market losses, determined that it needed to return to return to its core of performance and invest more in fewer athletes. When Nike signed Jordan in 1984, the company thought “it was getting one of the better players of the year. It did not know it was getting the greatest athlete of all time.” The Nike of 1984 was a company built by sports enthusiasts, competitive and willing to take risks.
Other companies like Reebok and Adidas were not interested in or willing to offer Jordan the kind of brand package that Nike wanted to develop. Had Jordan not lived up to his potential, Nike’s bets would have paid off quite differently. But Jordan’s performance in the 1984 Olympics helped showcase his ability, differentiate him as a player in ways that the more structured North Carolina offense from which he came did not allow, and start to build a legend\textsuperscript{148} for both the man and the company.

Nike’s offer in signing Jordan was unprecedented for a player in a team sport—they were to promote him on the level only known by athletes in solitary sports like track and field and tennis. Further, with changes in the media environment, new communications technology and satellite that would broadcast images of Michael Jordan to vast audiences around the world, Nike could promote Jordan in ways unknown to previous decades. As one of the more readily understandable team sports, with five recognizable team players whose movements and expressions were clearly visible, basketball was poised to provide a player of international appeal and fame. And Michael Jordan, with his camera-ready, balletic athleticism and style and his good-mannered personality and competitive spirit, was poised to be that player.\textsuperscript{149}

Enter the National Basketball Association (NBA), which was reeling from various scandals involving athletes and drug use and was looking for ways to increase support for the sport and attendance at games. When Nike developed the first Air Jordan shoe to match the colors of the Chicago Bulls, the shoes violated uniform regulations. Open to controversy and willing to take risks, Nike and Chiat/Day capitalized on the NBA’s ban on the new Air Jordans by turning controversy into consumer appeal with a rebellious ad that reported the NBA could ban the shoes on the court, but not from consumers. Thinking the commercials funny and recognizing the potential for the NBA in Jordan’s success, commissioner David Stern allowed the ad to run
during game time. And recognizing the game attendance and fan support that Jordan’s performances on the court were bringing, Stern and the NBA saw fit to capitalize on Jordan’s appeal. Indeed, the NBA’s rise as an international sport in the 1980s dovetailed with Michael Jordan’s career.

Having faced serious risks from oversupply in the past, Nike was underprepared for the consumer response to the new Air Jordan shoes. They company thought they would see about $10 million in sales from the Jordan line in the first year; instead, they had $130 million. People accused them of purposefully undersupplying the market to create frenzy over the shoes. While Nike retailed the shoe for $64.95, some retailers increased their price as high as $80 or more based on demand, and consumers turned pairs for over $100 on the street. Nike maintained through the 1990s, “The illusion of being exclusive is created by the incredibly high demand that even we didn’t anticipate.” The media, however, continued to insist that Nike deliberately kept the shoes in short supply. While there is no indication that Nike’s intention on the first release was to inflate the value by undersupplying, Nike would tightly control allocation in subsequent releases of the shoe such that demand would exceed supply.

With Jordan’s reputation building but with a championship unrealized, Wieden & Kennedy copywriter Jim Riswold saw a movie trailer for a film by rising director Spike Lee in which the Air Jordan was depicted as an integral part of character and plot formation. Riswold, with a gift for capturing cultural milieu, developed an advertising campaign with sports-enthused Jordan fan and up-and-coming director Spike Lee. Lee’s films captured urban life and brought it to the attention of mainstream America—not as depicting a bunch of drug dealers and thugs, but with a variety of characters trying to navigate their worlds like everyone else. Some saw Lee as an angry black man or as “too black,” others as a champion for improvement of the black condition.
Lee, himself, did not envision his purpose to provide all of the answers, but rather to incite discussion about difficult and controversial social issues.\textsuperscript{155} Of his influence, one author proposed, “If it can be said that blacks carry the lead in American culture—in music, sports, vernacular and dance—then Spike Lee is carrying one hell of a lot of it on his bony little shoulders.”\textsuperscript{156} Wieden & Kennedy and Nike paired the articulate movement and style of Jordan with the “nebbishy, deadpan character”\textsuperscript{157} Mars Blackmon as his foil, all while reinforcing a performance-based and athlete-centered message and resonating with a broad audience that would never step onto a court in their new Air Jordans.

Nike spoke to and through elite athletes with their performance message. As Nike ad man Scott Bedbury indicated, “The Nike empire was built on the theory that advertising should appeal to the elite athletes, and once they were won over, this success would trickle down to the masses.”\textsuperscript{158} Figures from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA) in 1990 indicate that athletic-styled shoes accounted for 4 out of every 10 shoes sold in the United States and that only 9% of those were purchased solely for athletic performance or sports use.\textsuperscript{159} While children’s athletic shoes accounted for under a quarter of the $7.6 billion in athletic footwear sold in the United States in 1990,\textsuperscript{160} that market was growing and kids set the tempo for athletic fashion.\textsuperscript{161} Further, industry analysis indicates that while urban youth accounted for a relatively small percentage of overall sales, their influence on the fashion of was tremendous. People became concerned over and fearful of the connection that had grown between Nike and inner-cities and had been cultivated through advertising, and the power of figures like Michael Jordan in forging that relationship.

The story of Michael Jordan and Nike is not simply a story of a sports celebrity or the sale of shoes. It is the creation of a myth and an icon, both carefully cultivated in an ever-broadening
story “made year-by-year by Jim Riswold,” and the consuming public, and packaged and repackaged by the media. As one journalist wrote:

“Jordan’s popularity has something to do with his acrobatic elegance and something to do with his sweet personality, something to do with how shrewdly he is promoted and something to do with how responsible he is with his image. It has something to do with what the nation expects of its athletes, and what kind of fame it makes available to black men. It also has something to do with joy.”

The experience of and the experiencing of Jordan have been characterized as transcendent. He has been said to transcend race and his grace and elegance, his seemingly superhuman feats and untarnished image, have been equated to religious experience. Divinity scholar Arthur Droge explained, “Going to a Bulls game is like going to a temple. There’s definitely a religious component about it and Jordan is the demigod.” Jordan, after all and unlike mere mortals, can fly. In doing so, he helps us to understand more of ourselves. He is, according to scholar Michael Eric Dyson, “a public pedagogue, a figure of estimable public moral authority whose career educates us about productive and disenabling forms of knowledge, desire, interest, consumption and culture.” In Dyson’s estimation, there is not precedence from which to judge the meaning of Jordan because while he may have encompassed previous incarnations of fame, he has transcended them. Again, this is not simply a narrative about athletic prowess or even athletic heroicism, but rather Jordan’s “transcendence” represents a historically-situated ritualizing of “racial achievement against socially imposed barriers to cultural performance.” He embodies the contradictions of a belief in “sport’s pastoral past” and the rhetoric of global capitalism and postmodern spectacle. His image works amidst a history of forged racist and sexist meanings of the African American male with innate physical ability that connects him with animality, hypersensuality, and eroticism, but he has also has “given us a new definition of male beauty” that defines or redefines the new age athlete. As an athlete and performer on a global stage, he
creates “sports as ballet, something utterly new and modern, its roots African-American. Ballet as a contested sport.”\textsuperscript{170}

Jordan was particularly adept at managing his public image. He was not too political, much to the chagrin of some who wanted to see him take more of a stand on issues, and he either presented himself or was presented by the media as a national moral compass, a symbol of achievement, hard-work, competition and fair play, and of family values. But Jordan was not perfect, either. He was not the perfect teammate and was particularly hard on his fellow basketball players; he came across as venal when he fought over brand presence at the Olympic ceremonies, refusing to wear the Reebok gold medal uniforms; he encountered personal scandal when checks bearing his signature popped up at the estate of a murdered bail bondsman and the media began to implicate him in scandal over big gambling debts; and, of course, he was implicated in scandals over low-wage foreign labor and the fleecing of inner-cities that plagued Nike.\textsuperscript{171}

These contradictions run deep. Given this, no satisfactory framework has been offered by which to understand and critique Jordan and Nike that allows us to understand the public on which he was said to have such a tremendous influence—inner-city African American youth. While some scholarly works have presented a more sophisticated and nuance examination of the meaning of Jordan,\textsuperscript{172} media discourse of the popular influence of Jordan and Nike have with few exceptions\textsuperscript{173} presented insular examinations that either represent inner-city communities as vulnerable and manipulated into believing in an unfounded and unrealized promise of consumption or as being the curators of their own destiny without regard to the complex social and historical systems within which they exist. To address this important absence in scholarly works, Chapter 6 presents a dialogic ethic as a framework for understanding consumer power
and vulnerability as they exist within the social and historical structures against which they react and within which they negotiate their existence.
Notes


3 The *Wall Street Journal* and the *Advertising Age* reports cannot be compared directly because while *The Wall Street Journal* discussed the number of endorsements as compared to popularity of athletes, the *Advertising Age* article discusses “top” endorsers. It is not clear how these measures were determined.

4 Bradley, *The Miracle of Bo is the Wonder of the '80*.

5 Hubbard, *AdVantage: Black-White Lines Fade in Athlete Endorsements*.


9 Greg Donaldson and Gam, "The Sneaker Story: A Nostalgic Look to Police the Modern Ones are Felony Shoes. To Joggers and Swingers They’re Comfortable and Trendy. But Do They Have the Character of those Old Black Highcuts," *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, July 16, 1979; De Longeville and Leone, *Just for Kicks*.

10 Author interview with Erin Patton.

11 See Chapter 2. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry*, 44.


13 Ibid.

14 Though in a different letter dated eight days later, that number was cited as the budget Nike spent the previous year on research and development. Either way, the point he is making is about Nike’s commitment to performance technology that would make a shoe superior; see Jack Welch, “Letter Addressed to Pete Calabro of the Enterprise Ledger, Ala.,” Nike Advertising Oral History Documentation Collection, 1976-1992, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 2, Folder 8, 1983.

15 Ibid.

16 Telander, *Your Sneakers Or Your Life*.


Ibid., 80.
25 Ibid.
26 Sharkey, Ads Targeting Black Consumers Don't always do the Right Thing, 38.
27 Brubaker, Athletic Shoes: Beyond Big Business.
28 Swift, Farewell My Lovely: The Good Ol' all-Purpose Sneaker is Obsolete in a World of Hyped-Up, High-Tech, High-Priced Athletic Shoes, 77-85.
29 Davies, "Hot Shoes: Nike and its Rivals Have Persuaded North Americans to Shell Out More than $5 Billion a Year on Shoes Like These. We Ventured to the Heart of the Nike Empire to Find Out How They Do It.
31 Ibid.. In fact, Nike later would develop such public service campaigns, though they would deny the efforts were in response to criticisms such as those lodged Houston prosecutor Mark Vinson or columnist Phil Mushnick who, by several accounts led the charge against Nike in particular John Leo, "The Well-Heeled Drug Runner," U.S. News & World Report, April 30, 1990.
35 Mushnick, The Write Thing Ain't Right.
37 Grimm, Nike Take a Bow, S22; Lippert, Nike Makes a Smart Move Into Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood, 17.
38 Hsu, The Sneaker Steps Out: $5 Billion Market a Mix of Sport, Fashion, But Ads Kick Up Controversy.
39 Mushnick, The Write Thing Ain't Right
40 Kornheiser, The Insidious Sneaker
41 Jerry Sullivan, "Jordan's Shoe Critics Are Full of Hot Air," Buffalo News, May 2, 1990; Greenberg, How Do We Stop 'Sneaker Killings.'
42 Lee, Bird, Montana Do it, Why Criticize Blacks for Peddling Sneakers?; Telander, Your Sneakers or Your Life.

