

***Rebellious Self-Expression? A Social History of Dr
Martens.***

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Abstract

Dr Martens is a footwear brand with a rich and unique history, which is selectively utilised in its marketing campaigns to build a brand image focussed on ‘rebellious self expression’. While certain positive historical associations of the boot—such as its connections to queer, feminist, and alternative subcultures—have emerged organically, these narratives have been strategically capitalised upon by the brand. This has been achieved through a sustained heritage-focused marketing campaign, complementary to a twenty-first century international neoliberal fashion market, that selectively highlights desirable aspects of its twentieth-century history, while obscuring contradictory and negative histories that occurred simultaneously to those commodified.

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Introduction

Dr Martens boots have been included in the uniform of upholders of the establishment, the left-wing and right-wing anti-establishments. This paper will question why, and how, this tripartite identity of Dr Martens existed simultaneously. Although these groups are ostensibly diametrically opposed, their choice to wear Dr Martens are all linked to a conscious or subconscious desire to communicate a working-class identity.¹ This paper will utilise a ten-question survey completed by 225 individuals- 63.4%, 28.6% and 8.0% of whom identified as female, male and other respectively. 19.2% were 18 or under, 41.5% 19-24, 17.9% 25-34, 7.6% 35-44, and 13.8% 45-65. 11 respondents had worked for Dr Martens, including at the Glasgow, Liverpool, Cambridge, Wollaston and Portland warehouse branches. The survey was circulated around students and staff at the University of Cambridge, Dr Martens stores and social media.

Literature Review

The positive and negative subcultural history of the boot is employed and discussed in more depth than that of the work and police boot within literature. However, as a material item in museums and collections, a more balanced view of Dr Martens rich history exists. This paper will demonstrate that the pair of yellow strait-laced Dr Martens displayed in a ‘Deconstructing Fashion’ exhibit of a punk ‘anti-establishment’ outfit in the Victoria & Albert Museum complements the embroidered Royal Mail Derby Style Dr Martens in the Postal Museum Uniform Exhibition.² This paper will explain and reconcile the coexistence of Dr Martens symbolising the oppressive nature of the police in Mona Hatoum’s ‘Performance Still’, and the same Dr Martens that represent female and queer emancipation in the ‘Women’s Health Handbook’ and in a TimeOut article on the 1972 London Gay Pride Week.³

¹ Kim France., ‘Dr Martens, Again’, in New York Times Archives, (New York Times, 6 October 1992), <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1992/12/06/219892.html?pageNumber=501>, p. 501.

² The Victoria and Albert Museum, Deconstructing Fashion 1975-1985, ‘Boots Dr Martens’, T.102:1,2-1994., ‘Anarchy in the UK Lithographic Print’, S.951-1990.; The Postal Museum, Uniform, Ladies Dr martens Derby Style Shoes, 2022-0142.

³ Tate Britain, Modern and Contemporary British Art: No Such Thing as Society: 1980-1990, Mona Hatoum, ‘Performance Still 1985-95’.; Time Out No. 335, August 20-26 1976, p. 15.; Time Out Digital Archive, ‘Special Edition: 1968-2022’, Time Out, ed. James manning, July 2022, https://digitalarchive.timeout.com/Europe/UK/London/2022/July/TO_London_2632/DVL/reader.html, p. 54-55.

In the historiography of post-war youth subcultures, Dr Martens often appear superficially and as a descriptor of subcultural capital. This is demonstrated throughout John Robb's *The Art of Darkness*, as Dr Martens are mentioned as a superficial indicator of alternative association.⁴ This can be examined further through archival punk fanzines and music magazines, such as *The Face*, *Acrylic Daze* and *New Musical Express*, where Dr Martens appear on the feet of bands such as *The Clash*, *The Who* and *Madness*.⁵ This is indicative of a wider factor in the social history of Dr Martens; despite each of these bands integrating into a slightly different subculture (largely punk, mod and ska respectively), the common adoption of Dr Martens indicates a commonality in heritage between post-war British subcultures.

