



## Investigating Shoes and Sexual Homicide

By Vivian E. Shubert & Dallas S. Drake

### Abstract

*There are seemingly many links between shoes and sexual homicide, but understanding the history of shoes helps to grasp the concept behind this odd connection. Chinese practices showed us the first shift linking beauty and feet, contributing to the rise of sexualization through footwear. Through stories and fairytales, young girls' minds were shaped into believing shoes were the gateway into exploring sexuality and determining their societal worth into adulthood. Men find this interest fascinating and like with anything, the extreme cases result from disorders such as paraphilia and fetishism. More issues pertaining to relationships, sexual attractions, and violent tendencies develop due to this disfunction. Abusive pasts are a common cause explaining the heinous outbursts of sexually related killings and the development of kleptomania--the need to steal and possess women's shoes. When it comes to crime scenes, shoes are often overlooked and can determine the location and lifestyle of an offender along with possible murder weapons.*

### The History of Shoes

Initially, shoes were designed to fulfill a very simple need; to protect one's foot from the outside elements. While different regions used various types of material to accommodate for their differing climates, the basic model of all shoes involved the simple construction of a sole with a front covering that protected the bottoms of the feet and the toes ("The history and evolution of shoes," 2018). This original desire to make and wear shoes for protection was purely utilitarian in nature and had no connection with fashion or appearance whatsoever. However, the first indication of a shift in this association between shoes, feet, and beauty can be seen in early Chinese foot binding practices, in which a woman's foot would be wrapped so tightly that it would stop growing. Not only was binding used to denote social status, but it was also used to gauge the overall beauty and sexuality of a woman, a practice that was new to the world of ancient footwear (Sancaktar, 2006). Indeed, this newfound relationship between perceived physical appearance and shoe design led footwear to evolve across many regions and started to influence styles that held a similar indication of class, status, power, and beauty.

Interestingly, the first high heeled shoe was not designed for women at all. In fact, men were the first to wear this style of shoe to demonstrate their social

status and because men's legs were a standard of beauty up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, buckles, lace, and other decorative elements became popular to add to the shoes and heels that were popular amongst women. However, as popular female garment wear began to change and hem lines began to shorten, more attention was given to the female form and the way that a higher heeled shoe would help boost this silhouette ("The history and evolution of shoes," 2018). Eventually, men's fashion lost the high heel altogether as it became primarily associated with feminine beauty, sexuality, and elegance during America's pop culture movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Old Hollywood starlets helped to solidify this by adding a level of sexualized glamour and status that has become associated with a feminine heel (Tourre-Malen, 2011).

Shoes have also had a significant place across the history of film and the arts. In examples such as *Cinderella*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *The Red Shoes*, the specific shoe designs can be seen as representing female empowerment, glamorization, elitist prestige, rejecting modesty, and escaping reality to embrace a fantasy (Griffiths, 2017). Furthermore, many famous artists throughout the ages have also presented famous works that focus on shoes and the way in which they affect the female figure and form (Sancaktar, 2006).

### **Sexuality and Shoes**

For many females, shoes represent an important transition into adulthood. Society has developed an unspoken rule that at some point in a girl's life, it is no longer a cute and innocent matter for her to play dress up in her mother's heels. Instead, it is discouraged and begins to be seen as inappropriate sexualization, a desire to 'grow up too fast,' or a way to represent herself in a way that is seductive. This sentiment is even shared by many elderly women who have reported a feeling of 'losing one's youth' after reaching an age where heels were too uncomfortable and impractical to wear anymore (Tourre-Malen, 2011). Shoes are also an important image in many classic stories and fairytales that appeal to young children or girls (i.e. *Cinderella* or *The Wizard of Oz*) and usually represent a sort of fantasy or are worn by the main character when interesting or significant plot points are occurring (Sancaktar, 2006). This can cause girls to start associating feelings of positivity, importance, beauty, and fantasy with shoes at a very young age and may increase their desire to explore their identity through footwear.