Williamson, *Sneakers Do Kill; the Prices are Murder*, 9.


Ibid.

Lippert, *Nike Makes a Smart Move Into Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood*.


47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.

50 Grimm, *Nike Take a Bow*, S22.


54 Araton, “It’s Not Sneakers, but Sneaks”; Jerry Sullivan, *Jordan’s Shoe Critics Are Full of Hot Air*.


57 Sullivan, *Jordan’s Shoe Critics Are Full of Hot Air*.

58 Berkow, *The Murders Over the Sneakers*.


60 Araton, “It’s Not Sneakers, but Sneaks,”; Shappell, “Bird, Montana do it, Why Criticize Blacks for Peddling Sneakers?”

61 Berkow, *The Murders Over the Sneakers*.


63 Berkow, *The Murders Over the Sneakers*.

64 Fowler, *Marketing Tools Shun Larger Evils*.


67 Shappell, “Bird, Montana do it, Why Criticize Blacks for Peddling Sneakers?”

68 Mushnick, *The Write Thing Ain’t Right*.
Nike was not the only athletic shoe company attacked by critics claiming their responsibility for inner-city crime, nor were they the only one to dedicate money to public service announcements combating some of the issues involved in those criticisms. Number two Reebok contributed $750,000 to Project Teamwork, a program run by Northwestern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society that fights racism. See Telander, *Your Sneakers or Your Life*. Footwear News noted that sponsorship of public service campaigns and of youth-oriented programs such as camps had increased over the several years prior to 1990 by both large and small athletic companies. Companies such as L.A. Gear, Pony and British Knight were offering monetary support to community organizations as well as sponsoring public service announcements; and Avia and Puma, like Nike and Reebok, held youth-oriented sports clinics and seminars. Many of them connected their efforts to high profile celebrities. Examples include Nike and John McEnroe, Bo Jackson, David Robinson and Michael Jordan, British Knights and M.C. Hammer, and L.A. Gear and Michael Jackson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. See Deirdre McKay, "Athletic Firms Playing Major Role Backing Youth-Oriented Programs," *Footwear News*, v61, n31, July 30, 1990.
suit would give them a chance to show how color-blind they actually are. See Sandra Kobrin, “Nike Trimming Marginal Factories,” Footwear News (April 18, 1983), 26.

90 Gwen Ifill, "Jackson Asks Defenders of Nike to Think Again: PUSH Founder Cites 'Race Manipulation,' Washington Post (August 17, 1990), sec. F, 1.

91 Ifill, Jackson Asks Defenders of Nike to Think Again: PUSH Founder Cites 'Race Manipulation'; Raspberry, So They Dream NBA Dreams, A27.

92 Scott Hume, “Boycott of Nike Ignored,” Advertising Age (October 29, 1990), 59.

93 Ibid.


95 Kobrin, Nike Trimming MarginalFactories, 26.

96 Foltz, Nike’s Two Stars Appear in a New Campaign, D19.

97 Wynter, Sneaker Makers Face Scrutiny from PUSH.

98 Raspberry, So They Dream NBA Dreams, A27.


100 Joe Cappo, “Don’t Get Too Pushy,” Advertising Age (August 27, 1990), 20.

101 White, Footwear Buyers Say Boycott Hasn’t Hurt Nike Sales.


103 Author Interview with Erin Patton, June 29, 2009.


106 Bob Herbert, "Nike’s Pyramid Scheme," The Tampa Tribune (June 11, 1996). The article pointed to Knight’s stock value of $4.5 billion and the $20 million a year paid to Michael Jordan in contrast to the $30 a month paid to Vietnamese workers making the shoes.


109 Tran, Nike Faces US Boycott Threat.

110 Paula Span, "Ad Agencies, Doing the Right Thing," Washington Post, May 29, 1992; However, as Strasser and Becklund (1991) indicate and Phil Mushnick reported, Nike figures on minority employment included immigrant manual laborers employed at a factory near the company’s headquarters in Oregon, from Mushnick, Media Still Missing the Point When it Comes to Air Jordan’s Greed, 50ff.


114 Span, Ad Agencies, Doing the Right Thing, D1.

Interestingly, in the wake of the L.A. Riots, concerns arose over the value of ethnic advertising, which had proven a lucrative boost for minority agencies. Deborah Yu of The Globe and Mail wrote, "In the past decade, ethnic advertising has proven to be a boon to minority agencies. Not only did the ads address the sensibilities of ethnic groups, the thinking went, it provided job opportunities for minority shops. But in the wake of the Los Angeles riots, there are those who suspect that such segmentation inadvertently contributes to a new segregation dictated by the


118 Ibid., 108.

119 Ibid., 112. The authors also point out that the advertising obscures the absence of institutions that provide structure and support for urban poor and also positions sport as the only available alternative to a life of gangs and the barren wasteland of nihilism (see p. 110-111).

120 Scholar Cheryl Cole (1996) considered the P.L.A.Y. campaign representative of a more complex system of meaning and power in American society. She argues, "representative figures like American Jordan are both effects and instruments of modern power. As such, Jordan is an element in and expression of a discursive formation that works to delimit and render intelligible what/who count as violent, criminal, and dangerous. The regulatory ideals invoked through nation-centric discourse, American principles, Michael Jordan, and the apparent inverse relationship between urban sport and gangs work to bound and limit identities in ways that mask the complexities of the terrain occupied by transnational corporations like Nike, while exacerbating punitive and vengeful desires directed at Black urban youth." Cole, American Jordan: P.L.A.Y., Consensus, and Punishment, 366.

121 Scholars have been concerned with the impact of the media successes of black athletes on black youth since at least the 1970s, arguing that it gives youth an unrealistic sense of their prospects in playing professional sports. See, for example, the discussion in Wilson and Sparks, "It's Gotta Be the Shoes": Youth, Race, and Sneaker Commercials about critics like Harry Edwards.


123 Ibid., 19.

124 Air Jordan: The Selling of an Idol, Nightline (February 7, 1997), loaned from Vanderbilt News Archive, 32107.

125 Colford, Magiera and Sloan, Athlete Endorsers Fouled by Slayings; Ads for High-Price Shoes Draw Criticism.


128 Sharon Lee, "Next Sports Receives Ewing Rights in U.S." Footwear News (1991), 60. The higher price points between $60 and $110 were for men, $50-$60 for boys and $45-50 for youths.

129 Ibid.60.


132 Air Jordan: The Selling of an Idol.

133 McAllister, Athletics Over $100 Top Gainer, 2.


For a more detailed and first-hand account of the Marbury Movement, see Patton, *Under the Influence: Tracing the Hip-Hop Generation’s Impact on Brands, Sports, & Pop Culture*, 170


Ibid.


Ibid.


Halberstam, *A Hero for the Wired World: In the Satellite Age, Michael Jordan has Become the Global Star of a Global show*, 76-81.


In contrast to Nike Basketball Director David Bond’s argument in the shot prior that Nike didn’t anticipate the incredibly high demand, reporter Chris Bury narrated, “The release date for new sneakers spreads almost entirely by word of mouth, and the company deliberately keeps the shoes in short supply.” *Air Jordan: The Selling of an Idol*.

*Footwear News* reported, “For years, the Air Jordan shoe has been sold on an allocated basis by Nike with demand for the shoe always far exceeding the supply.” “The Endorsement Rap: Marquee Marketers,” *Footwear News*, v49 n49, December, 1993, 2.

When violence erupts in “Do the Right Thing,” it is not because of drug deals gone bad or thugs out to do harm. It is because of the culmination of racial discord that reaches its peak on a hot summer day.

Reilly, *He’s Gotta Pitch it*, 74.

Ibid.


160 Karen McAllister, "All Pumped Up: Athletic Footwear Makers are Optimistic about Fall," Children’s Business, February, 1992; specifically, over 18% of the $7.6 billion of athletic footwear sold in 1990 was for children’s athletic shoes.
161 Freeman, Flat-Footed: Ad Campaigns Try to Spark Sales as Sports Shoes Hit Plateau, 82; McAllister, All Pumped Up: Athletic Footwear Makers Are Optimistic about Fall; Jon Berry, “Kids,” Adweek (April 15 1991), 31-34.
162 Halberstam, A Hero for the Wired World: In the Satellite Age, Michael Jordan has Become the Global Star of a Global show, 76-81.
164 Ibid.
165 Dyson, Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 64.
166 Ibid. Dyson, Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 65.
169 Halberstam, A Hero for the Wired World: In the Satellite Age, Michael Jordan has Become the Global Star of a Global show, 76.
170 Ibid.76.
173 Telander, Your Sneakers Or Your Life.
CHAPTER 6: DEVELOPING AN ETHICS OF CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

Introduction: Literature on Advertising Ethics and Vulnerability

Advertising and marketing have been criticized for violating various ethical standards and creating ethical problems. Research on advertising and marketing ethics has addressed the social and economic role of advertising,\(^1\) ethical perspectives of advertising practitioners,\(^2\) structural issues faced by practitioners as they are beholden to their own agencies, their clients, consumers, industry codes of ethics and regulatory systems, and as they navigate their own professional and cultural norms,\(^3\) by researchers as they explore consumer research,\(^4\) and in the realm of marketing ethics and consumer ethics—or as marketing scholar Morris Holbrook says, “what is done to consumers” and “what is done by consumers.”\(^5\) Cunningham (1999) uses Hannah Arendt’s communicative conceptualization of power and social contract theory to propose a contractualist approach to advertising ethics in which advertisers’ power is granted by the public and thereby requires responsibility to the public. Teleological and deontological research has also addressed more specific issues such as ethics and sexuality,\(^6\) representation and stereotyping, harmful products such as tobacco and alcohol, and targeting of particular audiences.\(^7\) For example, Park, Weigold and Treise (1999) conducted a cross-cultural study of perceptions and ethical evaluations of advertising to children, using sex appeals, for tobacco advertising, and perceived offensive advertising, as well as more general advertising issues such as prevalence and influence.\(^8\) Borgeson and Schroeder (2002) suggest an ontological approach to representation in advertising, arguing that discourses of marketing and advertising influence and are influenced by cultural knowledge, including values stereotypes and norms. This approach acknowledges the complexities of representation in the interaction of persons and messages, and politicizes the consequences by suggesting, “Every representation has the potential to construct the way
societies see other cultures and genders.” But with Borgeson and Schroeder’s approach, power remains in the hands of marketing and advertising practitioners to supply more just representations and avoid bad faith. This is not an adequate framework for understanding consumer vulnerability as it is rooted in social and historical context and to circumvent the exertion of power inherent in the very act of defining vulnerability.

