

The New Sneaker Era: Changes and Improvements in Sneaker Marketing through Digital Platforms

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Abstract:

This article explores the evolution of sneaker marketing strategies, highlighting the shift from traditional sneaker marketing methods to digital platforms. Historically, sneaker brands have relied on celebrity endorsements and mass media advertising to build brand relationships with customers and drive sales. However, the rise of the internet and social media has changed these approaches. Today, brands use targeted social media strategies and partnerships with influential influencers to connect with global customers in a more personalized and interactive way. This shift has also spawned a thriving online secondary sneaker market, reshaping brands' product development and positioning. In addition, this article explores the impact of soft and hard advertising in the digital age, emphasizing the need for brands to strike a balance between innovative digital interactions and authentic community interactions. Ultimately, this analysis shows how sneaker brands must continue to innovate and change their marketing strategies in order to thrive in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

Keywords: Sneaker marketing, digital platforms, influencer partnerships, social media, brand positioning.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the sneaker market has experienced magnificent growth, including from a minority interest into a million-dollar industry that connected and touched every place of the globe. Traditionally, sneaker brands have relied heavily on celebrity endorsements to promote sales and construct customer loyalty. The method for sneaker brands to get famous was simple: the more popular the sports star endorsing the product, the larger the brand's cake of the market. A representative example is Nike's

collaboration with basketball legend Michael Jordan in the 1980s, which gave birth to the Air Jordan series. This product line remains famous even today. Before the internet became widespread, the marketing strategies available to sneaker brands were relatively limited. Visual advertising was the mainstream of sneaker marketing, using newspaper ads, magazine spreads, and television commercials. Brands like Adidas, Puma, and Converse create eye-catching visuals and memorable slogans to grab consumers' attention. These advertisements often featured sports

stars, musicians, or actors, using their fame to reach a broad range of audiences. The messaging in these ads focuses on the highlighted performance, style, and lifestyle associated with wearing the brand, thus aligning the product with the consumer's desire to imitate their favorite stars.

In addition to visual advertising, in-store promotions played an important role in the marketing too. Retail environments were carefully designed to create a sensory outlook that encouraged customers to purchase. Eye-catching displays, limited-time offers, and exclusive in-store selling were all part of the strategy. Even the layout of the stores was carefully designed to enhance the shopping experience and drive sales. These promotions were often timed to coincide with local events or tied into broader marketing campaigns, creating a sense of urgency for customers to go into stores.

The rise of the internet, social media, and mobile technology has fundamentally transformed how sneaker brands engage with consumers. Traditional marketing strategies, while still in use, have been supplemented and, in some cases, replaced by statistical, data-driven methods that reach consumers across multiple internet platforms. As online shopping and digital content consumption have grown, traditional sneaker marketing strategies have lost some impact. However, this shift from traditional to digital has also expanded the market, giving sneaker brands connect to a global audience and giving consumers more control over the content they engage with.

Consumers have become more connected, informed, and influential in this new digital era. They demand authenticity, transparency, and unique value in the products they purchase, and sneaker brands have had to adapt accordingly. The digital marketing revolution has changed not only how brands reach their consumers but also how consumers perceive and connect with brands in a rapidly changing market.

2. Traditional vs. Modern Sneaker Marketing Strategies

2.1 Celebrity Endorsements vs. Social Media Influencers

Historically, sneaker marketing relied heavily on the power of individual celebrity endorsements. The success of Nike's Air Jordan line, fronted by basketball superstar Michael Jordan, is a prime example of this approach. Jordan's influence was so significant that it overshadowed other athletes, positioning Nike as the dominant force in the sneaker market. In the article *The Michael Jordan*

Effect in 1999, the authors Antony J and Bruce Niendorf point out that the collective increase in market value over a nine business day period, from the date of the first rumors until the first trading day after his comeback announcement, was more than \$2.9 billion [1]. The average return over those nine days was 4.59%. The return on the S&P 500 over the same nine-day period was just 2.91% [1]. These endorsements were straightforward: celebrities would appear in ads, wear the brand's products in public, and their personal brand would rub off on the products they endorsed.