Arthur Crucq comprehensively narrates the idiosyncrasies of the history of Dr Martens in his article on 'Double Class'. From the introduction of the work boot in 1960, through its skinhead appropriation, to the current commodification of subcultural histories, Crucq insightfully questions the authenticity of Dr Martens' deliberate application of more positive aspects of its historical circumstances.⁶ Crucq's article builds upon the work of Cath Davies, who analysed the success of the 'heritage claims of ownerships of subcultural discourses' present in the 2011/12 Dr Martens marketing campaign.⁷ However, the purpose of her study was not to consider whether the commodification of certain aspects of the brand's history negatively affected the emphasis of the brand of rebellion and authenticity, instead analysing the market success of this strategy.⁸ Aspects of Davies' methodology will be utilised by comparing and contrasting Dr Martens' social history and marketing campaigns, which emphasises and obscures distinct aspects of its history. Although Dr Martens claim the boot is intrinsically linked to rebellious and punk ideals, associations of the boot held by different demographics as outlined by quantitative data gathered from a primary questionnaire provides an insight into Dr Martens marketing history.

⁴ John Robb, *Art of Darkness: the History of Goth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), p. 181, 409.

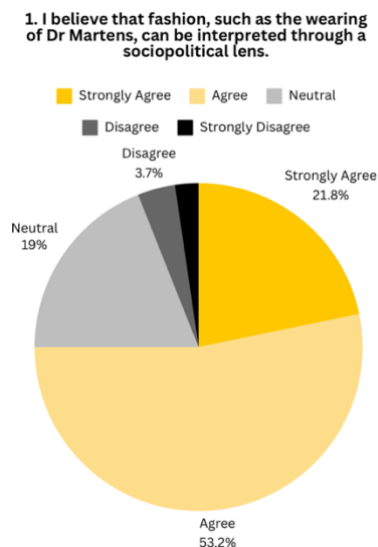
⁵ Manchester Pop Archive, 'NME' 2 June 1979, p. 62; *Ibid*, p. 39; 'The Face', ed. Nick Logan, May 1980, p. 23.;

⁶ Crucq, Arthur., 'Double Class. On the Popularization of Dr Martens', in *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 31, (Widok: Foundation for Visual Culture, 2021), p. 20.

⁷ Cath Davies., 'Smells like Teen Spirit: Channelling Subcultural Traditions in Contemporary Dr Martens Branding', in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), (New York: Sage Publications, 2016), p. 205.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 202.

Airwair Limited themselves have published three books on the history of Dr Martens authored by Martin Roach, in 1999, 2003 and 2015. The books are definitively situated within the Dr Martens marketing strategy, as the title of the 2015 publication, ‘A History of Rebellious Self Expression’ includes Dr Martens mission statement.⁹ Moreover, passages from these books are used on the Dr Martens website.¹⁰ Interestingly, this publication is no longer available to buy from the website. This comes after the company pledged to focus on product than branding to increase revenue in 2024.¹¹ Nevertheless, Roach’s trilogy constitutes the most comprehensive account of the history of Dr Martens, including oral testimonies from Dr Klaus Maertens, Pete Townshend of ‘The Who’ and socialist MP Tony Benn.¹² Thus, when these extremely useful books are discussed in this paper, it is with the consideration that there was corporate regulation and influence during the employment of the historical narrative. This concept is articulated by Cyril Ehrlich, who noted that often such works of institutional history can be ‘occasioned by... a desire for publicity and can fall into the category of ‘vanity publishing’’.¹³



[Figure One] 2024 Questionnaire.