Scholarship in advertising and consumer research in the 21st century has taken strides to reposition the literature to affect a concern for social well-being and responsibility. A task force for the Transformative Consumer Research movement of the Association for Consumer Research, for example, noted that the study of vulnerable consumer groups should be prioritized in consumer research. However, while advertising and marketing ethics has been an issue of concern for decades among scholars and consumers and even in light of recent directives to study vulnerability, the literature and discourses to date have not offered an ethical framework by which to understand consumer vulnerability in the context of complex historical and social structures. Further, advertising and marketing policies have tended to proceed on utilitarian perspectives that prioritize individual liberties and grant the greatest happiness or greatest good for the greatest number. Utilitarianism has been handed down in the American system through John Stuart Mill and the argument that this principle must be guided by neutral and empirical logic. But as communications scholars have pointed out, despite the democratic appeal of utilitarianism, a result-oriented ethic is inadequate because “results are frequently complicated and intertwined so that a theory staking itself on results often does not provide adequate guidelines for morally acceptable action.” Accordingly, a utilitarian ethic is not sufficient in considering vulnerable audiences because vulnerability displaces autonomy. Instead, I suggest a
dialogic ethic, which allows us to acknowledge and navigate personal and community empowerment and the social systems of power and ideology.

**Defining Persuasion**

Participants in a communication exchange enter the experience with the premise that the intention of the communicator is appropriately encoded in the structural characteristics of language and imagery of the communication and likewise that the recipient of the message has the ability both to perceive and decode the communication appropriately.  

Though the communication process may not proceed seamlessly, to deny such relationship is, in the words of Edwin Black, “to deny the possibility of language, as we ordinarily understand the term.”  

The market philosophy of *caveat emptor* prematurely and improperly disengages the intention of the communicator from the communicative process and thereby imposes the full burden of the message on the recipient. Yet this same tradition that proclaims “buyer beware” for consequences in the market exchange has also, to varying degrees in history, characterized the recipient, or audience, as naïve, foolish, incapable or unintelligent. Further, critics charge advertisers with appropriating and manipulating cultural imagery and discourse for market gain.

Advertisers and critics alike thus have debated issues of accountability in persuasive communication, and these debates have had an impact in both popular understanding and on formal and structural implications in communication regulation. Accordingly, “although our society strongly favors individual freedom, we also recognize that without community we are simply isolated and self-interested beings.”  

Because of the social context of communication media—and particularly of advertising—continuing discussion and development of ethical standards that consider social iconography and social accountability is critical. Because a
dialogic ethic is grounded in the social and historical context of communications, I begin by providing an overview of the ways in which communication—specifically persuasive communication—has been understood and how that legacy has been handed down in contemporary thought.

Different definitions of persuasion not only offer differing ethical dilemmas, but primarily determine whether or not persuasion should be situated within the context of ethical debate at all, perhaps most astutely doing so through the control the definition allocates to the message recipient in the communication environment. A review of historically dominant approaches to persuasion betrays varying degrees of confidence in message recipients’ abilities, portraying them anywhere from utterly insipient and dependent on the skill of intelligentsia to fully engaged and competent participants. Thus, definitions of persuasion can determine contextual approaches that situate the audience as capable or incapable, as active or passive, and thereby delineate ethical concerns or disputes that are carried to the present. Further, as theories of rhetoric have developed, scholars have readdressed persuasion to move beyond the formal, structural roots of rhetorical study and to expand the acknowledged tools of persuasion to encompass not just verbal, but visual means, as well. The impact of visual means of persuasion and inadequate theoretical understandings of their effects in modern media environments, together with expanding technological capabilities, impose further urgency on questions of accountability.

I proceed on the argument that persuasion is not, in and of itself, a deleterious act—nor have students of persuasion always considered it such, despite historical developments in the usage of the word “persuasion” that have provided the structure for commonly held negative associations. I discuss, with the legacy of persuasive theory in mind, ways in which power struggles to define persuasion and to delegate responsibilities in the persuasion environment have affected ethical
and regulatory approaches to advertising. Specifically, I will offer an ethical framework for understanding and approaching the concept of vulnerability, and will ground this discussion in the historical circumstances of the “sneaker killings.”

**Persuasion in Historical Context**

Persuasion is defined generally as communication with the intent of “inducing belief or action.” But full consideration of the term is contingent on an appreciation of the historical roots of rhetorical and persuasion theories, as well as their social and political underpinnings. Further, because communication, in its various linguistic and symbolic forms, is engrained in the experience of being human, attempts to define a form of communication for which the purpose is inducing belief or action is inherently a struggle of power. Barry Brummett, in his book *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* noted, “Power is the ability to define both events and meaning.” And so, from the very birth of rhetorical theory disagreements over its meaning and place in society have surfaced and have been the site of power struggles.

Conflicts in defining rhetoric, or methods of persuasion, began early in its development as a concept of theory and practice. For example, “For the Sophists, rhetoric was the heart of persuasion carried out through public speaking, the art of determining how to speak to popular audiences on the wide range of subjects that might come before them for review and decision. For Plato, rhetoric was an art of fooling people, of flattering them, of getting the public to make decisions based on oratorical technique rather than on knowledge or a grasp of the truth. These definitional arguments arose precisely because power was at stake.” While the “Sophists and Plato initiated arguments over rhetorical theory… Plato’s pupil Aristotle wrote the most famous work on the subject, the *Rhetoric*, which in one way or another influenced all subsequent
rhetorical theory.” According to Aristotle, humans are moral, and moral insight involves cognitive and rational deliberation developed through language and interpretation. He defined rhetoric as “‘the faculty wherein one discovers the available means of persuasion in any case whatsoever.’ Although the phrase ‘available means’ clearly gives permission to go beyond speech, many academics invested in the power of the word… have insisted on defining rhetoric as the exclusive province of verbal language.” However the scope of rhetoric has been defined, Aristotle’s position has been described in discussions of modern usages of persuasion as “the first comprehensive theory on persuasion.”

One can see debates early in the development of rhetorical theory revolving around issues of speaker and audience capabilities, issues of truthfulness and deceit, and the legitimacy of persuasion as a venerable form of communication. Further, as is evidenced in these early definitions, that which is rightly considered rhetoric and is placed in a system of persuasive technique is delegated and, for these early theorists, limited to formal oral communications. Theoretical embellishments on the definitional scope of rhetoric have varied in degree throughout history and have influenced modern thought perhaps as much as their classical precedents. The Greek and Roman legacy received renewed interest in the eighteenth century, after a period of relative suffocation, and alternatives to this delineated approach began to be explored, as well, “thereby planting the seeds of alternative ways of thinking.” For example, the developing field of psychology offered methods for rhetorical critiques, and shifted the focus from the communicator to the effects on and abilities of the message recipient. Further, as Barry Brummet argued,

“This concern for criticism also created a possibility for thinking about the rhetoric of popular culture, because it is as critics, or as consumers, that most people confront the artifacts of popular culture… During all these centuries in which rhetoric was defined primarily in terms of traditional texts, people were
experiencing signs, artifacts, and texts that were not in that traditional form…
[Today’s] rhetorical theorists understand the rhetorical dimension of that wider range of cultural artifacts. In other words, many theorists today would choose not to limit the rhetoric to those traditional texts.”

To understand the newly expanded perspectives on the scope of rhetoric, one must acknowledge both changes in theory and changes in society as effecting definitional alterations. Indeed, the twentieth century was a period in which “both the expression and conceptualization of persuasion changed.” With developing technologies expanding the means and methods of mass persuasion, the very notion of persuasion was augmented with accounts of nonverbal forms of communication.

Modern western philosophies on persuasion, also the context for modern advertising theory, reference Greek and Roman classical rhetoricians, drawing heavily in particular from Aristotle, and apply them to modern political and economic processes. While it is important to explore the theories of the ancient philosophers, it is equally important for functional purposes to explore how they have been handed down and translated into modern theory. Pratkanis and Aronson, who credited Aristotle with providing the first theory of persuasion, explained it thus:

“For Aristotle, the purpose of persuasion was the communication of a point of view or position. Although the Sophists believed persuasion was needed to discover important facts, Aristotle believed that knowledge could be gained only by logic and reason. Unfortunately, according to Aristotle, not everyone was capable of reasoning clearly about every issue. For these denser souls, the art of persuasion is needed to communicate truth to them in such a manner that they might come to the right conclusion.”

This is one way by which Aristotle has been handed down and from this view the artfulness and potential dangers of persuasion are drawn from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, contingent in these terms on a communicator who is skilled and a recipient whose understanding of issues depends on the guidance of the skilled communicator. This accounting of Aristotle’s position, however, is somewhat rudimentary when considered in the context of other derivations of his work and it
neglects the potential contributions of creativity in communication. Thomas Bivins allowed for a more creative aspect to the Aristotelian approach, suggesting that while he probably would emphasize individual over community rights, Aristotle “would also probably favor the creative aspects of advertising, since the messages creatively expressed are often those with the most impact (a fact that advertisers know well).”

But communications scholar Clifford Christians wrote of a more complex Aristotelian system of communication that affords greater opportunity for ethical engagement and discussion:

“We are unitary beings with our various human capacities depending on and interacting with one another. This third feature—the interpretive—was recognized by the classical Greeks as the primordial home of language. From the mythological Hermes, inventor of language, they coined the term *hermeneia* (hermeneutics, interpretation). Aristotle’s genius brought hermeneutical consciousness into focus as a constituent feature of the human species, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he gave the interpretive art its richest meaning… In making a moral decision, Aristotle argues, *hermeneia* discerns the appropriate action, in the right amount, and with proper timing. This is Aristotelian language confirming that we are moral beings with an orienting system beyond the senses yet one differing from logic… If the interpretive domain is lingual, and if language is the matrix of community, then human bonds are not constituted by reason or action but through finding common meaning in *hermeneia.*”

Thus Aristotle’s legacy, particularly in implicating an interpretive domain in the communication process, offers the opportunity not only to contemplate a more complex view of rhetorical communications, but also to treat all parties involved in the communication as constitutive of the communication itself.

