Sneakers and Crime

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As a self-identified sneaker-head, I understand all too well the disappointment of receiving inauthentic sneakers. Receiving a pair of fake Nike sneakers inspired me to look further into the breadth of the relationship between sneakers and crime. The relationship extends beyond counterfeit sneakers and enters the world of criminal investigation, as sneakers have been used as evidence to connect suspects to criminal activity, and have been the driving force behind much violence (Collier, 2020).

COUNTERFEIT SNEAKERS

Unbeknownst to the buyer, sellers all over the internet are trading fake versions of the most popular sneakers. Scrolling on eBay a few years ago, I came across a pair of orange and white Nike Dunk Low's. The shoe was sold out on the Nike website and being resold for upwards of $500 new, and $400 used (figure 1). The seller on eBay listed the 'lightly used' shoes at $275.

Want

Dunk Low Retro SP 'Syracuse'

SKU: CU1726 101

Nike / Dunk / Dunk Low Retro SP 'Syracuse'
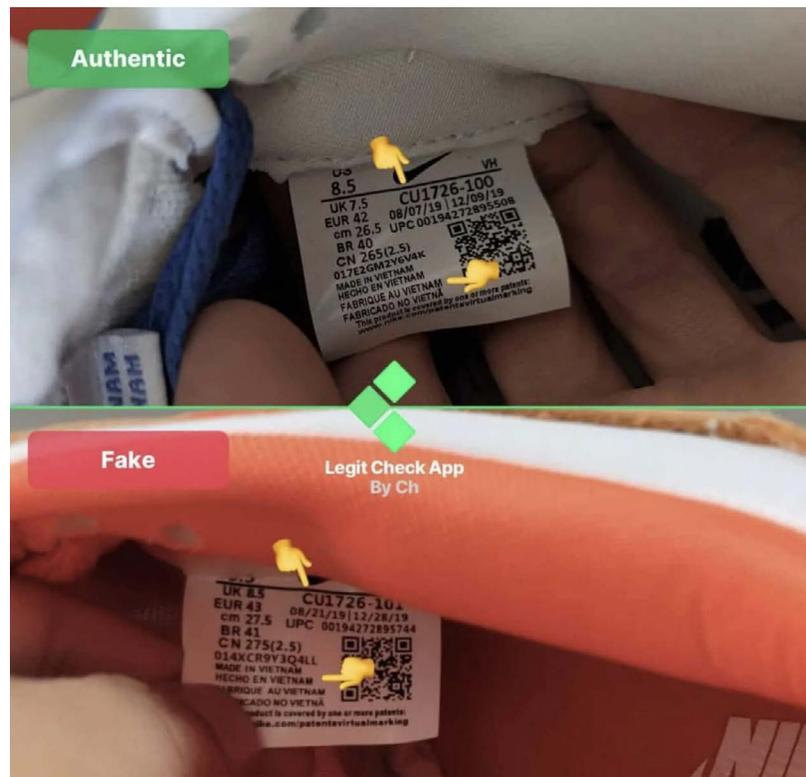
Buy New - $520   Buy Used - $416

Figure 1: Orange and white Dunk Lows being resold on GOAT.
From Goat, n.d., Retrieved April 21, 2021

