

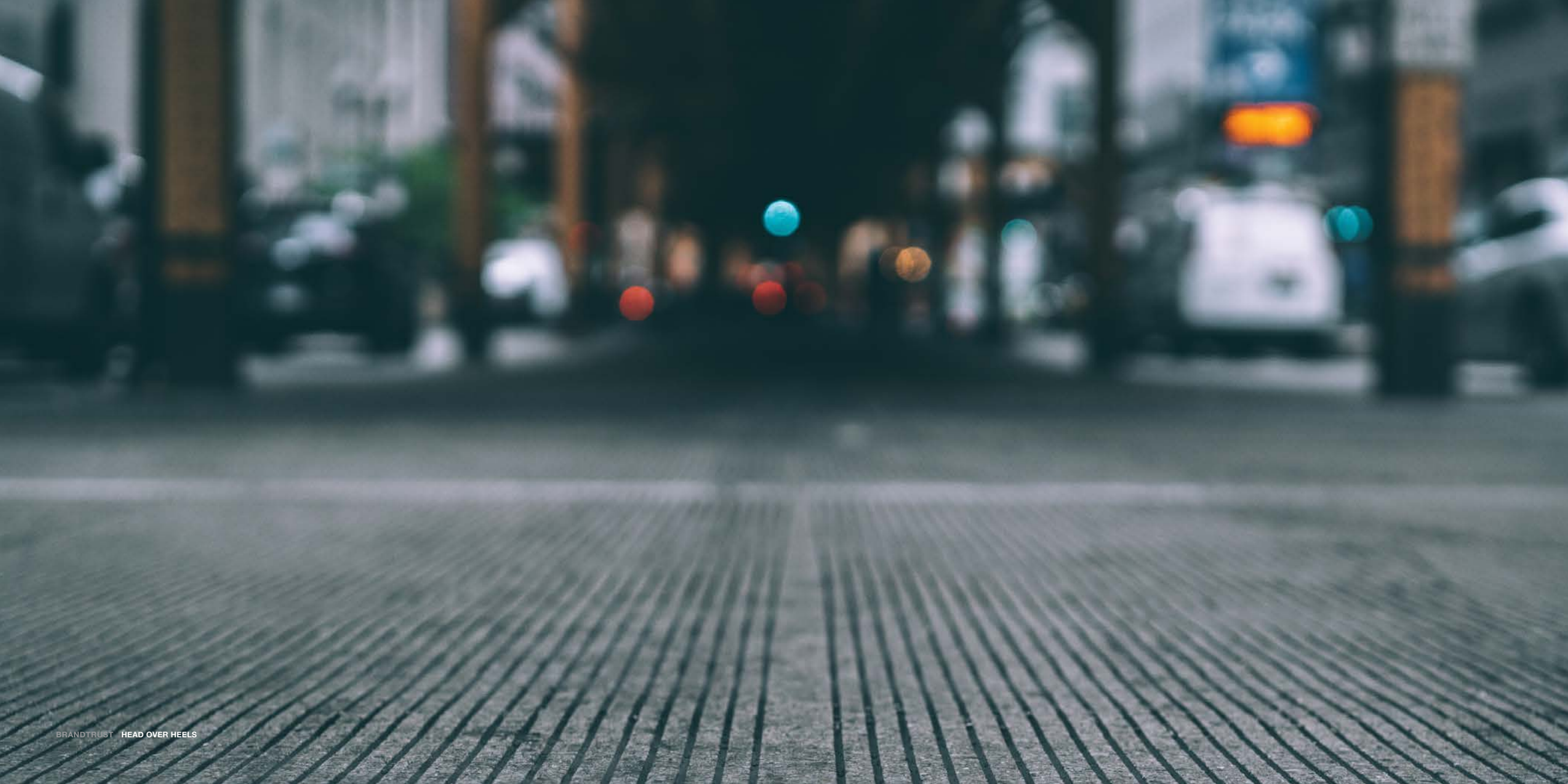
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A black and white photograph of a person's legs from the knees down, wearing dark tights and high-heeled shoes. The person is walking on a crosswalk with white stripes on a dark asphalt surface. The image is slightly blurred, suggesting motion.

Head Over Heels A Brandtrust Inquiry

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Heels represent hope.

Women hope for reconstruction of past triumphs, hope for their futures, and hope for confirmation of fantasies about themselves.

High-heel shoes have the power to make the women who wear them into the women they seek to be.



Why wear high heels?

As functional shoes, high heels make little rational sense. They are difficult to walk in. Their designs are so elaborate they take extra time to put on. They often cause a great deal of pain, and can even cause deformity to a woman's foot. There is nothing easy about high heels.

Yet many women keep closets full of high heels, with collections that include a wide range of colors and subtle differences in design. Their high heels are powerful because of the powerful images they create; how well they actually function as shoes is regarded as relatively unimportant.