Broader theories on persuasion may widen our understanding of the communication process, but also offer more opportunities for expanding fears about the communication process, for misinterpreting and misunderstanding responsibility within this environment, and for using misinformation as a source of power in the marketplace. Pratkanis and Aronson posit, “Our age of persuasion is populated with short, catchy, and often visually oriented messages. Although
such persuasive images are frequently successful in capturing our attention in the message-dense environment, they substitute slogans and images for well-reasoned arguments and can turn complex issues into vulgar black-and-white caricatures of reason.”33 These authors’ way of addressing advertising is dangerous if unfounded because it obscures the multiplicity of persuasive conventions and the complex methods of verbal and written language, signs and symbols, art and imagery that are involved in persuasive communication. Further, it implies first that those of the past did not have forms of or engage in complex communications such as the visually-oriented messages that “our age of persuasion” offers; and second, it implies that people of today are not equipped to participate fully in the communication process by understanding and interpreting complex messages and images. This approach lacks cultural and historical perspective; the practice of approaching methods of communications in consumer culture as unequivocally unique to modern and western environments disengages advertising conventions and critiques from the legacies and perspectives from which they stem. So, just as it is important to explore the classical legacy of rhetorical theory, it is equally important to acknowledge the multiple and complex ways in which that legacy has been translated into modern form and how, thus, the interpretations have influenced modern approaches to rhetoric and persuasion.

Vulnerable Audiences, Caveat Emptor and Accountability

Traditional approaches to persuasion continue to be the dominant forms of thought about behaviors in the marketplace such that, as one scholar explains, “advocates of all sorts (legal, commercial, and editorial) still subscribe to the tenets of persuasion set forth by the likes of Aristotle and Cicero. Because this traditional approach is in effect, we must be prepared to deal with the potential for unethical use of both the language and the techniques of persuasion.”34 This
traditional legacy is one of democratic and rational debate. It assumes advertising provides an important public service by providing the proper information for the marketplace to flourish through rational and well-informed decision processes, a view upheld under the doctrine of free speech by the Supreme Court in the 1976 case of *Virginia State Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizen’s Consumer Council, Inc.* But the legacy of Aristotle was based on the belief that rhetoric should not be misused to persuade audiences of falsities or of something morally corrupt and so a doctrine of truth is imperative within this system. In fact, “truth is one underlying principle about which there is a cross-cultural agreement… Deception destroys the social order. Living with others is inconceivable if we cannot tacitly assume that people are speaking truthfully.” The human capacity to lie or to obscure the truth, and the power that accompanies successful lies is the root of many fears about advertising’s place in society and its effects on consumers, particularly those consumers deemed not intelligent enough, capable enough or rational enough to look out for themselves. Thomas Bivins writes,

“Not everyone has viewed the ‘people’ as intelligent enough to look out for themselves. This is an important point to come to grips with, as much as the justification for the type of communication that both advertising and public relations engage in is predicated on the notion that listeners are intelligent enough to discern true from false... This belief in the rational abilities of the people who receive media messages is directly responsible for such precepts as caveat emptor. ‘Buyer beware’ assumes that an intelligent consumer will be able to discern nuances in messages—nuances that the designer of the message may have intentionally obscured. And this turns up the other side of the coin: Why do those advertising and public relations practitioners who say they believe in the intelligence of the average consumer try so hard to cloud their messages? Could it be that, like Plato, they really believe that the masses are easily deceived by the ‘shadows on the cave wall’?*

Thus we witness contrariant tendencies in the marketplace that are alternately paternalistic and absolving; but, Bivins continues, “whether you agree with Plato or with Milton, placing the onus of recognition of reality solely on the receiver of your message is failing to live up to your own moral obligations. Intent is still the ultimate measure of truth telling.” While it is helpful to
distinguish the message communicator and message recipient in parsing matters of intent and misinterpretation and while these distinctions are frequently used to determine obligation and accountability, acknowledging the necessary interaction of the two as constitutive of the persuasive message is equally important theoretically. As in dialogic theory, “communication is not the transference of knowledge but a dialogic encounter of subjects creating it together.”\textsuperscript{40} If contradictory approaches to the nature of the consumer are allowed to flow through industry and ethical discourse without close critique, and if none of these approaches acknowledges the dialogic creation of the message, then the industry and its critics will be allowed to proceed unabated by ethical concerns, by using an account of the consumer that best suits immediate advantage.

Christians, Fackler, Rotzoll and McKee address concerns about “special audiences” and consider whether certain audiences should be considered more vulnerable to the persuasive (or manipulative, depending on your perspective) effects of advertising:

\textbf{“Advertising practitioners tend to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the pursuit of their craft is generally socially beneficial and that for most people, most of the time, advertising performs a useful service. Those carrying the banner of special audiences, on the other hand, contend that the system is simply unfair to those who may be potentially more vulnerable and, hence, must be treated with greater sensitivity.”}\textsuperscript{41}

Many advertisers, in defense of their freedoms, argue, “advertising should not have to ‘protect people from themselves.’ Yet advertising commonly does just that–voluntarily.”\textsuperscript{42} How an advertiser views the audience is often reflected in the conventions of the advertisement and the expectations of how advertising representations will be interpreted;\textsuperscript{43} it is represented not only through the things an advertisement shows or says, but through those things it may not show or say. Advertising, after all, cannot afford to offend and displease the target market. But at what point do advertisers look beyond their target market to the good of the industry or even to the
good of society? As Bivins recounts, “In the final analysis, the media cannot afford to lie—in any way, for any reason. If we cannot be assured that the default position is always the truth, then the media will continue to slide in esteem, along with their ability to affect lives in positive ways.”

Such concerns certainly do not fall under the refuge of *caveat emptor*, but the problem remains of how obligated a given advertiser may feel about his role in the larger context of the consumer environment, if he does indeed consider that role at all.

Where the industry is not interested in affording protection, the government might be. Analysis of the Federal Trade Commission’s capability to regulate advertising varies, but it remains the main body responsible for keeping the advertising industry in check. In 1914, the Federal Trade Commission was charged with preventing unfair competition in commerce, and with the Wheeler-Lea amendments of 1938, the authority of the FTC was extended from prevention to elimination. The 1970s were a time of renewed interest in consumer protection, and in 1972 the Supreme Court held that not just merchants and manufacturers, but consumers as well should be protected from unfair market practices, initiating the *unfairness doctrine* of consumer protection, which took the FTC beyond the realm of fact and into questions of public values.

And so there are at least two powerful and rather inapproachable agents of protectionism, each with its own allegiances and agendas, determining who should be protected and under what circumstances. To restate and revisit the issue of power in media, recall, “Power is the ability to define both events and meaning.” The advertising industry, government, and the media are involved in defining fairness and deceit in the marketplace, as well as in defining the audience. But addressing these entities and determining accountability is a formidable task bound by the complexities of organizational structure, antagonistic loyalties and the fact that these complex
and amorphous systems do not exist in a vacuum but operate within larger contexts of capitalism, democracy and even globalism. Sometimes they are bound by loyalties within these larger contexts that are not necessarily in the public or consumer interest. In his discussion on the effects of organizational structure on moral decision making, Bivins points out, “The roles we take on as media practitioners also imply a responsibility to perform certain functions associated with those roles. ‘Responsibility’ could be defined as a bundle of obligations associated with a job or function. In other words, responsibility refers to more than just the primary function of a role; it refers to the multiple facets of that function… Does responsibility naturally equate with accountability? ‘Accountability refers to blaming or crediting someone for an action – normally an action associated with a recognized responsibility. The assumption, therefore, would be to hold a person responsible for an action also accountable for the results of that action. This assumes that the responsible party is relatively autonomous.” It further assumes that the responsible party is identifiable, which can be difficult within large organizations and may be even less definitive within large social structures such as an “industry” or “government” or “media.”

Culture and Persuasion

Manipulation involves deception and falsities, which are not legally allowed in commercial communications; but persuasion can involve exaggerations and embellishments, known as puffery, which are legally allowable on the argument that a reasonable person would acknowledge and understand the embellishments. But our engagement with imagery is complex; and it may be as much that we use the image to constitute and convey our sense of reality as it is that the image shapes our sense of reality. Indeed, humans live in a world of representations and
interpretations—they are the very essence of culture. It is this interpretive domain, in which the audience is considered to have a constitutive role, that I suggest is most helpful in addressing issues surrounding vulnerable audiences.

According to Christians and Traber (1997),

“in dialogic theory, humans—in contrast to the rest of the animal kingdom—are not only situated in the natural world but live alongside it. Their symbolic capacity separates them from other forms through their consciousness… Mediating systems, from this perspective, are inescapably human creations, as well. In literary works or cinema, the indispensable features of their inner dialectics—the point of departure, plot, setting, overall tone, and resolution of conflicts—are all value driven and either engage a culture’s value system or they cannot be understood.”

Similarly, perception is necessarily value driven such that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe… Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”

Viewed in this way, advertising becomes a part of a complex web of communicative conventions that are reliant for their meaning on their situatedness in material culture, on the viewer’s perceptions of the message in its given context at its historical moment, making any analysis of its effects an overwhelming endeavor.

What the discussion thus far suggests is that a manipulation model of persuasion is not only too simplistic and unidirectional, but is unsubstantiated and negligent. Too often critics read messages without addressing the circumstances of their use, and theories of persuasion and manipulation have been developed without attention to the “viewing strategies available at a particular moment in time” and “cultural and historical conditions on which the perceptual act depends,” leaving the field of advertising with criticisms that have no substantial basis to allow for advances in ethical behaviors and theories in the marketplace. Failure to acknowledge the
participation of both the communicator and receiver is a failure to understand the communication itself.

**Dialogic Ethics**

As I have tried to express, a central theme in advertising ethics today is one that has been the subject of debate since the dawn of persuasive theory. This debate has assumed new meaning through the interaction of new and widespread methods of communication and through changing theoretical perspectives that, in their ability to define, harbor power over our communication, our interpretive ability and thus our very humanness. One version of dialogic ethics is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy. As a rhetoritician notes, “The Greek legacy to us includes some ideas about the relationship between power and rhetoric, as well as the ways in which popular culture is related to both… [Changes] in theory may be part of changes in power.” Generally widespread and accessible modern theories of consumer society recognize that consumption does more than fulfill our physical needs, that it addresses in large part our cultural needs, our need to have meaning, and our need to have power in the process of created and shared meaning, much of which is created by and passed through our cultural imagery and discourses. A dialogic ethic brings us to a place of respect for the historical processes of meaning, for the contemporary moment of a globalized and technological world where mono-cultural perspectives are insufficient, and to a place in ethical debate where the social and historical process of defining vulnerability are not just useful in exploring the concept but are necessary.