I was blinded by the great deal and quickly bought them. Instantly I became worried that the shoes were not authentic. I was reassured by eBay's return policy and so I decided not to cancel the order. When I received the package my first red flag was that the box did not match the shoes. They did come in a Nike box, but the label said Air Max 97 instead of SB Dunk Low. I did some research and found an article that pointed out the differences between real and fake Dunk Low's (Ch, 2020). The fakes I received were well done but there were a few details that differed. On the back Nike logo there were threads connecting each letter (figure 2) which would not be seen on real Nikes. Additionally, the text on the sizing tag was much boxier on my sneakers (figure 3). With all this in mind, I reached out to the seller with my concerns. Fortunately for me, the seller refunded my purchase and I sent back the shoes.
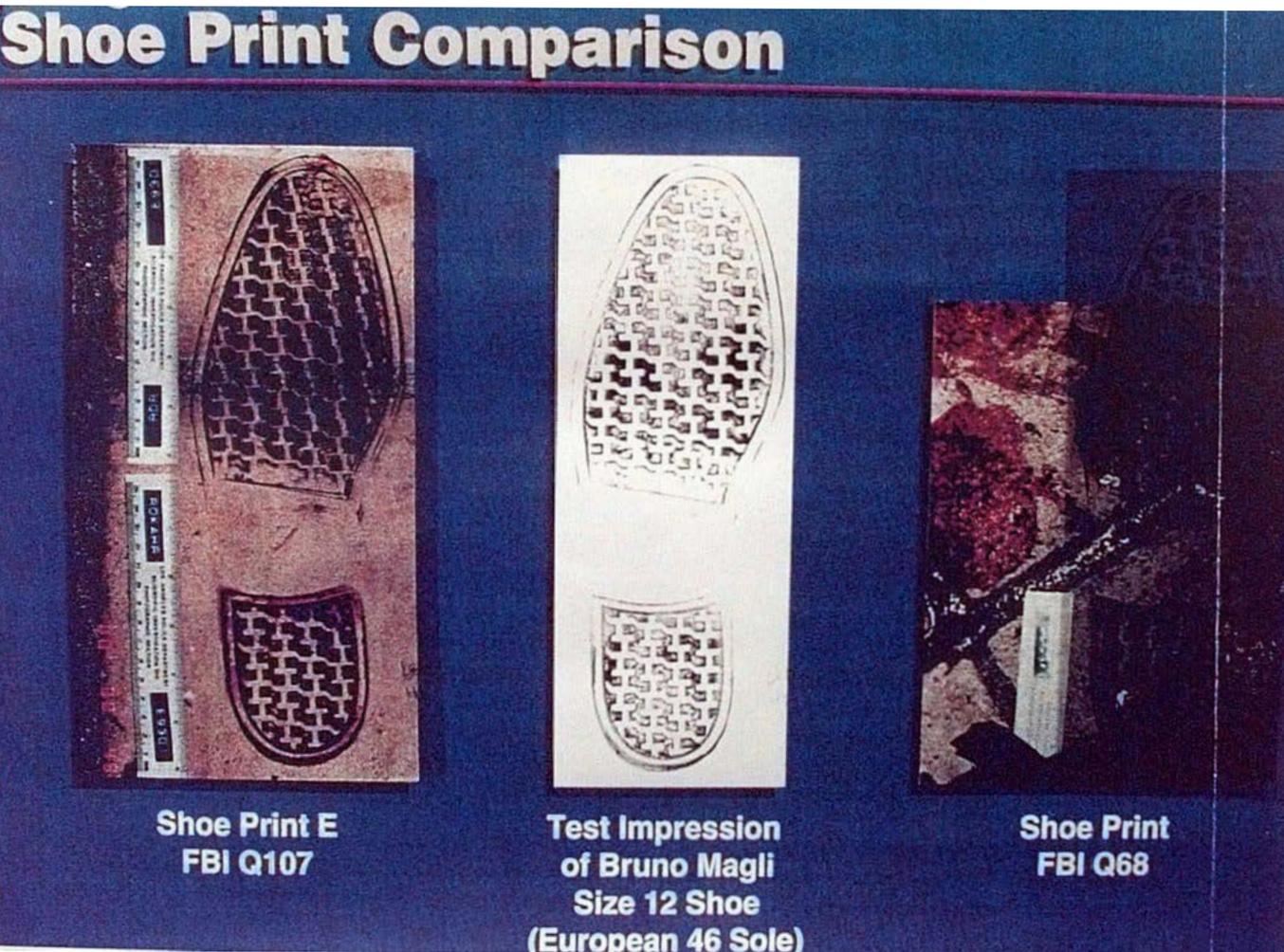
Figure 2 (left) and 3 (below): Nike Dunk Low authentic sneaker vs. fake. From How To Spot Fake Nike Dunk Low (Fake Vs Real Dunk Universal Guide), by D. CH, n.d. Retrieved April 21, 2021

Counterfeit sneakers on the market have interfered with criminal investigations. In such investigations, knowing the manufacture date is helpful in eliminating shoes as evidence; if the shoes were made after the date a crime was committed, they could not be attached to the crime. For instance, a footwear examiner in New York received many pairs of Air Force Ones to compare to a footwear impression at a crime scene (Wisbey, 2010). He contacted Nike to get their manufacture dates and, as it turns out, several of the shoes were counterfeits, making it much more difficult to pinpoint which shoes matched the impressions (Wisbey, 2010).

