**The Globalization of the Sneaker**

**Designing the Global Sneaker**

**globalization** the process of increasing the interdependence of the world’s economies

**multinational company** a company with facilities in more than one country

The first sneakers—footwear with canvas tops and rubber soles—appeared in the mid-1800s. People engaging in leisure activities and athletics wore them instead of bulky leather shoes. By 1917, companies such as Keds and Converse had begun mass-producing sneakers. They also designed sneakers for specific sports, such as tennis and basketball.

Until the late 1960s, sneakers were relatively simple shoes. Some had high tops. Others were cut low. But all had the standard canvas upper and rubber sole. Today they are far from simple. Modern sneakers are designed for a wide variety of purposes. Serious athletes still wear them, of course, but so does just about everyone else. Consumers all over the world buy sneakers for jogging, for rock climbing, for boating, for bicycling, for dancing, for skateboarding—and even for just walking around.

Most designing of sneakers occurs in the USA, Germany, Italy, and Japan. To compete in the global marketplace, **multinational** makers of athletic shoes have come up with innovative designs for their sneakers. These have resulted in improvements in performance and comfort. Some sneakers now have air pockets, gel pads, or memory foam for cushioning. Others have technologically advanced lacing systems or Velcro fasteners. The visual design of sneakers has also become more elaborate. Some come bearing stripes or stars or tassels or the company’s logo. Others come in a mix of wild colors or equipped with flashing lights. The focus on style and color has given sneakers more fashion appeal. To increase that appeal, shoe companies often hire popular athletes and musicians to promote their sneakers to a global audience of consumers.

**Locating Global Sneaker Materials**

Sneaker companies today also make use of a variety of materials. Some of them are found in only a few places in the world. All of the materials come together at factories, mainly in Asia. Workers in those factories create a shoe with three main parts: the upper, the midsole, and the outer sole.

The upper is the top part of a sneaker. Some uppers are made of natural materials, such as cotton or leather. The cotton comes mainly from farms in the United States, India, Uzbekistan, and Australia. The leather comes from the hides of cattle that are raised in Texas, Argentina , and other livestock centers. Other uppers are made of synthetic, or human-made, materials such as nylon. Nylon fabric is light and dries easily.

The midsole is the part of the shoe that cushions the bottom of the wearer’s foot. The typical midsole consists of shock-absorbing plastic and foam padding. Factories in South Korea, China, and elsewhere use chemicals derived from petroleum (petrochemicals) to produce the midsoles. The petroleum itself comes from Saudi Arabia, Russia, and other oil-rich countries.

The outer sole, or tread, of a sneaker needs to be tough but also flexible enough to put a spring in the wearer’s step. Sneakers used to be manufactured with natural rubber soles. The rubber came from the sap of rubber trees grown in such tropical countries as Brazil, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Today most soles are formed from synthetic rubber, which is made mainly from petrochemicals. Taiwan is a major producer of the synthetic rubber used in sneaker production.

**Manufacturing the Global Sneaker**

Globalization has also changed where sneakers are manufactured. Most sneakers used to be made in the countries in which they were sold. In the 1960s, simple canvas and rubber sneakers were still being produced in the United States, Britain, and Germany. As styles of sneakers multiplied and designs became more complex, so did the cost of labor needed to produce them.

Eventually, most makers of athletic shoes decided that it was too expensive to make sneakers in high-wage countries. They moved their production offshore, mainly to Asia. By **offshoring**, or **outsourcing**, production to low-wage countries such as South Korea and, later, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, these companies were able to reduce production costs. This made it possible for them to sell sneakers for lower prices and still make a profit.

**Distributing the Global Sneaker**

In 1990, a ship carrying sneakers from South Korea to the United States was hit by a fierce storm. Eighty thousand pairs of shoes spilled into the Pacific Ocean. A year later, the shoes were still washing up on American shores. Normally, though, sneakers have a smoother journey from Asia. Companies use several methods of transportation to move their shoes from the factory to the store.

Typically, sneakers are transported by container ship from Asia. This is the least expensive way to move goods over long distances. The trip to the United States takes about two weeks. The sneakers make this journey in freight containers, which are large, weatherproof steel boxes that are easy to stack on the deck of a ship. Huge container ships can accommodate 8,000 of these boxes.

When a ship arrives on the west coast of the United States, the containers are unloaded onto trains or trucks. In some ports, train tracks run right up to the docks to make unloading easier. Train or truck transport across the United States can take a week or longer. Most of the sneakers end up in Memphis, Tennessee, which is a major distribution center, where rail lines and highways meet. The sneakers are stored in warehouses in Memphis and then delivered by truck to retail stores around the country. A truck leaving Memphis in the morning can reach approximately 75 percent of the nation’s population by the following day.

Sneakers are distributed to approximately 18,000 stores throughout the United States. By the time a pair of sneakers makes the trek from an Asian factory to an American consumer’s feet, it may have traveled more than 7,000 miles.

In 2007, Americans bought about 425 million pairs of athletic shoes. That is nearly one and a half pairs for every man, woman, and child in the United States. Athletic footwear sales totaled more than $17 billion—and that amount doesn’t count sales in the rest of the world. Obviously, sneakers are a booming global business.