Ronald Arnett argues, “Dialogic ethics is the meeting place for learning in an age of difference.” As the rejoinder to individualistic rationalism, ethics is bound in “our mutual human existence across cultural, racial, and historical boundaries.” The various derivations of
dialogic ethics share an understanding of selfhood called to duty through relation or dialogue with community.⁶⁰ Martin Buber has been called the archetype of the dialogical perspective, and his “I-Thou”ness thesis of human existence its frame of reference.⁶¹ Ethics stems from the “other” but is not extrinsic, as in the formalism of the classical liberalism of John Stuart Mill and John Locke.⁶² Instead, for Buber, human relationships are primary, with primacy of Thou incorporating not only other humans, but also human relation with nature and spirituality.⁶³ Buber has been criticized for failing to offer a terminus a quo for revolutionary change and for appearing naïve and romantic.⁶⁴ Because the focus is on person-to-person interaction, he does not offer a theory that deals adequately with social institutions and therefore does not provide a framework for demanding institutional and structural change.⁶⁵

Greatly influenced by but ultimately rejecting Buber, Emmanuel Levinas proposed an ethics centered in the other, rather than “the ethical relationship as residing in the ‘between’ of the interpersonal relationship” as with Buber.⁶⁶ For Levinas, humanness is presumed by our moral obligation in relation to others; the other is the source of ethical obligation.⁶⁷ Levinas criticized western ontology for its self-centered focus on human subjectivity.⁶⁸ In fact, Levinas posited relational duty to be fundamental to human identity and to supersede individual rights.⁶⁹ Rather than proposing that we might “know” the other, which he conceived to be an act of dominance if not violence, he posited a phenomenological approach to the Other through the way that the Other conveys itself. As Murray (2002) explains, “Ethics is reconceived, therefore, as a summons that comes from the Other… Responsibility is in ‘response’ to the call of the Other.”⁷⁰ Levinas brings listening to the forefront of communication and presents a view of self that requires learning from the Other. While Levinas brings ethics to the center of humanness and conceptualizes communication as “the doing of ethics discovered in the act of listening,”⁷¹ this
centeredness in the Other and the phenomenological appearance of the Other poses several problems in politicizing the ethics of Levinas. As Murray (2002) explains, “[T]he face of the Other may be instead an inescapably interpreted phenomenon. In other words, the announcement of ethical obligation may depend upon communication rather than initiating it, and therefore be subject to interpretive distortion… The call of the Other, as an ethical summons, is only heard against a cultural and historical backdrop.” Further, Levinas’s Other is essentially an interpersonal, face-to-face encounter. Therefore, Levinas does not offer a satisfactory ethical framework for a globalized, multicultural, mass communication society that hosts a variety of examples in which the face of the Other is masked or distorted through cultural and historical processes. But the deontological framework that Levinas presented offered a counter to Nietzsche’s ethical relativism by placing ethics in the call of the Other, and influenced the development of dialogic ethics.

Clifford Christians (2007) offers three versions of dialogic ethics—discourse ethics, feminist ethics and communitarian ethics. The discourse ethics of Habermas places ethics in public communication practices. Ethics is dialogic rather than monologic and is derived from “communicative action—the process of giving reasons for holding or rejecting particular claims.” Feminist social ethics is rooted in human social relationships and experiences with the language of caring and understanding. It “situates the moral domain within the general purposes of human life that people share across cultural, racial, and historical boundaries.” Communitarian ethics acknowledges sociocultural influence on existence and meaning. Human identity is developed in the social realm and fulfillment is achieved in community. In its basic form, communitarianism is political theory that argues a politics of individual rights fails to acknowledge identity formed through historical and cultural processes and is therefore incapable
of offering human fulfillment. But while these versions of the dialogic move us towards the “transnational and cross-cultural in a way utilitarianism is unable to match conceptually,” they are not sufficient to understand vulnerability in these contexts.

Habermas has been challenged for failing to be “deeply holistic, gender inclusive, or culturally constituted” and discourse ethics more generally as being ethnocentric. The political agenda of communitarianism is predicated on a dialogic view that can only be maintained in context of a larger political structure that works within the same belief system. While it may acknowledge the social, it does not demonstrate adequately how more localized dialogue work within the larger social system. And while feminist social ethics avoids the political policy agenda of communitarianism, an ethic of caring still insinuates a dependence relationship that is problematic beyond the interpersonal. Therefore, none of these versions of the dialogic offer an adequate ethical framework for understanding vulnerability and responsibility in a multicultural, historically-rooted environment of mass communications. Instead, I suggest that the dialogic ethic of Paulo Freire is uniquely situated to address the concept of vulnerability, specifically through several important concepts—the socio-historical situatedness of meaning that not only allows for but anticipates multiculturalism, pluralism, and transformation; the notion of liberation through dialogue, not as an act of violence, but naming and therein transforming the world; the importance of voice, or the ability to be a part of naming the world; and the concept of responsibility not only as centered in the individual, but also in the social.

**Paulo Freire**

Because Paulo Freire’s concept of dialogue emanates from concrete historical experience, is contextual in nature and “his books and essays are ongoing reflections of activities in process,”
it is important, likewise, to place Freire in context. Freire was born in 1921 in northeast Brazil, one of the poorest regions in the world. As a child, he witnessed the impact of the Great Depression and knew his own hunger and saw the hunger of others. Despite this, in the 1940s he was able to obtain a law degree and complete a doctorate in education. Literacy was important to Freire from his early career, and in 1946 he was named director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in Pernambuco. He was faced with the fact that literacy was an obstacle to participation in society, and so education became imperative for participation. Ronald Arnett places this in western perspective by pointing out, “in the United States, literacy tests were used to exclude many citizens from voting until the Voting Rights Act of 1964, which attacked numerous forms of disenfranchisement.” Freire’s ideas were not simply esoteric; rather, he was an educator whose work was pragmatic. In 1962, he taught literacy to three hundred sugarcane workers in forty-five days; he became the coordinator of Brazil’s national adult education campaign by 1963; and in 1964 after a military coup that toppled the “reform-minded regime,” Freire was imprisoned and then exiled to Chile, where he continued his work in adult education. He published Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1974), his most widely known book and in which his concept of dialogue is addressed most elaborately, while a visiting fellow at Harvard’s Center for Studies in Education and Development.

Freire’s personal experiences in various third-world countries influenced and politicized his thought and, as De Lima and Christians (1979) articulate, “prompted Freire to name humanization as today’s central problem and to see domination as the fundamental theme of our time, implying its opposite (liberation) as the permanent goal to be pursued.” Dehumanization, as Freire contends, “is not only an ontological possibility” but also a “historical reality.” Therefore, the “great humanistic and historical task” is liberation, not only for the oppressed, but
for their oppressors, as well. Humanity is created and expressed through communication, in the
dialogic, through interdependent reflection and action. In the act of oppression, the oppressors
are not only dehumanizing the oppressed by denying their rights, but in the act of denying
humanity to others are negating their own, as well. Dialogue, for Freire, “is the encounter
between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.” And in naming the world,
thereby transforming it.

_Socio-historical relation and creation._ Freire’s notion of conscientização opens the doors
for people “to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects” and engage critically and
dialogically in the creation of meaning. They transform the world together and in relation. Freire
tells us, “It is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with
reality, produce not only material goods—tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas,
and concepts. Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history
and become historical-social beings.” His notion of “speaking a true word” is rooted in the
relationship between the Subject and the Subject’s grounded socio-historical reality. For
change, or transformation or liberation to occur, it has to emanate from the social-historical
reality of the Subject, thereby binding it in social action.

_Multiculturalism and globalism._ Because Freire’s work is so clearly articulated through his
experience in third-world countries, it introduces an alternative to western individualism. We can
as Freire does, trace a distinction between his experiences and an alternative to Western
monologic individualism and empiricism and even to communitarian approaches. Freire’s ethic
is based on an understanding of humans-in-relation. Freire writes,

“There is no longer an ‘I think’ but ‘we think.’ It is the ‘we think’ which
establishes the ‘I think’ and not the contrary. This co-participation of Subjects in
the act of thinking is communication. Communication implies a reciprocity which
cannot be broken… It is not transference of knowledge, but the encounter of
subjects in dialogue in search of the significance of the object of knowing and thinking. In dialogic theory, as Christians (1997) explains, “discourse is born of conscience… We resonate through our spirit cross-culturally to the moral imagination of others everywhere.”

Humans are bonded together in seeking humanity, which develops out of dialogue and is situated in the interpretive. In dialogic encounter, where authentic lingual and symbolic utterance is not just an expression but is also constitutive of humanness, simply being open to another’s perspective is not sufficient; rather, participation in dialogue requires active listening and contribution “with a view to uncovering non-idiosyncratic truth capable of withstanding the test of critical dialogue.” Cultural difference, then, does not supersede humanness in the dialogic encounter.

**Liberation and Power.** As previously stated, liberation and fulfillment cannot occur if the oppressed topple the oppressors merely to become oppressors themselves. Oppression denies fulfillment of humanness. Dialogue, which is built on co-participation, is not simply a means of communication; it is “the only acceptable tool of liberation.” For Freire, liberation as authentic social change occurs through empowerment, not merely a transfer of power that shifts the objects of disempowerment. However, a central problem for Freire is the ambiguity implicit in oppressed existence whereby the oppressed, whose concrete reality has been shaped by the structures of their oppression, internalize both the deprecation they have endured and the state of oppressing as the expression of humanity; while desiring their freedom, they contemplate it through the state of their oppressors. Freire’s response to this ambiguity and mistrust of the oppressed is conscientization, such that people critically recognize the causes of their own oppression and name or create a new situation. Freire postulated a “culture of silence” of the dispossessed and, through his experiences, “came to realize that their ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination—and
of the paternalism—of which they were victims.”

Thus, regaining humanity would require transformation of these structures. But Freire also situates a power within the oppressed that is seldom and not easily accessible by the oppressors, which is the ability to regain humanity not only for themselves but for their oppressors. That is, as Freire stated, “it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors.” They do this by seeking their own humanity.

"Voice and Power. For Freire, authentic transformation cannot occur unless the oppressed are subjective participants, that is participating in the naming of the world, in their liberation. This requires that the oppressed are the agents of their own struggle. For Freire,

“No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption… It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education.”

A project of empowerment “gives people the strength to create a space for themselves.” People must be able to name both the problem and the solution in their own oppression for transformation to liberate; therefore, liberation develops from “open spaces” and not from the political and economic elite. Freire problematizes the conundrum that without political power the oppressed cannot initiate their own liberating education. His answer is a pedagogy of the oppressed “which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity.” That is, again, that the oppressed must be empowered with a voice in dialogue; they are not treated with paternalism or objects to be saved, but as participants in a dialogue built on a nurtured and mutual trust. They must be treated as Subjects constituting meaning. They must be given voice. Christians (1991) writes, “In Freire’s alternative, power is relational, that is, characterized by mutuality rather than sovereignty… Power in this perspective is reciprocity between two subjects, a relationship not of
domination, but rather of intimacy and vulnerability." A concept of vulnerability is only acceptable insofar as it is not harbored in the domination, or the naming, of one over another, but rather a surrender of each to the other.

Responsibility. Scholars have demonstrated that social institutions and those doing the work of social institutions are moral agents and thereby hold responsibility for their actions. Much advertising and marketing material is the end result of efforts by and contributions from a variety of sources. Therefore, audiences receive, interpret and create meaning from messages that are the collaborative effort of perhaps many, sometimes unidentifiable individuals. One potentially could track the development of an advertising message from its original inception through the media that broadcast it and develop a list of individual participations. But any attempt to parse individual efforts to determine responsibility de-contextualizes responsibility for the message from its coherent or unified meaning. So simply attributing responsibility to individual actors in such situations is insufficient. We must also consider responsibility on the institutional and corporate level. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated how both role- or task-related and corporate responsibilities are legitimate expectations in complex social systems; we can evaluate the ethicality of persuasive messages and attribute responsibility on a variety of levels, including socially to the institutions developing them and to the audiences interpreting and often re-creating or co-creating meaning.