Even as adults, many men and women use shoes as significant way of expressing their personal style and making themselves look and feel good. For women in particular, high heels and other similar shoe designs are very important in expressing confidence, sexuality, or a sense of power in the way that they appear physically. In many cases, a certain type of footwear is purchased or worn because it makes the individual feel good in the way that they look or come across to others. In fact, around 80% of shoes purchased by women are bought because of some sort of relevance to a feeling of sexual attraction, whether it is consciously realized or not (Belk, 2003). High heels or platform shoes can be worn to accentuate certain features of a woman's body, whether that be for personal pleasure or as a way to try and attract attention while in public. Many specific styles and designs of high heels are quite upfront about the seductive ways in which their shoes are marketed. For example, the famous Christian Louboutin heel can be identified by its distinctive glossy black material and the signature bright red heel. Not only are these heels heavily associated with wealth and status because of their price tag, but they are also distinctively marketed as a symbol of seduction. Louboutin even used the phrase "unleash a bleeding flash of sole with every step" as part of their marketing campaigns, which may demonstrate a further sexualized association between the sleek material and colors of this shoe with those materials and colors commonly seen in fetishism (Tourre-Malen, 2011).

Despite this somewhat normalized sexualization of shoes, it can be taken to the extreme in some cases. When this occurs, fetishes such as podophilia (Kippen, 2002), the sexual attraction to feet, or retifism, the sexual attraction to shoes and footwear even without the foot, can develop. These types of

fetishes are indicated across all types of sexual relationships and partner preferences, although it is more common for extreme cases to be seen primarily in men (Fedoroff, 2008). While these sexual interests can be relatively innocuous, there is a point at which these associations with a shoe or a foot can turn from harmless to invasive, which marks the beginning of a paraphilic condition.

### **Fetishisms and Paraphilias**

Shoes and feet are two of the most popular fetishes seen in many sexual deviants (Kafka, 2009). Despite still having quite a bit of social stigma attached to them, these fetish types have been found by multiple studies to rank in the top three most prevalent type of body or bodywear-related fetishes (Griffiths, 2017; Kafka, 2009; Scorrolli et al., 2007). As with most fetishes, foot and shoe fetishism can be harmless when practiced in healthy, communicative, and consensual circumstances. However, there is the possibility for unhealthy behaviors to develop that can begin to invade a person's ability to normally function within both their sexual and day-to-day life. This is the point at which a paraphilia may be indicated, which is when the relationship between these fetishes and certain criminal behaviors becomes stronger (Taktak et al., 2015).

A deviant or atypical sexual behavior can be defined as any erotic behavior that fails to adhere to the accepted norms of a certain culture or society. It is extremely common for an average adult to have one or more of these atypical behaviors or fetishes, and they are usually not a cause for concern. However, issues can arise when these behaviors begin to meet the criteria for a paraphilia, which the DSM (2013) describes as a mental disorder characterized by strong and repetitive sexual urges or disruptive fantasies that last for at least six months and include either nonhuman objects, pain or humiliation of oneself or another, or nonconsenting people such as children. The development of these behaviors can become very problematic due to a significant link between certain paraphilias and general criminal behavior, such as burglary or petty theft (Hickey, 2006). However, there are some paraphilias that demonstrate an even more significant link with violent crime and high rates of comorbidity with sadomasochism; another type of paraphilia that involves the infliction of pain and humiliation towards oneself or another for sexual gratification (Fedoroff, 2008). In fact, a study conducted in 1983 on the presentation of foot and shoe fetishism in men produced results showing that these paraphilias were among those that had an almost indiscernible link with extreme sadistic or masochistic behaviors (Hickey, 2006).

Furthermore, fetishes can progress and become psychopathic in nature if the individual begins to see their partner as a mere accessory to their fixation. This is commonly seen in cases of significant Retifism: the sexual attraction to shoes and footwear as objects themselves, or Altocalciphilia: the sexual attraction to high heeled shoes (Hickey, 2006). In such instances, the object of fixation has progressed to such a level that the individual no longer requires an association with the presence of a partner to experience a significant state of arousal. In fact, many of these fetishists begin to prefer the sexual gratifications they receive when dissociating an object from the partner who is wearing it (DeRiver, 1958). This can sometimes result in the development of kleptomania as the individual's desire to have such objects in their possession increases or can even explain why some sexually sadistic murderers decide to take certain items as potential trophies that may continue to serve a sexual purpose outside of the incident (Schlesinger & Revitch, 1999; Taktak et al., 2015).

While both women and men can demonstrate paraphilic behaviors, most cases are seen in men and are said to begin developing anywhere from early childhood to late adolescence and early adulthood. A study conducted on the development of paraphilias indicated that many male adults share common childhood characteristics, including restrictive or abusive parenting, traumatic events that had occurred during a significant developmental period, low self-esteem, difficulty forming social bonds, extreme sexual frustration, exposure to violence towards women, and a desire to escape reality

(Fedoroff, 2008; Nagler, 1957). Paraphilic behaviors also correlate with other mental disorders during childhood, such as anxiety, depression, antisocial personality disorder, gender identity disorder, and psychopathy (Cantor et al., 2009).

