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SYMBOLIC EXPRESSIONS IN FOOTWEAR DECORATION AND DESIGN

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Footwear is a powerful medium for symbolic communication, encoding cultural values, social status, and identity through its design. Using a semiotic framework, this manuscript analyzes case studies across traditional and contemporary contexts. It examines traditional footwear, such as Chinese lotus shoes, Native American moccasins and Moroccan babouches, as cultural repositories, before shifting to contemporary engineered symbols like the Louboutin red sole and Nike and cultural artists collaborative narratives. The study argues that symbolic footwear operates as "wearable text," where decoration forms syntax for messages about tradition, power, and belonging, underscoring the adaptive evolution of material culture's symbolic language.

Key words: Footwear Design, Material Culture, Symbolism, Semiotics, Fashion Theory, Cultural Heritage, Brand Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Footwear is a fundamental artifact of human material culture, serving not only as protection but also as a canvas for profound symbolic expression (Riello, 2006). The decoration and design of shoes communicate intricate messages about the wearer's identity, community, beliefs, and social standing. This communicative capacity operates through a language of symbols—colors, motifs, materials, and construction techniques—that are legible within specific cultural contexts.

PURPOSE

While extensive research exists on costume and adornment, focused studies on footwear as a discrete symbolic system are less prevalent. The purpose of this manuscript is to address this gap by presenting a structured, cross-cultural analysis of symbolic footwear. Drawing on semiotic theory (Barthes, 1967), this study interrogates how meaning is produced and circulated through decorated shoes. This study addresses a central research question: How is symbolism encoded and communicated through decorative elements in footwear, from traditional to contemporary design paradigms?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach grounded in material culture studies and visual semiotics. Semiotics, the study of signs and their meaning-making processes, provides the primary lens. We treat footwear as a



complex sign comprising the signifier (the physical shoe and its decorations) and the signified (the cultural concepts and values it references) (Barthes, 1967).

Decoration is analyzed as a key syntactic element that modifies this sign. Cases were selected to ensure diversity in cultural origin, historical period, and market orientation. Traditional cases are analyzed as expressions of embedded symbolism, deeply tied to ritual, folklore, and collective identity. Contemporary cases are examined as expressions of constructed symbolism, often driven by brand narratives and consumer culture. The following discusses symbolic expressions in traditional Chinese, Native American and Moroccan footwear.

Chinese embroidered lotus shoes – The embroidered lotus shoes of pre-20th century China, designed for bound feet, are a profound example of symbolism intertwining with bodily practice. The form itself symbolized elite status, feminine virtue, and erotic ideal (Ko, 2005). The decoration, however, elaborated this primary sign. Intricate silk embroidery featured motifs such as lotuses (symbolizing purity and femininity), butterflies (conjugal happiness), and phoenixes (imperial virtue and prosperity). The colors held specific meanings: red for happiness and celebration, yellow for royalty. Thus, the shoe acted as a portable, coded biography of the wearer's desired social and moral attributes, transforming a practice of physical constraint into a display of cultural capital and artistic refinement (Jackson, 1997).

Native American moccasins (Plains tribes) - Among Plains tribes, moccasin decoration served as a vital ethno-linguistic marker and narrative device. The basic form was pragmatic, but the beadwork and quillwork constituted a symbolic language. Color symbolism was crucial: red often signified life or blood, blue represented sky or water, and white denoted purity or spirit. Specific designs could indicate tribal affiliation, clan, or personal achievements in battle or hunting. The moccasin was thus not merely personal attire but a communal text, embedding the wearer within a network of social relations and spiritual beliefs (Casse, 1984) .

Moroccan babouches - The babouche, a soft leather slipper, communicates through form, material, and selective ornamentation. Its decoration signals social and economic status (Ferdinand, 2025). Plain, yellow babouches were historically common. Sultan Moulay Ismail (r. 1672–1727) mandated the wearing of babouches in deliberate opposition to Western Christian black shoes (Pegu, 2020). Elaborate embroidery in gold or silver thread, intricate leather tooling and the use of vibrant dyes like saffron yellow were reserved for the wealthy and for special occasions such as weddings. The pointed toe can be read as a symbolic gesture, often associated with elegance and refinement. The symbolism here is one of social hierarchy and religious observance, communicated through a minimalist but potent decorative grammar.