One defining feature of marketing communications professions, and specifically advertising, is that audiences assume their messages to be biased. We enter into the message exchange expecting a persuasive intent and with the assumption that we can know on whose behalf the message is presented. As scholar Thomas Bivins writes, “Transparency in media communication, or in all communication for that matter, is the mainstay of human interaction… It means that
both your identity and your motivation are apparent to those whom you are trying to persuade." Further, Bivins maintains that the measure of ethicality of persuasive communications is whether the message was developed with the intent to deceive an audience in order to manipulate them. If the person receiving the message is not afforded the opportunity to “reflect critically on his choices in a situation,” as scholar Richard Perloff maintains, then the message is unethical. But advertising presents a variety of kinds of “information,” rendering it difficult in many situations to determine intent or “truth.” What is truthful, for example, about “the image of a skier screaming down the side of a skyscraper, or of huge draft horses playing football, or of frogs talking with lizards about beer” or of a man whose shoes make him fly? If we can assess that these messages were developed with the intention to mislead consumers by blurring lines between reality and fiction, then we evaluate the message as unethical. But if instead we expect the message recipient, or consumer, to discern the variety of types of truths available, such as metaphorical meaning or irony or humor, then we evaluate the message as transparent and ethical. However, an assessment of a message as transparent or truthful and thereby ethical does not alleviate an advertiser’s responsibility. That is, institutions and individuals alike are bound by similar obligations as “cultural agents” to uphold our “cultural vitality,” but to thrive these obligations must also be developed likewise through collective or communal responsibility. As Christians states, collective responsibility “inheres in our humanity as social beings.”

Through Freire, we can posit a third form of responsibility that resides in audiences. For Freire, “It is essential for the oppressed to realize that when they accept the struggle for humanization they also accept, from that moment, their total responsibility for the struggle.” Freire empowers the oppressed to become Subjects of their own liberation, as well as the
liberation of their oppressors; but in doing so they must maintain their own responsibility in this reciprocal process. Christians (1988) proposes a collective responsibility through social being that is housed in the audience as constitutive of their communication with broader social institutions. Thus, when audiences are empowered, they are also responsible. While this collective responsibility is difficult to grasp, it is nonetheless imperative because it is part of the fabric of our social being.\textsuperscript{122} As “we enact our culture in everyday life” we are thereby agents of it and responsible for it.\textsuperscript{123} Our symbolic life is “a critical element in total humanization”\textsuperscript{124} and media systems are mass purveyors of these symbols. Therefore, as agents in our own cultural systems, we hold a moral responsibility for these social processes of communication and, as Christians (1988) demonstrates, “we can legitimately be called to account to the extent of our power for effecting change.”\textsuperscript{125}

While some difficulty in determining a dialogic relation with social institutions does arise from Freire’s articulation of his position from his lived experience in particular socio-cultural circumstances, I believe that we can reinforce through Freire the kind of social justice projects enacted by activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While transformation requires fundamental changes in structures of oppression, those changes can be expressed and instituted in the “open spaces” of community and develop not out of top-down dictates of elite, but out of the “voice” of the oppressed as they enter into authentic dialogic relation.

**Conclusion**

Often our cultural, legal and ethical approaches are in discord, particularly in varying definitions of the role of advertisers and the nature of consumers, and the production of each within economic and political systems. Some social movements have addressed cultural images
and representations in the media and advertising as important sites for social change. But when these social practices are criticized or regulated in the name of social change, it is just as important to recognize and address the value-laden nature of these criticisms and regulations as it is of the messages they attempt to alter.

Historical perspective of the theoretical underpinnings of theory is critical for our understanding of the power relations involved in consumer contexts; but at some point, as well, we must be able to move beyond the problems inherent in the traditional conflicts involved in this discussion. Mutual respect for the elements of communication—for the position of the communicator; for the elements and conditions of the message, whether formal or informal, whether fact or image; and for the autonomy, abilities and vulnerabilities of the recipient—are a positive starting point. As in dialogic theory, communication rests in “the interpretive capacity, the spirit. Discourse is born of conscience. A fulsome anthropology of organic wholeness moves language from its Enlightenment site in cognition to an interpretive axis in values and worldviews—or, as the center of our being is sometimes called—to the human spirit. If the interpretive domain is lingual, and if language is the matrix of community, then human bonds are not constituted by reason or action but through finding common meaning in hermeneia.” And if we are willing to relinquish our worship of Enlightenment interpretations of “rational” reasoning, we may legitimately expand the tools of the interpretive domain. That is, “being an audience member entails a certain kind of creativity—specifically, the creativity exercised when one adjusts one’s interpretation of a message to one’s evolving perception of reality.

A related assumption of this kind of study is that the construction of meaning is part of a social process… Although these assumptions are shared widely enough to make them appear relatively uncontroversial, they nonetheless bear repetition—if only because of the prevalence,
both in research and in public perception, of an opposite view of the audience member, as passive and isolated.” Again, the ability to control definitions within a culture is a powerful tool, and it can be used to the disadvantage of certain groups. Using that power to define the communication environment without proper understanding of its tools and without proper respect for its participants can result in unethical activity that can, if not checked, become widespread through the dominant institutions and, in doing so, diffuse the subjects of accountability. Proper ethical decisions, then, cannot be made without greater knowledge of the power to define our reality.

Dialogic ethics offers a framework that both insists on people’s agency in creating their own worlds while at the same time acknowledging the structures of power through which they must navigate. It brings us to a place where multiple and multicultural meanings are nurtured and, indeed, required. And it requires us to engage in dialogue that encourages critical consciousness and empowers us by giving us the tools of our own liberation and humanness.
Notes


5 Ibid.. For an overview with specific cases and ethical issues see Christians et al., *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*, especially Part 2: Persuasion in Advertising.


10 For example, in 2005, then-president David Mick addressed the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) with a call for association members to concern themselves with solving real problems and enhancing consumer welfare. Of the most pressing research topics that Mick imparted, the first was “vulnerable consumer groups (such as the poor, children and adolescents, and the illiterate). That call has led to the development and growth of the Transformative Consumer Research movement within ACR. See David Glen Mick, *Presidential Address: Meaning*


13 Ibid., 120.

14 Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) provides an analytical discussion of this point. See, in particular, pp. 16ff.

15 Ibid., 16.


18 Brummett, Rhetoric in Popular Culture, 42.

19 Ibid., 38.

20 Ibid., 39.


24 Brummett, Rhetoric in Popular Culture, 49.

25 Ibid., 50.

26 Ibid., 51.


28 Ibid., 17-18.

29 Pratkanis and Aronson, Age of Propoganda: The Everyday use and Abuse of Persuasion, 13.

30 Bivins, Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism, 81.

31 The first and second features are the biological and rational or the mind and body as is found in Western dualism. A dialogic view includes the spirit, which is the symbolic or interpretive domain; Clifford Christians and Michael Traber, eds., Communication Ethics and Universal Values (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 10.

32 Ibid., 10-11.

33 Pratkanis and Aronson, Age of Propoganda: The Everyday use and Abuse of Persuasion, 15.

34 Bivins, Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism, 130.


36 Bivins, Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism, 131.


38 Bivins, Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism, 137.

39 Ibid., 138.


Ibid., 141.


Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 42.


Ibid., 7-8.


Kenney and Scott, *A Review of the Visual Rhetoric Literature*, 29. Kenney and Scott were writing specifically about visual imagery in advertising, but because imagery dominates the advertising landscape of today and is therefore an integral part of the overall message, particularly when considering the issues of representation of race in Nike advertising as discussed in the previous chapters and at issue here, I am taking the liberty of extending their argument to the overall message.

Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, 105.

Ibid., 108.


Christians, *Utilitarianism in Media Ethics and its Discontents*. Deontology in dialogic terms is not the duty of Kant's formulaic and rationally-implemented Categorical Imperative. Rather, it is based on a responsibility to humanness that presides in relation to others.


Ibid.
101 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47.
102 Ibid., 30.
103 Ibid., 56.
104 Ibid., 44.
111 See Christians, Can the Public Be Held Accountable?, 55.
113 See Christians, Can the Public Be Held Accountable?, 52 for a discussion of R. Niebuhr.
114 Ibid.
116 As quoted in Bivins 2008, 234. Ibid., 234.
117 Ibid., 238.
118 Ibid.
119 Christians, *Can the Public be Held Accountable?, 50-58.
120 Ibid., 52.
121 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 68.
123 Ibid., 18.
124 Christians, *Can the Public be Held Accountable?, 56.
125 Ibid., 56.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION—SOCIO-HISTORICAL CASE FOR A DIALOGIC ETHICS OF VULNERABILITY

I began this work by arguing that past thinking about consumer vulnerability has not accounted for the complexity of the historical, social and cultural circumstances that people navigate, nor for that of the market and the processes of meaning making. Instead, vulnerability has been defined by those in a position to define meaning, which is a position of power, and has been situated across a delineated set of demographic variables that are historically associated with groups that have been misrepresented, underrepresented, suppressed or oppressed in some way. Even when prescribed by well-intentioned advocates, these definitions have amounted to paternalism that silences the voices of those being defined and instead can disempower the very audiences that these definitions are intended to protect.

To more fully understand the issue of consumer vulnerability and to provide a more nuanced explanation of the complex systems through which people navigate the consumer world and communication environments, I explore the circumstances behind the “sneaker killings” of the 1980s and 1990s, placing them within the broader history of race and consumption in the United States. Not only does this history illuminate issues of vulnerability but also offers an important reflection of race relations that is integral to theorizing vulnerability as historically and culturally situated. I suggest that dialogic ethics acknowledges the interpretive domain of human nature and offers a more positive framework from which to understand the concepts of consumer vulnerability and through which to empower the lives of the otherwise disempowered. Therefore to conclude, I draw a more deliberate connection between the theory of a multicultural, dialogic ethic presented through Paulo Freire, and the histories of African Americans, Nike and markets developed in these chapters.
African Americans have long fought for inclusion and positive representation in consumer markets and advertising not only as an indication of economic power but also as a symbolic expression of social value and respect. They were struggling against the embeddedness and depth of racial misrepresentations that had been necessary for the maintenance of advertising but remained long after the abolition of slavery and endured in the development and representation of the imagery of minstrelsy and iconic advertising figures such as Aunt Jemima. Such misrepresentations continued to prioritize the voice of the oppressor and to dehumanize African Americans with sweeping generalizations and inappropriate caricatures. But for centuries, even as they had to navigate their lives alongside these misrepresentations, they at the same time developed voice through early publications such as *Freedom’s Journal* and market resources such as *The Negro Yearbook* and the *Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro* and later through the growth of magazines like *Ebony* that appealed to a growing African American middle class and drew national accounts. Through these various publications, they began to press American corporations to recognize black consumer markets and offer alternative, positive representations of African American life.