### **Shoes and Sexual Sadism**

When considering shoe and foot fetichisms, many of these individuals began either wearing or stealing women's shoes at an early age after having developed a certain fascination with them or after having a significant sexual experience that involved attention towards the footwear or the foot itself. Unfortunately, many of these instances escalate and begin to involve burglary, rape, and assault as the individual associates the thrill and gratification from these acts with the fetishized object (Kafka, 2009). For many, the repetitive nature of their sexual fantasies combined with the dopamine reward of orgasm or sexual arousal creates a strong conditioning response that only strengthens the desire of the individual to act out their fantasies in real life (Hickey, 2006). Following this pattern of escalation, the addition of violence within such a fantasy can create a conditioned association between sadistic and sexual gratification, which furthers the possibility that the individual will eventually act against another person (Beltran et al., 2019). Considering the childhood development and social environment of a certain offender, this pattern can be used to help explain why a sexually violent offender with shoe or foot paraphilias may escalate from simply taking shoes from a store to the assault and rape of a woman during the process of stealing her shoes.

When it comes to retifism, the most associated type of shoe with violent sexual tendencies is the high heel. The term 'stiletto' is derived from the Latin word 'stylus' and translates to 'slender dagger.' There are also many other sexually suggestive names given to BDSM styled shoes, such as the "Fuck Me Pump," "Pleaser Heels," and "Dagger Pumps" (Cleary, 2005). Many aspects of the fashion of footwear also relates to many erotic preferences that are shared by many sexual sadists. Considering these types of heels, it can be seen why their ability to cause pain, discomfort, and restrict mobility while simultaneously representing seduction and sexuality might appeal to a sadistic individual. Additionally, many high heels are visually exciting to fetishists due to the use of shiny, leathery, sleek materials and the additions of spiked, laced, and pointed embellishments (Griffiths, 2017). When comparing these elements to those of other common accessories and items used in sadomasochistic practices, such as handcuffs, rope, corsets, mouth gags, leather whips, and latex masks, the similarities are very apparent.

Physical attributes aside, a sexual sadist with a foot or shoe fetish may also be drawn to heels because of the association between them and female empowerment (Sancaktar, 2006). By dominating and humiliating a woman who is wearing a symbol of such power, an offender may be playing out a resentment that he has developed towards women who have rejected him in the past, or he may be attempting to make up for feelings of inadequacy and an inability to assume the "stereotypical" male role throughout his life. The taking of such an object as a trophy further demonstrates an offender's desire to symbolize and remember their power and ability to dominate (Tourre-Malen, 2011). In many cases, the offender may choose to wear the shoe themselves, either while alone at home or when committing a sexual act with another victim. This demonstrates the offender's detachment from the victim themselves and points to the need for the shoe itself as an object that is required to achieve sexual gratification.

### **The Shoe Fetish Killer**

Jerome "Jerry" Brudos was an American serial sexual murderer who was born in South Dakota in 1939. Growing up with an abusive mother who would frequently dress him up in girl's clothes, it is no surprise that Brudos showed severe emotional and developmental issues very early on. At age five,

he demonstrated his first interest in women's high heels after taking them home and wearing a pair that he had found in a junkyard near his house. After his mother confiscated and burned them, Brudos began satiating his curiosities by first stealing his older sister's shoes, and then escalating to thieving clothes and other footwear from neighborhood clotheslines (Keefe et al., n.d.). His fantasies continued to grow and began involving thoughts of kidnapping and overpowering women, photographing them nude, and wearing their clothes. Eventually he escalated to the point of kidnapping, raping, and murdering a young woman who had entered his home as a door-to-door salesman (Newton, 2006).