⁹ Annual Report, Dr Martens PLC, 2023,

https://www.drmartensplc.com/application/files/8316/8624/2435/Dr_Martens_plc_Annual_Report_2023.pdf

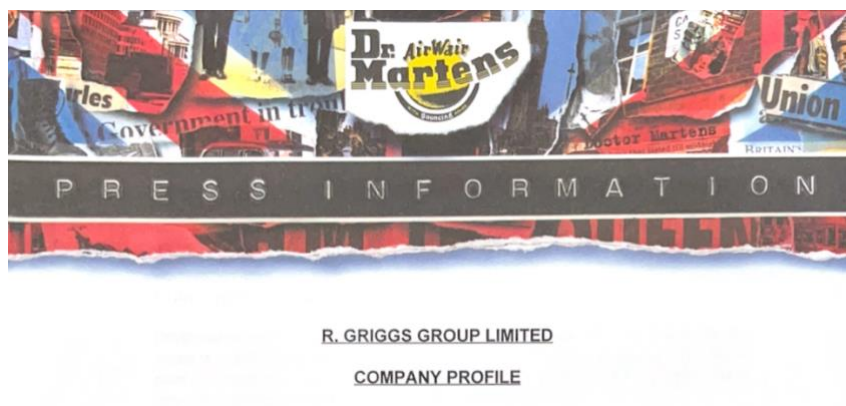
¹⁰ The History of Dr Martens, Dr Martens, <https://www.drmartens.com/us/en/history>; Martin Roach., Dr Martens (Northamptonshire: AirWair, 1999), p. 3.

¹¹ Dr Martens Rebellious Book, Dr Martens Website https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/dr-martens-rebellious-book-black/p/AC511001

¹² Martin Roach., Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 5, 19.; Martin Roach., Dr Martens (Northamptonshire: AirWair, 1999), p. 4.

¹³ Cyril Ehrlich, Harmonious Alliance: A history of The Performing Right Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. vii.

This paper will analyse the history of Dr Martens within the theoretical framework of sociopolitical interpretations of fashion. In her monograph *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson highlighted that dress represents a tangible manifestation of intangible social change.¹⁴ Eleanor Margolies argues that, as a barrier and interface between the body and the outside world, footwear allows observers to ‘step into the shoes’ of the wearer to allow a richer understanding of different social identities.¹⁵ Dr Martens, with their rich history, have uniquely complicated connotations within feminist, racist, LGBTQ+, anarchist, and working-class movements, and act as an effective form of subcultural communication.¹⁶ Within a primary questionnaire, only 6.0% disagreed that fashion and the wearing of Dr Martens can be interpreted through a sociopolitical lens. Therefore, the data displayed in figure one represents a data set of 75.0% responses in alignment with sociopolitical fashion theory.



[Figure Two] 1997 press information sent to Victoria & Albert Museum.¹⁷

Subcultural theory, pioneered by influential sociologists from the mid- 1960s at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), is a framework closely intertwined with fashion analysis. Dr Martens are a piece of subcultural capital, as described by David Muggleton in *Inside Subculture*, within a multitude of social groups, rather than an identifier of singular subcultural loyalty.¹⁸ This is precisely

¹⁴ Elizabeth Wilson., *Adorned in Dreams* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1985), p. 8.

¹⁵ Eleanor Margolies., ‘Were Those Boots Made Just for Walking? Shoes as Performing Objects in Everyday Life and in the Theatre’, *Visual Communication* 2(2) (2003), p. 171.

¹⁶ ‘What’s Up, Doc? The enduring appeal of Dr Martens’, (BBC, 25.10.18), accessed 24.06.24, [available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-45952572#:~:text=The%20enduring%20appeal%20of%20Dr%20Martens,-Published&text=From%20school%20shoes%20to%20work.become%20part%20of%20British%20culture>].

¹⁷ The Victoria and Albert Archives, *Young V&A*, ‘1997 Press Release from Dr Martens to Museum of Childhood’, MOC/MACL/67.