By the late 1800s, black-owned businesses began to accumulate wealth by establishing trust on the very basis of speaking to consumers through advertising with more realistic and positive depictions and engaged their communities in the process of growing and strengthening. Realizing that working to become a strong economic force would give them weight in cultural and political realms and help them to gain acceptance and participation in American society, black leaders developed organizations such as the National Negro Business League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League in the early 1900s. Just as Jim Crow laws formally enacted social and political segregation well into the 20th
century, the negative depictions or otherwise absence of African Americans in advertising represented economic and symbolic censure from American life. Together, these publications and organizations pressured advertisers and the advertising industry for more representation not just in their media depictions but also in their ranks. African Americans mobilized throughout the 20th century to demonstrate their economic clout and that mistreatment, misrepresentation and lack of representation were important issues. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns of the 1930s, for example, and later the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and the “Be Black. Buy Black” theme of the Civil Rights era demonstrated the power of African American retribution and paved the way for the success of future boycotts and further advancements through economic and market means.

Companies responded to this kind of pressure, particularly as they increasingly recognized the potential of the African American market, but they did so slowly and with trepidation. While some companies had begun targeting African Americans by the mid-1930s, they were doing so with ads and imagery developed for the mainstream market that was not reflective of African American life and culture; still other companies continued to avoid association with black consumers, either through blatant discrimination or a general and unfounded fear of white backlash. As they entered the Civil Rights Era, black communities increasingly turned their attention to the advertising industry, recognizing as most had its considerable impact on symbolic life, and tried to break the industry of its fear of white backlash and the assumption that African Americans did not have their own unique market needs and could be reached through white-oriented messages. It was not until the 1980s that Americans began to see positive, authentic reflections of African American life in force through mainstream media.
At the same time, blacks seized opportunities to leverage American rhetoric of democracy and freedom to highlight their own unjust treatment. During World War II, African Americans pointed to the inconsistency of American policies towards equality at home and abroad through the “Double V” concept, and later the lessons of the Civil Rights era reflected the discrepancies between American ideals and American realities. African American soldiers had returned from war with an increased sense of consumer activism, and they witnessed the end of formal discrimination in government-related defense industries, opening the doors to skilled industrial labor positions in urban environments. Several waves of black urbanization were met with both increased racial tension and with new opportunities through culture and the arts that eventually would find voices in mass media. Both music and sports played prominent roles in the development of the sounds and aesthetics of black culture that crossed into mainstream American life.

The sounds of black music took the world stage during World War I as U.S. army bands took their Jazz sounds to other countries, spreading the sounds that ushered in the “Jazz Age.” While black representation in the sounds of radio, disseminated throughout American homes in the 1930s, were filled with many of the same racial caricatures that had dominated stage entertainment and print media, radio did begin to speak directly to black audiences and black companies used these cultural spaces to reach out to black consumers. With increasing African American urbanization after World War II, large radio markets for African Americans were formed. The rhythm and blues sounds of these black-oriented stations began to cross over to the white teenage market. While black music and sounds had a strong influence on mainstream American culture and pressures during the Civil Rights movement ensured more African-
American programs, the majority of radio stations had white ownership and many were skeptical that these programs were merely accommodationist and did not reflect substantial change.

As television technology developed and disseminated throughout America, it absorbed many of the same racial conventions of radio. Radio shows like Amos ‘n Andy transitioned onto television and presented long-standing and derogatory caricatures of blacks reminiscent of those found in slave ads and minstrel acts and only served to perpetuate dehumanizing stereotypes. Thus, organizations such as CORE turned their sights on the powerful representations that entered American living rooms through their televisions sets. They pressed both for integration and representation in television commercials and in media industries, targeting some of the largest and most prominent corporations to promote change. These campaigns were founded on the belief that advertising played a significant role in the oppression of blacks and that, given this power, could also serve to improve their conditions. The 1968 Kerner Commission report further implicated mass media in the persistent subordination of African Americans and argued that most white Americans were ignorant of the destructive conditions of the racial ghetto despite being deeply implicated in a system of oppression that created a pattern of social and economic disadvantage in these communities.

Scholars increasingly turned attention to media representations of African Americans. The use of “Negro market” specialists earlier in the century and the growth of black-owned agencies and media outlets into the 1970s had helped companies become more sophisticated in their communication with black consumers, and helped redefine images of African Americans and promote new concepts of the consumer market that aligned with overall social goals. But while research posted notable changes in the number and types of representations by the 1970s, some scholars and activists felt these changes merely represented shifts in racial stereotypes rather than
movement towards authentic representation of black life. Additionally, the long-standing debate continued over whether integration into mainstream advertising or targeting with images unique to African Americans was a more appropriate means to improved representation and justice. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 obliged government organizations to target blacks with their services, and many sought similar attention from the private sector. For some, targeting symbolized just the kind of deference that black activists had been seeking for decades, but others considered it reverse racism.

While targeting practices had the potential to provide more authentic and tailored representations, black communities were disproportionately targeted with “sin” products such as alcohol and tobacco that undermined positive values. While the consumer movement of the 1970s took up issues pertaining to unethical targeting and advertising practices, it developed out of the white, middle-class and did not incorporate the voices of the heavily disadvantaged in poor, black and urban communities. As Andreasen pointed out, the oppression and exclusion to which African Americans were subjected throughout American history distinguished them in terms of the values they brought to the marketplace, and yet analysis of these communities tended to be derived from middle-class standards of rationality and stereotypes of the poor without proper understanding of the conditions of life in poor, black communities.2

Further, while the Civil Rights movement clearly had made tremendous gains towards equitable treatment and civil liberties, the social turbulence of the 1970s and the Vietnam War took a heavy toll on the poor. Black communities, in particular, shouldered much of the burden and became increasingly disenfranchised as economic and political practices leading into the 1980s resulted in larger discrepancies between the “haves” and the “have nots.” In the wake of the Civil Rights movement and even in light of the development of positive forms of
representation, increasing educational opportunities and higher standards of living, more representation in elected bodies and in businesses for African Americans, many media images such as those found in blaxploitation films of the 1970s remained problematic. Further, the imagery of conservative politics that began to take hold depicted African Americans as criminals and statistics on the number of incarcerated youth and stories and experiences of police brutality painted a dire picture of urban life.

Thus, many in the black community felt little protection from their government and for their civil liberties. The 1970s youth generation of African Americans was the first to grow up free of legalized segregation; yet many living in inner-cities failed to see in their own lives how the gains of the Civil Rights were realized for them. It was in these conditions that the cultural movement of hip-hop developed out of the streets of New York City in the late 1960s and 1970s. Early hip-hop entrepreneurs believed hip-hop had the potential to change the lives of the otherwise disenfranchised. It offered an alternative to the gang warfare that had mired the streets as DJ’s “battled” out their problems lyrically and rhythmically. These early hip-hop artists were the bridge between Civil Rights and the hip-hop generation that they inspired. African American musical styles had long had influence over the sounds of American life. From jazz to rhythm and blues, the unique stylization of black music was integrated into the American experience, though often co-opted by white-owned businesses for financial gain. But in the beginning these young hip-hop artists exerted control over their own stylistic expressions and ultimate created an entire industry around these sounds. Hip hop was the manifestation of the unique, African American experience and in its early days offered a politicized voice that grew out of the hardship and disadvantage in their own communities and expressed rebellion against the social institutions that had long limited them.
Thus, despite the development of some of hip hop’s more violent and sexist tendencies that drew a great deal of criticism throughout the 1980s and 1990s and tended to overshadow the social commentary that inspired the movement, hip hop culture and the organizations that arose out of it provided space to mobilize and empower disadvantaged and marginalized youth. It was not just a sound, but a culture and an aesthetic that dictated fashion and incorporated the style of sport most popular in the inner-cities—basketball.

As the hip hop movement grew, so did another, at-the-time completely disconnected but equally important part of this story—Nike. There are clear distinctions between Nike’s early days as a running shoe company and the image that developed after Nike entered the basketball arena on Michael Jordan. Phil Knight’s original business plan was based on the concept of manufacturing shoes overseas at lower costs and selling them in the United States at competitive costs; but it was also based on the ideas of shoe technology and performance, as epitomized in the influence of Bill Bowerman. The original market for shoes was high school and track team members, and even once Nike was outfitting the trend-setting fashion elite they maintained in their discourse a commitment to the serious athlete. Indeed, the company was established by athletes, sports enthusiasts and with the influence of the competitive spirit of sport. By the early 1980s, the company had championed numerous victories in the sports and business worlds. They had made a successful public offering and had witnessed Olympic athletes cross the finish line with the swoosh on their feet.

The company sales growth was rapid in the early years, in large part due to the 1970s jogging and fitness revolution that was in no small measure inspired by Bowerman’s passion for track and field and his communication of the jogging phenomenon to the American public. But growth was so rapid that the company’s internal structure and their ability to meet market demand could
not keep up with the rapid changes that accompany such development. The company was faced with numerous financial and supply problems in the early days and by the early 1980s was facing structural problems and internal struggles, not to mention a very public oversight of the aerobics market. Thus, despite a move towards a national branding campaign for the 1984 Olympics, Nike was facing dire circumstances. They made several risky but strategic decisions to try to improve their position, including withdrawing from many of their endorsement deals and concentrating instead on lining up a team of superstar endorsers. It was at this time and in the midst of great turmoil and their first-ever documented losses that Nike made an unprecedented endorsement deal with a rising basketball star, Michael Jordan.

While Nike did not anticipate the kind of success they would achieve with Jordan, and while their decision was a strategic business move as they worked to expand into the sport of basketball and as they faced potential takeover or demise, this relationship cannot be separated from the broader historical and social circumstances in which it existed. First, basketball was a sport that had become popular in urban areas, only requiring a ball and a goal and serving as a place for recreation and of social exchange. Further, while sport was one of those arenas in American life where African Americans were able to make significant inroads, these were hard-won. Jackie Robinson had signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s and helped pave the way for future African American athletes in mainstream sport like Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson. But as history demonstrates this was at the expense of black leagues, and even through the 1980s discriminatory practices in sport were evident. In the endorsement game, popular black figures such as Bill Cosby, Michael Jackson, Ray Charles, Whitney Houston and others had prominent commercial deals in the 1970s and 1980s, but none would rival the kind of achievement realized by Michael Jordan and Nike in terms of cultural impact.
Nike gave Jordan his own line and a strong stake in its success. In an unprecedented move for a team sport player, Nike built an entire program around Jordan. According to popular accounts, “They are the hottest selling shoes in the world, because of one man.” As is elaborated in previous chapters, a complex set of forces impacted the meaning instilled in the shoe: the winged goddess of victory that epitomized the spirit of sport and business competition, the air technology, the fat checkmark that became known as the swoosh, the swoosh of a Jordan net shot, the original image of a winged shoe, the wholesome image of Jordan in contrast to his aggressive and graceful style of play, and the outrageous colors of the shoe and the NBA’s response—the collision of both strategic and fortuitous circumstances and, I argue, a cultural moment at which the urban African American community was searching for and developing ways of conceptualizing their identity in a post-Civil Rights world—led to the creation of a hero, an idol and an icon of American possibility and of the complex processes of meaning in a multicultural and diverse landscape.