However, the fast development of social media and online platforms has shifted the center of influence. While individual celebrities still play a role, however, their impact is no longer as dominant as it once was. Instead, the massive voices of online communities and social media creators, often referred to as influencers, have become increasingly powerful in shaping consumer behavior. These influencers, who range from micro-influencers with small number of followers to mega-influencers with millions of followers, are now key players in sneaker marketing. Based on the newest Ins statistic website for sneaker influencers, the top three influencers are Victoria Brito, who has 2.4 million followers, 679 posts, and a 2.75% engagement rate; PARAS BHUSHAN KALNAWAT, who has 1.6 million followers, 709 posts and 11.64% engagement rate; Johnny Sanchez Ulloa, who has 1.3 million followers, 1493 posts and 0.21% engagement rate [2]. Although an influencer's individual influence cannot be compared to that of a celebrity, the range, number, and engagement rate are massive. There are still thousands of sneaker influencers who have their own influencers that contribute to the marketing. Most of the celebrities all have their own accounts to be active on the internet as an influencer.

2.2 Mass Media Advertising vs. Targeted Social Media Campaigns

Traditional sneaker marketing mainly depended on mass media channels such as television, radio, and printing materials. These methods were effective for reaching a broad audience quickly but offered limited chances for personalization or targeting specific consumers. The messaging in these ads was generally broad, focusing on brand awareness with aspirational themes designed to appeal to a large, diverse audience. In Singh G.'s *Analysis of Digital Marketing Strategies in the Footwear Industry*, he points out both advantages of traditional and digital marketing [3]. First, traditional methods may be the only way to reach the target audience, such as the old generation. Secondly, person-to-person is a strategy of traditional marketing. Sometimes there is definitely a time and place

when this type of direct selling is most effective to market a product or service. Third, Traditional marketing offers hard copy material [3].

In contrast, modern digital platforms allow precisely targeted marketing plans for individuals' specific demographics, interests, and behaviors. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow brands to engage with highly focused audiences through personalized content. This shift from broad messaging to make strategies enables sneaker brands to connect with consumers on a more personal level, enhancing the relevance and impact of their marketing efforts.

Digital marketing has five advantages. First of all, digital marketing is an interactive means of reaching a local audience as well as a global audience when appropriate. Secondly, data is available immediately, and results are much easier to measure. Third, social media enables to communicate directly with groups and even individual consumers, like word of mouth marketing. Fourth, Build direct relationships with the customers through social media. It is 24X 7 marketing and captures the most energetic crowd [3].

From the comparison of traditional and digital marketing, people can tell that digital marketing covers all of the advantages that traditional marketing has besides the personal person experience. People cannot stop the progress of digital marketing improvement, but people are also finding the balance between reality and digital marketing.

2.3 Primary Sneaker Market vs. Online Secondary Market

Traditional sneaker marketing usually relies only on the primary market to sell sneakers. The primary market for sneakers refers to direct sales by brands at brand prices based on official websites or physical stores. For example, Nike, when people enter their website, will show them how much the shoes originally sold, and customers can hardly see a discount; the price would not change for a long period. Therefore, its marketing forms are very limited, usually including in-store promotions, retail environments designed to attract attention and drive impulse purchases, displays, and promotions. Although this approach is still valuable, its influence has weakened as more consumers turn to online shopping and digital content for purchases.