Even the most straitlaced women are capable of speaking passionately about their high heels. Although it may not make sense to others, women who own many pairs feel that having a variety of high heels at their disposal is a natural part of being a woman. Without those shoes, they would feel out of place and ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of life.

High heel shoes are like few other objects in life in the way they produce such strong feelings of emotional connection. But why do women wear high heels?





The power of ritual costume.

High-heel shoes form the foundation of special costumes women wear to present themselves out in public. High heels complete a woman's costume in the same way a keystone completes an arch. The shoes would be nothing without the rest of the outfit, and the rest of the outfit would fall apart without being anchored by the shoes.

Heels help women assume roles that would otherwise feel unnatural. These costumes allow women to appear to be someone other than who they are in their day-to-day lives.

Heels provide the transformative power to help women be who they seek to be. The ritual character of the costume created by high heels is reminiscent of the nature of other ritual costumes from around the world. The Hopis of the American Southwest, for example, have elaborate ritual costumes they create for sacred dances. The people who put on the costumes are not merely supposed to be representing useful spirit beings; they are supposed to actually become those spirit beings through the act of putting on their ritual costumes.

In a similar way, high heels themselves are believed to have transformative powers to make the women who wear them into the women they seek to be.



Towering childhood emblems.

High-heel shoes become important to girls not at the point in their lives when they first start aspiring to womanhood, but when womanhood is still far beyond their reach. At this time, shoes become emblematic of aspiration and remain emblematic of aspiration for their whole lives.

Daughters start acclimating themselves to the idea of wearing high heels by trying on their mothers' high heels to see how well they would fit, and how they might appear later in their lives after they become women.

By trying on their mothers' shoes, they are trying on womanhood itself. Even if they do not like the style of their mothers' shoes, they can start to develop their own style by seeing themselves in that style of shoe in order to consider how they would choose differently.

Maternal high-heel shoes represent the form of womanhood a daughter has learned by watching her mother's example. Often, it is a model in which many women feel most secure.

For many women, their mothers' shoes always form the starting point from which the identity of womanhood is defined.





The call to transformation.

Although girls' passage forward into their social acceptance as women is guided by their mothers, neither the girls nor their mothers choose when the transformation will take place. Instead, specific events present themselves as opportunities of formal social acceptance.

These events serve as a call to transformation that both mothers and daughters recognize and are eager to heed.

The first formal transformative event for girls is the prom. Similarly, weddings present women with an opportunity to gain access to a higher social order of womanhood. Their own weddings are, of course, the most significant of their lives.

Prom is seen as the first adult event in a woman's life, but it isn't really an adult event at all. It is, rather, the final event of childhood fantasy; adults don't attend proms, after all, and a wedding is not representative of married life. Proms and weddings are ritual events that allow passage from one stage of life into another.

Events such as proms and weddings are female-centered occasions that women regard as opportunities to establish themselves in female society. Males are necessary accessories at these events, but the males are not the main focus of attention.

These are purposeful events designed by women for women.





The society of women.

Women believe their admittance into certain social circles is protected in a very real way by their ability to put together outfits that are completed by the right pair of shoes. They feel that other women are actually judging their suitability for the social roles that they aspire to, based solely on the appropriateness of their shoes.

When women change shoes, they change social roles. Shoes either give women the feeling that they have the power to judge other women, or they make women feel they are vulnerable to judgment by other women. Having the proper shoes is not enough in itself to gain entrance into the top circles of women's society, but without the proper shoes such acceptance is impossible.

Particular social rules about shoes, such as the acceptable height of heels, are arbitrary, but the rules are nonetheless socially essential to women, and therefore are accepted by them. Under these rules, women are able to evaluate with confidence which other women in their social spheres are capable of meeting standards and which women are not.

High heels are a medium for competition of women against women, in a social arena where criticism is a weapon as well as a defense.







Little acts of submission.

Fashion is an expression of social power that does not need a rationale. It's a form of social power that exists merely for the sake of social power itself. Women put on painful shoes because it is expected to be done. Putting on high-heel shoes is an act of submission to the larger society of women.

It is to be expected, therefore, that there should be some discomfort when high heels are worn. The pain of wearing high-heel shoes makes the act of submission to the society of women credible and meaningful. It is not an easy submission and so has more weight, allowing access to more social power. Wearing high heels is a ritual sacrifice of individual will. Through this ritual sacrifice, social power is gained through acceptance into the hierarchy of presentable women.

When selecting their high heels, women feel a conflict between trying to fit in and trying to stand out. Women want to feel appropriate but do not want to completely surrender their individuality. So women seek small ways to stand out, even as they satisfy other women's expectations.

Nonetheless, women worry that if they submit too much to the demands of their high-heel shoes, they could lose their individuality and become mere manifestations of the feminine ideal. In their minds, they ask themselves the question, *"Do I wear the shoe or does the shoe wear me?"*





A closet of possibilities.