Throughout his time as an active killer, Brudos continued to demonstrate his obsession with shoes by making them the central focus of most of his murders. In a very notable example, Brudos cut off the foot of one of his victims and stored it in his freezer with the high heeled shoe still on. He would frequently take it out and wear the shoe to obtain sexual pleasure (Keefe et al., n.d.). It can be clearly seen that Brudos had invasive paraphilias because he was no longer able to gain sexual satisfaction without involving a shoe or a foot in either a criminal or violent manner (Kafka, 2009). He also demonstrated many of the comorbidities associated with extreme fetishism and criminality, such as kleptomania, rape or sexual assault, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and sadism (DeRiver, 1958). Because of this, Brudos is an excellent case to demonstrate how the relationship between social environment, sexuality, and criminality may affect the characteristics of a particular offender. His case also provides a way for researchers to begin looking into what life experiences may begin the development of disruptive behaviors in some offenders,

### **Shoes and the Crime Scene**

All types of crime scenes can benefit from both a shoe itself and what a shoe can leave behind. Footwear impressions left behind can be analyzed by experts to determine the brand, size, and material of a shoe, which can then be used to track down a potential offender. These impressions also introduce the potential for trace DNA or other telling evidence to be recovered from what an offender may have tracked into a crime scene. Whether it be blood, soil, or fibers, trace evidence tracked into a crime scene can provide important leads as to where a suspect may live, work, or spend his/her time. In the case of sexually charged homicides, shoes at a crime scene may provide very important evidence that can be easily overlooked. Especially in cases where a victim is notably missing one or both shoes, consideration should be given as to whether this was merely an accident or whether it may indicate that a trophy was indeed taken (Geberth, 1996).

Aside from information about the offender, shoes can also provide investigators with possible details about the victim. If it is difficult to identify a victim, whether that be due to decomposition, mutilation, or the absence of a body altogether, a shoe can be used to provide information on the victim's foot size and the brand he/she was wearing during the crime. A shoe may also be able to provide details about the victim's personal interests and lifestyle, or what they were doing right up until the moment the crime occurred (Gardner, 2005). For example, a jogging shoe left behind at a crime scene in a park may suggest the victim was a runner who cared about physical fitness, or a closet full of extreme clubbing shoes at a victim's home may suggest they enjoyed night life and going out regularly.

A shoe at a crime scene can also help to identify possible murder weapons. If a shoe is discovered at a crime scene with a missing lace and ligature strangulation is evident on the victim, it should be considered that the lace was used as the weapon and then taken or discarded. Because strangulation is a very intimate and sexually charged method of murder, it would not be unlikely that a sexual sadist with a shoe fetish would find this type of assault desirable (Beltran, Flores, & Ordonez, 2019). Shoe imprints on the victim may also indicate whether the offender used physical force to subdue or murder, such as stomping or crushing (Fedoroff, 2008). All these details are extremely important to take note of, especially in a case in which the offender has not been apprehended because it can give

investigators a clearer idea of what exactly may have happened during the altercation. If the investigators are properly educated on what to look for in the case of a potential sexual serial offender, the potential for a more accurate profile of their suspect increases.

### Considerations in Future Investigations

The importance of shoes is overlooked or undermined in many criminal investigations to this day. Unfortunately, the extensive relationships between many serial sexual behaviors and types of criminal conduct are not widely taught in many police academies unless that is the specific field in which an investigator is specializing in. There is also a serious lack of standardization regarding terminology and classification of paraphilias, sexual homicides, and other sex crimes between many law enforcement departments and agencies (Chan & Heide, 2016). This increases the probability that important details or connections may be overlooked at the scene of a potentially sexually driven homicide, especially when something as seemingly unimportant as a shoe is involved. Increasing the overall education on these relationships between certain offender characteristics, different types of paraphilias, and the links between certain presentations or patterns of criminal behavior can increase the likelihood that these factors will be noticed at a crime scene.

Just by looking at the many unsolved murder cases over the years that have a sexual association, a significant number of victims were described as missing either one or both shoes. While this speculation should not be taken out of context to mean that any sex crime involving a shoe, points to a serial sexual murderer, it does suggest that using accurate and updated information about the characteristics of serial sexual homicide could be useful in explaining a wider range of cases that involve details such as a missing shoe. Without this knowledge, a missing high heel may not seem so suspicious. But if the lingering stigma surrounding sex and the extreme behaviors associated with it are diminished, a greater understanding of these individuals can be achieved and utilized in homicide investigations to identify more of these offenders.