Shoe Print Comparison

Shoe Print E FBI Q107

Test Impression of Bruno Magli Size 12 Shoe (European 46 Sole)
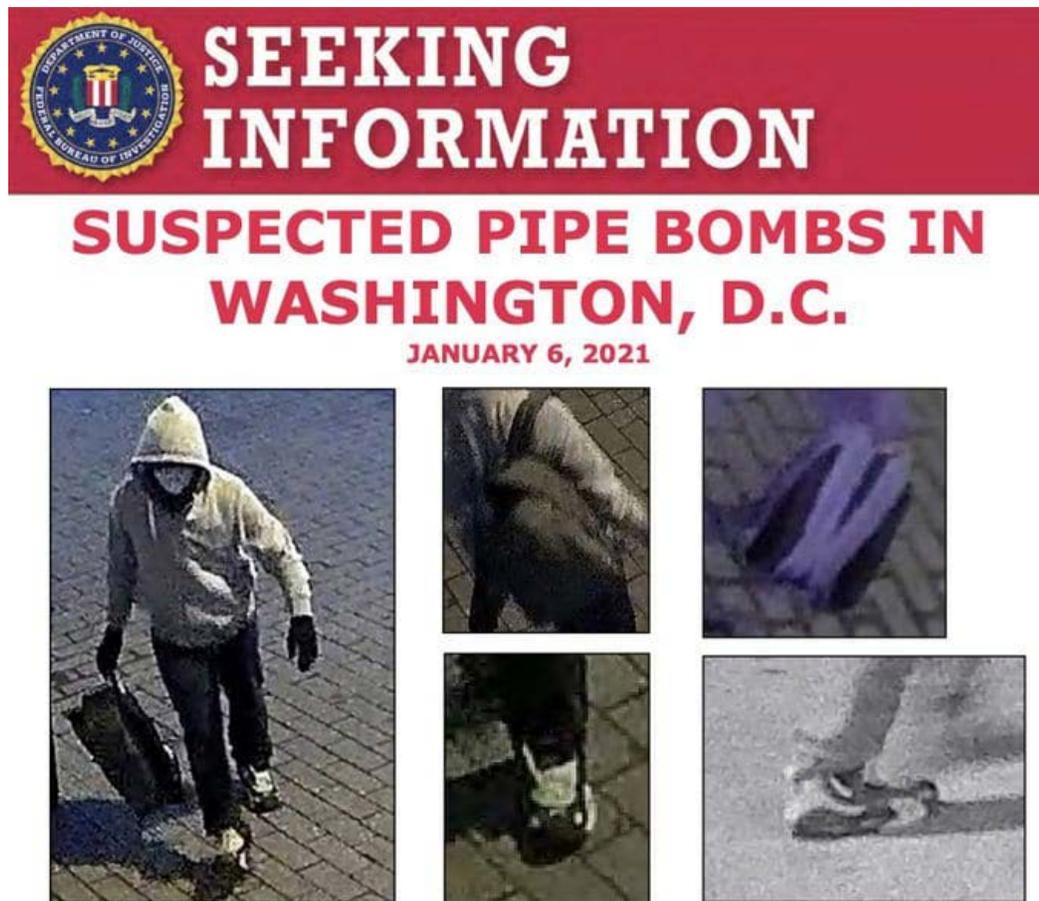
Shoe Print FBI Q68

SNEAKERS AS EVIDENCE

The connection between footwear and crime is not a new phenomenon. There are records of shoes being used as evidence for hundreds of years (Bodziak, 2016). Shoes were often compared to marks and impressions left at crime scenes. Skills used to analyze footwear impressions are closely related to the observation skills used by hunters to track animals in ancient times. Analyzing shoe impressions at crime scenes was done long before forensic experts existed, and before the invention of photography; casting and lifting were used in the analysis process. Shoe were often compared directly to the marks left behind. Detectives would consult shoe makers who could determine if the shoe shape was common in the community, if the shoe had any repairs, and what type of person might have been wearing the shoe (David, 2019). Today, the analysis of footprints at a crime scene can help determine the type of shoes, the number of suspects there are, and can be used to identify the suspects. This is combined with an analysis of general wear, cuts and debris held in the outsole that can help narrow down the search for suspects.

There are different types of impressions that can be left behind by criminals, including two- and three-dimensional impressions. Two-dimensional impressions occur when substance from the shoe transfers to a surface; this was the type of transfer in the O.J. Simpson trial (Butler-Young, 2016) (figure 4). Two-dimensional impressions can also occur when a shoe removes material from a surface. Three-dimensional impressions are created when the shoe deforms the material on the ground and the deepness of the impression is dependent on the softness of the ground. In the case of O.J. Simpson, a bloody impression was left at the crime scene (Margolick, 1995). The prosecution used William J. Bodziak as an expert witness. He was able to determine that the bloody impression was left behind by size 12 Bruno Magli shoes and that only one person was involved in the crime (Margolick, 1995). Although the shoe size matched that of O.J. Simpson, the prosecution in the criminal case was unable to prove the shoes were worn or owned by Simpson (Butler-Young, 2016).

Shoes can be connected to a suspect by shoe boxes, receipts and photographs (Bodziak, 2016). In the case of O.J. Simpson, pictures surfaced of him wearing the model of shoe that matched the impression, but not until after the criminal case concluded (Butler-Young, 2016). The photos that surfaced were used as evidence in the civil case, however, where Simpson was found liable for wrongful death (Bodziak, 2016).