In the digital age, sneaker culture has flourished through online communities and social media platforms. These virtual spaces allow consumers to connect, share, and discuss their love of sneakers, creating a sense of community and belonging. Brands that interact with these communities through content, collaboration, and interactive

experiences can establish stronger and more authentic connections with their audiences. Not only that, due to the expansion of the scale of interaction, fans, and businessmen have created a secondary market for sneakers, which has driven the economic development of sneaker products and further established product strategies for sneaker brands. Secondary market sneaker trading refers to online transactions between individuals or third-party companies based on the current value of sneakers in the sneaker market, including limited edition sneakers, sneaker color matching, sneaker styles, etc. The secondary market can also be referred to as the resale market. Resellers are businesses or individuals from the community (in this case the sneaker community) who try to profit from the high demand for sneakers. Regardless of whether the sneakers are rare or not, private individuals who sell sneakers to clean out their wardrobes are not considered resellers. Resellers use the expected value and demand of sneaker releases to evaluate whether sneaker silhouettes and colorways are worth their investment, comparable to stock traders [4]. In fact, the mainstream sneaker-selling apps that customers use today are basically the digital form of the secondary market. For example, the mission of stock x is to provide access to the world's most coveted items in the smartest way possible. Buy and sell the hottest sneakers, apparel, electronics, collectibles, trading cards, and accessories. Goat: GOAT is the global platform for the greatest products from the past, present, and future. Since its founding in 2015, GOAT has become one of the leading and most trusted sneaker platforms in the world, and has expanded to offer apparel and accessories from select emerging, contemporary, and iconic brands. Through its unique positioning between the primary and resale markets, the company offers styles across various time periods on its digital platforms and in its retail locations while delivering products to over 60 million members across 170 countries [5]. From the two examples above, people can see how flourishing the secondary market is nowadays. The wideness and the deepest of the resell market changed the brand's strategy for selling. Only extraordinary products and sneakers will be worth more value in the resell market; customers need products that are more personalized, unique, and meaningful, so each brand has changed its brand sneaker position in the market over time.

3. Product Positioning in the Digital Era

The brand's product positioning has become a serious question. Brand positioning, especially in the sneaker industry, plays a pivotal role in digital marketing. In an

era where advanced manufacturing and the Internet dominate, controlling online traffic has become a key revenue driver. Beyond established mainstream sports brands, small sneaker brands have emerged, gaining the loyalty of sneaker enthusiasts who value quality, innovation, and personal expression. These small brands, though limited in resources compared to giants like Nike and Adidas, benefit from their agility. By actively listening to consumer feedback, using the newest and updated materials, and offering unique, high-performance designs, they are able to stand out in the crowded market. Such brands often build strong communities and turn their products into valuable products in secondary markets, fostering both brand loyalty and brand economic growth.

A successful sneaker product positioning is the Chinese brand Player 1, which strategically positioned itself with the goal of “creating the best guard shoes.” By sharing the production process online and engaging with consumers, Player 1 garnered significant support and insightful feedback. Through continuous performance and design improvements, Player 1 released the Player 1 Plus, which quickly became a favorite among basketball enthusiasts. Influencers on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram recommended the shoes as one of the best of the year, driving global recognition and sales in 2024. The famous YouTuber wear testers, who have 875k subscribers, recommend the player game one and believe they are the best shoes of the year. Although it might have different feelings for different people, but people cannot deny the successful product position for player one, which makes a lot of influencers and media sharing them for free. Nowadays, people can see a lot of athletes wearing Player 1’s shoes on the court, even in the NBA; this all has contributed to their excellent product positioning as the main goal of their marketing strategies, which creates enormous profit for the brand.