### References

- Belk, R. W. (2003). Shoes and self. In P. A. Keller & D. W. Rook (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research* (pp. 27-33). Association for Consumer Research.  
<http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/8730/volumes/v30/NA-30>
- Beltran, J., Flores, V. J., & Ordonez, E. (2019). How sadistic behavior and its correlation to sexual coercion leads to fetishes and sexual aggression. *UC Merced Undergraduate Research Journal*, 11(1), 76-95. <https://escholarship.org/content/qt4gb476t8/qt4gb476t8.pdf>
- Cantor, J. M., Blanchard, R., & Barbaree, H. (2009). Sexual disorders. In P. H. Blaney & T. Millon (Eds.), *Oxford Textbook of Psychopathology* (2<sup>nd</sup>), (pp. 527-548).  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James\\_Cantor/publication/311734949\\_Sexual\\_disorders/links/5665b5d308ae418a786f2195.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James_Cantor/publication/311734949_Sexual_disorders/links/5665b5d308ae418a786f2195.pdf)
- Chan, H.-C., & Heide, K. M. (2016). Sexual homicide: A synthesis of the literature. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 10(1), 31-54. doi:10.1177/1524838008326478
- De River, J. P. (1958). *Crime and the sexual psychopath*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- DSM - American Psychiatric Association, D. S. M. T. F., & American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5* (Vol. 5, No. 5). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Fedoroff, P. (2008). Sadism, sadomasochism, sex, and violence. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 53(10), 637-646. doi.org/10.1177/070674370805301003.
- Gardner, R. M. (2005). *Practical crime scene processing and investigation*. CRC Press.

- Geberth, V. J. (1996). *Practical homicide investigation: Tactics, procedures, and forensic techniques* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). CRC Press. ISBN: 0-8493-8156-8.
- Griffiths, M. D. (2017, April 20). Sex, footwear, fashion, and fantasy. *Psychology Today*.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/in-excess/201704/sex-footwear-fashion-and-fantasy/>
- Hickey, E. W. (2006). *Sex crimes and paraphilia*. Pearson Education.
- Kafka, M. (2009). The DSM diagnostic criteria for fetishism. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39(2), 357-362. doi:10. 1007/s10508-009-9558-7
- Keefe, M., Mangrum, A., Mast, K., McGinn, H., Miller, R., Pouchot, K. Newsome, N., & Tanner, V. (n.d.). *Jerome Brudos*. Department of Psychology, Radford University.  
<http://maamodt.asp.radford.edu/Psyc%20405/serial%20killers/Brudos,%20Jerome.htm>
- Kippen, C. 2002. *The history of footwear: Foot fetish and shoe retifism*.  
Curtin University of Technology, Department of Podiatry. <http://podiatry.curtin.edu.au/fetish.html#naughty>
- Nagler, S. H. (1957). Fetishism: A review and a case study. *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, 31(1-4), 713-741.
- Rossi, W. A. (1976). *The sex life of the foot and shoe*. Krieger Publishing.
- Sancaktar, A. (2006). An analysis of shoe within the context of social history and fashion (Doctoral dissertation), 1-101. <http://library.iyte.edu.tr/tezler/master/endustriurunleritasarimi/T000364.pdf>
- Schlesinger, L. B., & Revitch, E. (1999). Sexual burglaries and sexual homicide: Clinical, forensic, and investigative considerations. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 27(2), 227-238. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4558/accdeeb60f1666a1ec56de4bfc637a1b1941.pdf>
- Scorolli, C., Ghirlanda, S., Enquist, M., Zattoni, S., & Jannini, E. A. (2007). Relative prevalence of different fetishes. *International Journal of Impotence Research*, 19(4), 432-437. doi:10. 1038/sj.ijir.3901547
- Taktak, S., Karakus, M., Kaplan, A., & Eke, S. M. (2015). Shoe fetishism and kleptomania comorbidity: A case report. *European Journal of Pharmaceutical and Medical Research*, 2(2), 14-19.
- The history and evolution of shoes. (2018, March 5). <https://www.dolitashoes.com/blogs/news/the-history-and-evolution-of-shoes>
- Tourre-Malen, C. (2011). *Shoes, heels, and women*. *Anthologie Francaise*, 4(41), 727-739. doi:10: 3917/ethn.114.0727

---

*Vivian E. Shubert is an assistant homicide researcher at the Center for Homicide Research. She received her master's degree from Tiffin University in Ohio with majors in criminal justice and criminal behavior.*

*Dallas S. Drake is Senior Researcher at the Center for Homicide Research. He is a member of the American Society of Criminology and the International Homicide Investigator's Association. He can be reached at [dallas.drake@homicidecenter.org](mailto:dallas.drake@homicidecenter.org).*



**CENTER for HOMICIDE RESEARCH**

P.O. Box 6542  
Minneapolis, MN 55406  
(612) 751-9374  
[www.homicidecenter.org](http://www.homicidecenter.org)