SNEAKERS HELP SOLVE CRIMES

Impressions are not the only way sneakers can be connected to a crime. In San Diego, the uniqueness of a man's sneakers helped lead to his arrest. On New Year's Eve 2019, a man threatened a bouncer at a bar (Horn, 2019). He was wearing Air Jordan 1 Phats 'Anthracite'. This specific colourway of the Air Jordans 1's was released in 2012 (Jones, 2019). In 2019 when the incident occurred, seeing this colourway was rare. A police officer was able to spot the suspect based on the description of his Air Jordan sneakers and make the arrest (Horn, 2019).

FBI officials are hoping the uniqueness of another pair of Nikes will help identify a suspect in the Washington riot on January 6th, 2021 (Bain, 2021). The suspect is seen on security footage covering his face so as to be unidentifiable, but what stands out is his unique pair of Air Max Speed Turf sneakers (see figure 5). These sneakers are less popular than other Nike shoes such as Air Force 1's or Air Jordans and could possibly help narrow down the suspect.

In a suburb of New England, two boys were fishing when they were attacked by a group of teenagers (Siver, Lord and Mccarthy, 1994). After being held at knife-point, beaten and left to drown, the boys managed to escape. In this incident, the sneakers played a vital role because they carried sediment from the crime scene. Investigators were able to test sediment on the shoes of the suspects and the victims for similarities. Since dust preserves its characteristics from where it originated (Locard, 1993), investigators were able to confirm that the sediment came from the same place (Siver, Lord and Mccarthy, 1994). This sort of investigation to determine sediments' origins can be extremely precise (Locard, 1993).

SNEAKER VIOLENCE

The intersection between sneakers and crime does not end at counterfeits and the use of sneakers as evidence. There is a history of crimes motivated by sneakers that dates back to the first release of Air Jordan shoes. Crimes motivated by sneakers are carried out mainly by teens and those who cannot afford them (Niebuhr, 1998) Hype is one of the main motivators for violence associated with sneakers (Bain, 2015). Hype is usually generated by releasing shoes that are very expensive, only releasing limited amounts (Bain, 2015), and dressing popular athletes in the shoes (Collier, 2020). Sneaker violence has been intensified by the resale market (Collier, 2020).

Basketball player Kevin Garnett recalls in 1989 when a child was killed for his pair of Air Jordan sneakers (Garnett and Ritz, 2021). The red and black shoes were highly sought after. Garnett notes the shoes were significantly more expensive than other basketball shoes on the market at the time (Garnett and Ritz, 2021). He explains that "the price only added to the lure and legend" of the shoes. After the incident, Nike released more colourways of the shoe to potentially reduce the hype by saturating the market with more Air Jordan sneakers (Garnett and Ritz, 2021).

Brands intensify the hype of sneakers by outfitting popular basketball players in their apparel and shoes (Collier, 2020). Michael Jordan is the most famous example. When Nike started sponsoring Jordan, they put him in their shoes for games and used his highlight reels as commercials (Garnett and Ritz, 2021). Jordan was probably the most popular basketball player at the time, and people would rush to buy Nike shoes to mirror their favourite player. A more modern example of this brand endorsement occurred with basketball player Zion Williams, who gained popularity even before being drafted to the NBA. Collaborating with popular young players, while they are in high school or university, is appealing to brands because it can stir up interest and hype in specific communities (Collier, 2020).

Overhyped shoes create an environment for high resale profits. Once a shoe sells out, it can be found on reputable sites like StockX and GOAT for 200% of the original cost (Palmer, n.d.). Individuals understand the potential profit on the resale of sneakers, and having such high resale prices raises the value of sneakers and could motivate further violence. Sneaker violence is also seen when sites like Craigslist are used for resale (Collier, 2020). In southwest Miami, two men trying to resell Yeezys, a sneaker designed by Kanye West, were shot when they met up with potential buyers (Collier, 2020). Kanye West spoke out against violence over Yeezys, saying "I just want everyone to be safe and be patient [...] I know you can run up on this kid and take his Yeezys, but just be patient because we'll make more Yeezys" (Collier, 2020).

Brands will often release limited quantities of shoes. This increases the hype and resale value, thus motivating further violence. On release day, thousands of people will line up outside retailers in hopes of getting their hands on some coveted sneakers. There are many instances of violent outburst at Nike releases. In 2011, Nike released a pair of retro black and white Air Jordans and violence broke out across America as people lined up for the shoes (NG and Katrandjian, 2011). In Seattle and Florida, police used pepper spray to break up a fight between shoppers (NG and Katrandjian, 2011). Brands are not unaware of the crimes and violence motivated by their sneakers and, in an attempt to limit violence during sneaker release, Nike changed their release time from midnight to the morning hours (Bain, 2015).

Despite the efforts being made by brands, sneaker-related violence still occurs. These acts of violence are motivated by the monetary and social value placed on sneakers. This motivates not only violence but also leads to the manufacturing of counterfeit and fake sneakers. Sneakers are not only the motivating factor behind crime, they are also used to aid criminal investigations.

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