For large-scale brands like Nike, positioning revolves around innovation and differentiation. Nike excels in three core areas: technology, design, and colorways. Its proprietary Zoom technology, which combines shock absorption and rebound, gives Nike a competitive edge. Additionally, Nike’s forward-thinking designs, such as the Kobe 5 with its bold use of plastic uppers, have been highly praised for their futuristic function and designs. In 2009, the Zoom Kobe 5 was released, and the primary market price was 180 dollars. However, nowadays, from the data of the stock X, the cheapest pair of brand new Kobe 5 is 249 dollars. The price of the secondary market shows the sneakers’ value; such a high price for the shoes represents people’s favor toward this pair of sneakers, which gives NIKE a positive marketing effect on the brand. Colorways are another area where Nike shines, with themed releases

such as Chinese New Year, Black History Month, and Breast Cancer Awareness that resonate with individual and community identities. Nike’s commitment to personalization, such as offering customizable sneaker options on its website, allows consumers to express their unique style, further reinforcing the brand’s position as an innovator [6]. Adidas, once the most prominent sports brand before Nike’s rise, has found success by embracing retro styles in an era of diverse fashion tastes. As innovation slowed and its Boost technology was surpassed by newer materials, Adidas capitalized on its nostalgic appeal, bringing back classic designs from the 20th century. The resurgence of retro fashion allowed Adidas to reintroduce iconic sneakers like the Superstar and develop semi-retro styles like the Samba and Neo VL, which have gained a strong following. Although Adidas may not rival Nike in performance innovation, its unique aesthetics have attracted a huge consumer group. As of 2024, Adidas’ sales of classic shell-toe sneakers have surged, solidifying its place in the retro sneaker market.

Based on the statistics of the brand value of the sports company Adidas worldwide from 2016 to 2023, 7098 U.S dollars, 10169 U.S dollars, 14295 U.S dollars, 16669 U.S dollars, 16481 U.S dollars, 14342 U.S dollars, 14636 U.S dollar, 15660 U.S dollar, there is a constant increase for the brand value [7]. The circle graph represents the Adidas revenue by product. Apparel 36%, accessories and gear 7%, and the footwear proportion takes 57% of the total revenue [7]. The product positioning of the sneaker directly affects the brand’s total income, and Adidas succeeded in doing that. This increase will contribute to the positioning of old-fashioned sneakers, making Adidas popular again.

In the new sneaker era, digital platforms have empowered brands, big and small, to engage directly with their audiences, refine their products based on feedback, and maintain strong, distinctive brand identities. Effective brand positioning, especially in the context of online marketing, remains crucial to success in this evolving landscape.

4. Soft and Hard Advertising in Digital Marketing

4.1 The Power of Soft Advertising in Digital Marketing

Soft advertising has become a prevalent marketing method for sneaker companies in the digital age. In 1897, promotional means started with copywriting, and by the 1960s, David Ogilvy had already become the father of soft-sell advertising — his Schweppes advertisement increased

client company sales by 517 percent [8]. This approach emphasizes the advantages of products or services while appealing to consumers' emotions, often using humor or evoking warm, friendly feelings. Unlike traditional, overt advertisements, soft ads are seamlessly integrated into entertainment content on the internet, making them less intrusive and more engaging for consumers.

A prime example of soft advertising is the use of sneakers in movies and television shows. For instance, in the 2019 film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, the protagonist, Miles Morales, wears a pair of black and red Air Jordan 1s. This subtle product placement did not just serve as a costume choice; it significantly boosted sales of the Air Jordan 1s due to the character's popularity and the film's success. Nike's clever insertion of the Air Jordan 1s into the movie did not feel forced, allowing the brand to tap into the film's cultural impact without overwhelming the audience with overt advertising.

Similarly, sneaker brands have even gone as far as producing commercial films specifically for marketing purposes. *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, starring LeBron James, is a notable example. The film, which features James teaming up with classic cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, served as a platform for Nike to launch a collaborative sneaker line that included LeBron's signature shoes and Bugs Bunny-themed designs. These limited-edition sneakers, available only at a premium, became a hot topic in sneaker communities, driving both sales and brand engagement. In addition to high-cost productions like movies, short videos on social media recommending sneakers have become increasingly common. Collaborating with influencers offers brands several advantages, it is cost-effective, has a quick turnaround, and reaches a wide audience. Many consumers who are not deeply versed in sneaker culture make purchasing decisions based on factors like price, function, and appearance. For these consumers, the quickest way to find information is through internet searches and social media. Influencers, who often top search results due to their follower count and perceived authority, play a crucial role in shaping these consumers' purchasing decisions.