As the previous chapters demonstrate, by the early 1990s the shoes had become implicated not only in the symbolism of American possibility, opportunity and growth, but also of a continuing and historically-situated racialized system of violence. Media critics who drew attention to the “sneaker killings” did so out of an implicit concern that Nike, Michael Jordan, and Spike Lee had an influence uniquely on inner-city black consumers such that they were vulnerable to the advertising messages and through these messages compelled to buy over-priced shoes that they did not need. These media critics never addressed young, white consumers who may not have been any more privileged financially and who certainly were Nike consumers; further, they did not account for the multiple ways in which inner-city black consumers,
themselves, had fashioned much of the meaning for Nike and many other brands. As Erin Patton argued of the hip-hop generation and Nike’s targeting practices:

“These innovators looked at these brands as, I’m gonna create in and around it and I’m gonna adopt it and utilize that product in a way the utility of that product is going to be a little different from me than the others. At the end of the day that reverberating impact ultimately sent a signal out into the masses and that’s sort of the notion of, you know, under the influence and the influence that this audience had… In my entire time at Nike I can’t think of one meeting I was in and someone said, you know, we gotta get these inner-city urban consumers to adopt the brand. I mean, Nike’s a performance-oriented company and the design aesthetic makes it appealing and the aura, the halo of the brand and the athletes and the celebrities that all got tossed in a pot and shuffled up together made it what it was but there was never really an overt attempt to actively kind of create a false sense of identity or challenge the value system too much.”

Nor did the argument made by Phil Mushnick and other critics of Nike, Mike and Spike account for the history of economic and market battles that the African American community had waged for well over a century to find recognition, inclusion and positive representation in consumer environments as part of a civil rights agenda. Nor did they account for the multiple ways, whether well-intentioned or not, that concern over the consumption practices of poor, black consumers had interpreted into judgments of their buying practices that were based on value systems of middle-class white consumers.

Thus, it is not surprising that Mushnick and fellow critics had their own share of critics. As discussed in Chapter 5, the voices of those who spoke out against Mushnick were from both within and outside of the marketing and advertising community and popular press. These critics of the critics argued that the notion that Nike, Jordan and Lee were manipulating inner-city consumers was either insinuated or outright racism. Spokespeople for Nike pointed out that it would be racist, instead, for the company to neglect black consumers and not target them because of presumed vulnerability espoused by the critics. History supports this assertion and for many years black communities sought the very kind of targeting for which Nike was being
criticized because, among other things, it represented regard for their market power. Further, some observers suggested a *caveat emptor* approach under the expectation that inner-city, black consumers would be capable, as most consumers are, of critically examining the situation. Indeed, research demonstrates the savvy of inner-city consumers in discerning market claims, and the story of Nike demonstrates that members of this community were not simply recipients of marketing messages but rather they were active participants in its brand equity.

Unfortunately, though, the latter arguments do not account for the structures of power, formal and informal, through which inner-city consumers had to navigate in their daily and consumer lives. Ultimately, the media commentary failed to provide a nuanced understanding of markets and of consumers, offering instead either paternalistic assertions about proper behavior in the marketplace or withdrawing responsibility completely from the equation. Even those reports that presented multiple viewpoints and recognized the complexity of the situation, such as Telander’s *Sports Illustrated* article, still failed to provide a foundation on which to move forward and improve our understanding of vulnerability and responsibility. Further, scholarship in consumer vulnerability and responsibility does not provide an adequate framework for examining the complex circumstances and diverse audiences involved in the history of Nike and the “sneaker killings.” I argue that a dialogic ethics, as the one presented in Chapter 6, can provide such a framework.

Dialogic ethics places the interpretive domain of human nature in a position of primacy. In this interpretive domain, audiences have a constitutive role in the development of meaning. A Freireian stance on dialogic ethics requires that we acknowledge and respect the historical processes of meaning. Likewise, the history presented in the preceding chapters points to the importance of the historical process and the values through which it is defined. For example, the
concept of vulnerability has been historically situated such that vulnerability has been associated with particular populations that have been oppressed, suppressed and stereotyped. At the same time, we recognize that through the very same systems of power that have oppressed, suppressed and stereotyped, those populations have also been disadvantaged. That is, as we understand from Freire, in naming the world we make it so. Further, by examining the history of African Americans and consumption and advertising, we better understand the complexities of the swell of meaning in the Nike brand and that the circumstances of the “sneaker killings” are different from and more than the critics would have us believe in suggesting that this is the result of a big corporation manipulating vulnerable consumers to overspend for products that they cannot afford and do not need.

Further, Freire’s dialogic ethics is bound in the cross-cultural existence of our shared humanness; it is not monologic. It is grounded in an understanding of how communities operate; we exist in “relation or dialogue with community.” We are liberated in our humanness through dialogue. Suppression of dialogue, then, is an attempt to dehumanize. From such a stance, we ask different questions than from other approaches such as the utilitarian one often found in the context of American market systems. Specifically, we must ask whether a communication is a true dialogue such that it enables critical consciousness to develop and empowers the listener to name the world. Alternatively, we must ask whether the voice of the communicator represents the language of oppression.

There were many voices in the history presented in previous chapters. I will elaborate on two to articulate the point of dialogic ethics and propose an understanding of vulnerability and responsibility. The first is the voice of the audience and, in these circumstances specifically, the voice of the African American, urban audience. Despite centuries of degradation and hardship,
the African American community found multiple outlets through which to name and thereby transform the world. Through the early newspapers and publications, early African American businesses and advertising agencies, the formation of organizations and activist groups, support of prominent black leaders, to music, dialect, aesthetics, sport and style, and in the culture of hip hop, African Americans have named the world.

This does not devalue the important impact of years of oppression, segregation, and derogatory language and imagery that black Americans suffered as attempts to dehumanize them. Rather, it demonstrates the strength of their efforts towards empowerment. The early hip hop movement developed out of the language in urban streets and reflected on this world. Its messages were critically engaged in a dialogic encounter in a very literal sense through the conversation of lyrical “wars.” Socially conscious hip hop provided an alternative to gang warfare and a positive outlet for the expression of frustrations. It would not alleviate the many pressures of the street and so we cannot neglect to recognize the power structures within which hip hop formed, but it was an expression of meaning that was heard, as it grew, by the world. But because liberation requires freedom from oppression and not just a reversal of power, we cannot consider other forms of hip hop that developed violent and sexist tendencies, to be expressions of true dialogic encounter. Further, if we concede that the hip hop culture and generation engaged in instilling meaning in the Nike brand as part of their cultural expression and demonstration of participation in the consumer world, then we also understand them as sharing responsibility for that meaning. Therefore, when we examine circumstances that are unacceptable to us as moral beings, such as murder in the name of a pair of shoes, and we recognize a problem with the privileging of consumption over other values such as the value of human life, we look to those
constitutive of that meaning to assess responsibility. This brings me to a second voice—that of communication of Nike, Michael Jordan and Spike Lee.

Nike, as a large corporation with billions of dollars and the ability to mass communicate, is in a position of power. The decision makers at Nike have responsibilities to their employees, to their shareholders, to the brand and to a variety of other stakeholders including their audiences. If we take the position, as dialogic ethics allows us to do, that transparency is an important determinant of the ethicality of an advertising message, and we understand that audiences are savvy and understand the conventions of advertising such as irony and humor, then we are left with little room to argue that Nike’s advertising in and of itself was unethical. But we also must ask whether their messages enabled critical consciousness and empowered the listeners. In the context of the history of African Americans and advertising, Nike’s collaboration with Michael Jordan and Spike Lee was groundbreaking in so far as they provided a venue for positive, empowered representations of African Americans on a scale not previously known. Spike Lee, as he had done through his movies representing urban life, brought the language and style of the inner-city to mainstream advertising. As an icon in American and black culture and, as many felt, a positive role model, Michael was in a position of power. But he acknowledged the responsibility that came with it: “It’s a scary responsibility. It’s a responsibility that I really didn’t’ ask for but it was bestowed upon me and I have graciously accepted it.”

There were those who wanted Jordan to insist that Nike lower the price of their shoes or refuse to endorse them. But such a request does not account for the systems of meaning and limitations in the market. We legitimately can criticize the company for failing to hire African American employees at that time, but we must also recognize that Nike heard the voices of criticism and responded. Further, Nike vehemently denied being the cause of “sneaker killings.” As part of
the system of meaning, they are not without responsibility; they accepted it implicitly, though, by listening and responding to the voices of criticism by implementing a number of advertising and community-based measures—such as the stay in school advertising and the P.L.A.Y. program—to help empower the black community. Granted, they spoke to them through the language of commercialization and sport, but they did so in dialogue with and through the black community. They also did so within the larger systems of power and limitations in the market.

These are two of the multiple parties and circumstances that constitute the discourse of Nike and of the “sneaker killings.” For example, we might question the reports of Nike’s market relationship with drug dealers and gangs. However, anecdotal reports that Nike courted the business of drug dealers are not the basis on which to make a strong argument. Further, we might consider to what extent we can consider gun-wielding criminals “vulnerable” to the messages of advertising. We might also look to those in the media who sensationalized the events of violent crime over sneakers.

But ultimately, the argument that I propose remains consistent on these points. We cannot accept circumstances in which lives are taken in the name of possessing material goods. But to suggest that this happens because Nike manipulates vulnerable, inner-city consumers is simplistic and neglects the struggles and history of African Americans and the dialogic encounter that occurs through one of the most pervasive symbol systems of contemporary society—the market system, including advertising. I propose a dialogic ethics as a framework for understanding vulnerability and responsibility in consumer environments. As Freire helps us to understand, our humanity is bound in dialogue. Dialogue requires co-participation. The naming of groups as vulnerable through sweeping generalizations neglects to empower the oppressed by giving them voice in the encounter. When definitions of vulnerability are instituted in cultural
and social structures of meaning without appropriate respect for and discourse with those so-named, then we risk instituting a culture of silence from the oppressed or “vulnerable.” This dehumanizes the oppressed and diffuses the structures of accountability that come with liberation. Instead, we must engage in true dialogue that accepts multiple voices, presents message that enable critical consciousness and empowers the participants, acknowledges the historical circumstances of our language in discourse, and promotes our humanness, which we find in relation to others.
Notes

4. Author Interview with Erin Patton.
5. Wilson and Sparks, "It's Gotta be the Shoes": Youth, Race, and Sneaker Commercials, 398-427; Chin, Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture.
8. It is not clear that they did so swiftly and on a grand scale, however.
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