There is no one shoe that can do everything for any woman. Women have many favorite shoes for different social tasks in life. Just so, women are not loyal to any one brand of shoe. Having many pairs of shoes helps women to feel they have flexible identities that will be powerful and respected no matter what social situations arise.

Women want to feel they weren't born with only a single identity. They do not want to feel stuck with who they are, with a static, one-size-fits-all identity. They want to be shapeshifters, exploiting the strengths of different identities when they are most convenient, and casting those identities back into the closet when they are no longer advantageous.

A closet full of shoes is like a shrine, showing who a woman is, who she has been, and who she may yet become. In these closet shrines, the most special shoes receive the most special attention: in special boxes, with special wrapping, in special places in the closet.

When a woman admires her collection of shoes, she is not really celebrating the shoes themselves, but rather is celebrating the woman the shoes will allow her to become.





Heels as fantasy.

High-heel shoes, because they are not ordinary shoes, give women the opportunity to step outside of their ordinary identities and become something extraordinary. The shoes also give women the feeling of permission to do extraordinary things. High-heel shoes are thus a symbol of freedom.

The ultimate freedom for women is the escape from mundane life. Even though they must commit themselves to the daily routine of ordinary living, they can feel they are capable of escaping it simply by owning impractical high heels.

Because of the early association between high heels and make-believe, high heels enable women to escape into a world of fantasy, where any kind of transformation is possible. The freedom that women seek is really neither in girlhood nor in womanhood, but exists in the transformation between the two states. Deep down, no matter how grown up women are, they still want to feel like a princess: young girls in the process of gaining the status of full womanhood.

The fantasy of that transformation is not something any woman can maintain, but women can evoke the feeling of fantasy by wearing high heels.



Reflection of the ideal self.

As much as women gain and lose weight, they feel confident that their shoe size will not change.

When women try on other kinds of clothes and find they don't fit, they hate themselves and their bodies. Trying on shoes does not provoke such self-loathing, however.

Because shoe size remains relatively constant, shoes do not remind women of their failure to maintain their ideal weight. So high heels become particularly attractive to women, not just to shop for but also to own.

Even as years pass by, women can put on pairs of shoes they bought years earlier and feel as young and beautiful as they did when they first went shopping for them.

High heels represent the eternal, ideal, true self that does not fluctuate even with significant body changes, such as weight gain. High heels are also appealing to women because they can be seen and evaluated without a mirror. Thus, women do not have to look at the rest of their bodies in order to admire their high heels.

Women can always see their own shoes, regardless of their weight, and so high heels can promote a constant image of self-worth wherever they go.



Shopping as rebirth.

The act of buying a pair of shoes enables women to acquire a feeling of new possibility for their future. When women feel stuck in a rut, they can buy a new pair of high heels to protect the fantasy that they will still be able, sometime, to recapture the magical core of their womanhood.

Buying a new pair of shoes, simply because they are new, represents an act of self-rejuvenation. As long as women give themselves permission to go out and get more new shoes, it feels as if they have a closet filled with an infinite number of shoes, and thus an infinite number of possibilities for who they can become.

Women sense they could never perform an act of self-transformation with an old shoe. An old shoe, after all, represents the old self that is to be left behind. So a new shoe is like a new skin that enables the rebirth of the self in a new form, in a way that an old shoe, no matter how well maintained, could never do.

When shopping for outfits, women are drawn to high heels in particular because shoes are easier to buy on impulse. It is relatively easy for women to choose the right size of shoe, in comparison to other kinds of clothing.

Thus, high heels are a quick fix for women who feel trapped in their everyday social identities, enabling them to regain hope for their lives without hassle and without delay.





The soul of heels

So why do women wear high heel shoes?

High-heel shoes are believed to have transformative powers to make the women who wear them into the women they seek to be.

Each pair of shoes represents hope.

Women hope for reconstruction of past social triumphs, hope for desired events in their futures, and hope for the confirmation of their fantasies about themselves. High heels are images of who women have been, who women believe they are, and who women want to become.

And for high heels to retain their power, they mustn't be worn casually. High heels are fantasy shoes, and to constantly wear them would be to constantly live in the world of fantasy. For high heels to retain the power required to catalyze an entry into the realm of fantasy, they must not be worn for the accomplishment of everyday tasks. If they were to be used in such a casual and frequent manner, they would lose their magic and become mundane, powerless to do anything more than protect the foot from physical harm.

With a closet full of possibilities, a woman's fantasies can be worn at will or kept in reserve for possible future times of need. High-heel shoes represent hope.



“A shoe is a metaphor.
It’s better to have more
shoes because no one
pair of shoes can fit many
occasions.... There are
many different roles and
I wear many hats ... so
I wear lots of different
kinds of shoes.”

–high-heel shoe zealot