When a brand partners with an influencer, the influencer's positive reviews and recommendations can significantly boost a sneaker's appeal, this creates a positive feedback loop where satisfied customers leave favorable comments, further enhancing the brand's reputation and the influencer's credibility, ultimately driving more sales.

4.2 The Impact of Hard Advertising in the Digital Era

While soft advertising is becoming more popular, hard ad-

vertising remains an important tool for sports shoe companies, especially in the online space. A hard-sell approach has an objective that is "to induce rational thinking on the part of the receiver" [8]. The year 1904 is the period where people started to notice such appeal of advertising when Lord and Thomas pioneered the hard-sell strategy under the influence of John E. Kennedy [8]. Although a more traditional method, advances in online technology, editing, and special effects have injected new vitality into hard advertising, making it more visually appealing and attractive.

First, advances in special effects technology have made hard advertising more and more attractive. In 2023, PUMA launched a hard advertising campaign for NBA star LaMelo Ball's personal signature shoes. The ad uses Ball's self-proclaimed "alien" identity and combines alien-themed special effects such as multiple eyes, UFOs, and cosmic backgrounds. The bright color scheme and unique visual elements are designed to attract consumers' attention and create a memorable association with the product. The underlying message is clear: wearing LaMelo Ball's shoes can make people unique and "otherworldly" like him.

Secondly, because social media allows anyone to inject free content, the advertisements of its stars can be released and promoted at a very low cost. Take IG as an example: In 2024, the number of people following LaMelo Ball on IG reached 10 million, and the number of clicks on the hard advertisement he made with Puma on April 10, 2024 reached an astonishing 566,000. It does not cost anything to publish, which saves the brand a lot of entry and promotion costs.

Although these types of advertisements are obviously promotional in nature, they are still able to attract audiences by breaking creative boundaries. They use the latest digital tools to enhance the consumer experience and make the products and the brands behind them more attractive.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the shift in marketing strategies in the athletic footwear industry, focusing on the shift from traditional approaches such as celebrity endorsements and mass media advertising to modern techniques such as leveraging social media influencers, targeted digital campaigns, and a thriving secondary market. The findings suggest that traditional strategies still have advantages in some areas. However, the advent of the internet and social media has shifted consumers to online platforms that allow brands to target and engage with consumers. The study identified three major shifts in athletic footwear marketing strategies: from low-volume celebrity endorsements

to high-volume influencer marketing, from mass media advertising to precision personalized digital campaigns, and more in-depth positioning and research of products. These changes reflect a trend toward more interactive and data-driven marketing techniques that allow brands to engage with consumers more deeply and personally. The significance of this study lies in the comprehensive analysis of how the digital shift has reshaped athletic footwear marketing, providing mass and niche brands with different opportunities to position and compete. Companies like Nike and Adidas have adapted their product positioning and marketing to remain relevant in a competitive market. Smaller brands, such as Player 1, have shown that effective product positioning and consumer engagement can have a huge market impact even with limited resources. This study provides insights for sneaker brands to help them navigate the digital environment and take advantage of emerging trends, such as the use of influencers and the strategic positioning of products based on secondary market prices. Despite the contributions of this study, its limitations are that it focuses on a few well-known brands and case studies and may not fully summarize the diversity of the global sneaker market. Future research can explore the impact of sneaker digital marketing strategies in different countries and cultural contexts. In addition, there is a need to investigate the sustainability and cyclicity of current marketing practices, especially in the context of rapidly changing consumer behavior and environmental considerations. Overall, this study provides a foundational understanding of the changing marketing landscape of the sneaker industry, recognizes the development prospects

of niche brands, and provides insights for consumers and sneaker brands seeking to increase market influence and influence in the digital age.

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