In terms of contemporary footwear, shoes are purposefully designed objects that blend high technology with deep cultural symbolism. The following discusses Christian Louboutin red sole and Nike's collaborations with cultural artists.

The Christian Louboutin Red Sole – In modern luxury fashion, Christian Louboutin's red-lacquered sole transcends mere decoration to operate as the brand's primary signature and icon (Mielniczuk-Skibicka, 2019). The sole functions as a hyper-visible, status-signifying signifier. Legally trademarked (Teilmann-Lock &



Brun Petersen, 2018), the red sole signifies deliberate status marker, visually aligning his designs with their four-figure price point (Thelin, 2020). The symbolism is not inherited but constructed through consistent branding, celebrity endorsement, and legal protection, creating an instantly recognizable global icon of aspirational consumption.

Nike Collaborations with Cultural Artists – Modern sportswear giants like Nike engage in symbolic production through collaborations that embed cultural narratives into sneaker design. For example, Sean Wotherspoon's Nike Air Max 1/97 uses corduroy and vintage logo patches to embody 1990s nostalgia and upcycling. Similarly, Travis Scott's Air Jordan 1 collaboration deploys a reversed Swoosh, hidden pockets, and an earthy palette, symbolizing rebellion, artistic irreverence, and his distinct Texan identity (Camilla, 2024). Here, decoration (materials, logo manipulation, and colourways) is used to encode stories of cultural subversion, artistic identity, and community belonging, targeting consumers who buy not just a shoe, but access to a curated cultural narrative.

Comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary examples demonstrates both persistence and transformation in the semiotic functions of footwear decoration. In traditional settings, symbolic meanings tend to be collective and normative, reinforcing shared cultural values and social order, with significance rooted in communal life and cosmological belief systems. By contrast, contemporary symbolic systems are largely produced and aspirational, strategically crafted by brands to signal affiliation with consumer-defined groups or the achievement of specific lifestyle ideals.

Despite these changes, the fundamental role persists: decorative elements elevate footwear beyond mere utility, turning it into a medium of expression. Whether manifested in the iconic red sole or the intricately beaded moccasin, both exemplify deliberate differentiation. Such designs render the wearer socially intelligible within specific contexts, be it an indigenous community or the global fashion system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that footwear decoration constitutes a rich and systematic language of symbolism. From the culturally embedded motifs of traditional shoes to the engineered icons of global fashion, decorated footwear serves as a powerful vehicle for expressing identity, status, and belief. The semiotic analysis employed here provides a robust framework for decoding the "wearable texts" we produce and consume. Future research could benefit from ethnographic work with contemporary wearers, quantitative studies of brand symbol recognition, and deeper investigation into sustainable or digital (e.g., NFT sneaker) designs as emerging symbolic systems.

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ХАН Цзянлінь

СИМВОЛІЧНІ ВИРАЗИ В ОЗДОБЛЕННІ ТА ДИЗАЙНІ ВЗУТТЯ

Взуття є потужним засобом символічної комунікації, що передає культурні цінності, соціальний статус та ідентичність через свій дизайн. Використовуючи семіотичний підхід, у цій статті проаналізовано кейси у традиційних та сучасних контекстах. Дослідження розглядає традиційне взуття, таке як китайські лотосові черевики та мокасини корінних американців, як носіїв культури, перш ніж перейти до сучасних інженерних символів, як-от червона підошва Louboutin та нарративи колаборацій Nike. У роботі стверджується, що символічне взуття функціонує як «текст, що його носять», де декор формує синтаксис для повідомлень про традицію, владу та приналежність, підкреслюючи адаптивну еволюцію символічної мови матеріальної культури

Ключові слова: дизайн взуття, матеріальна культура, символіка, семіотика, теорія моди, культурна спадщина, ідентичність бренду.