¹⁸ David Muggleton., *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p. 64.

why the history of Dr Martens is so idiosyncratic; Dr Martens legitimately coexisted as a marker of anti-establishment subcultural social manifestations, working class practicality, skinhead violence, police power and high fashion desirability. This paper will analyse these intertwined histories and the significance of their commodification, or lack of, in current marketing initiatives, measuring Dr Martens against its assertions of ‘rebellious self expression’. Dr Martens soon engaged in the anti-establishment narrative of their wearers. This is demonstrated by figure two, a press release from Dr Martens, which included a banner with the Union Jack colours and newspaper clippings of the phrase ‘government in trouble’, and a front cover including the phrases ‘Bloody Sunday’, ‘trouble’, and ‘winter of discontent’.¹⁹ This shows that Dr Martens have integrated politics into their company profile and identity, and can hence be understood through a political lens.

The early years of the workman’s boot

The first Dr Martens boot (the 1460) was manufactured in 1960 by the Wollaston family business R. Griggs & Co, established in 1901, following their acquisition of the patent for the ‘Dr Martens Luftpolster-Sohle’. The sole was designed and manufactured in 1945 by German manufacturers Dr Klaus Maertens and Herbert Funck to provide orthopaedic benefit to Maertens’ broken foot.²⁰ From the Griggs family’s strong reputation manufacturing army Bulldog boots for the English army in both world wars, to the first shoe cobbled by Maertens using looted leather, needles and threads following the end of World War Two, the 1460 is an amalgamation of working-class determination.²¹ Dr Martens were a comfortable and sturdy shoe, advertised to the working man in *Shoe & Leather News* as ‘revolutionary... air-cushioned soles put an end to this foot-breaking torture’.²²

¹⁹ The Victoria and Albert Archives, *Young V&A*, ‘1997 Press Release from Dr Martens to Museum of Childhood’, Press Release Packet, MOC/MACL/67.

²⁰ Martin Roach., *Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression* (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 8-9.

²² ‘60 Years of the Subcultural Staple’, *END*, 28 July 2020, <https://www.endclothing.com/gb/features/60-years-of-the-1460-a-subcultural-staple#>.

Skinhead adoption



[Figure Three] Youths checked by police in London 1970.²³

76.8% of respondents agreed with Roach's assertion that 'the Dr Martens Boot had become a fierce symbol of self expression at the very heart of British youth culture (by 1970)', but what exactly did this fierce symbol represent?²⁴ How did Dr Martens enter the 1960s as solely a 'working man's... comfortable boot', and exit the decade as 'the boots to have for any aspiring young skinhead'?²⁵ The first subculture to adopt the boots, skinheads, which 'in the national horror league... weigh in somewhere between serial killers and devil dogs', did so due to the boots' working-class connotations and uniform appearance, which reinforced a powerful 'gang mentality'.²⁶ British Movement skins, who were criticised by Ian Curtis of Joy Division for being 'kids who go P*ki bashing down the Eastend', and football hooligans utilised Dr Martens boots as weapons in violent assaults.²⁷ They were soon banned by the football police for being an 'offensive weapon' and confiscated, displayed in figure three.²⁸ This association led a writer in Sounds to complain that 'racism... has gone from a few Adolf fans polishing their boots to a nationwide hobby'.²⁹ Although the boots described were not solely Dr Martens, an association with neo-Nazis and Dr Martens certainly existed by the 1970s. Dr Martens have

²³ Getty Photos, 'Youths Checked by Police in London 1970', photograph by David Nash, 4 April 1970, <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/skinheads-clash-in-farringdon-road-london-twenty-to-thirty-news-photo/962215484>.

²⁴ The History of Dr Martens, Dr Martens, <https://www.drmartens.com/us/en/history>.

²⁵ Martin Roach., *Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression* (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 22.

²⁶ George Marshall, *Spirit of '69: A Skinhead Bible*, (London: S. T. Publishing, 1994), p. 78

²⁷ Manchester Pop Archive, 'Mixed Punk Fanzines', *Acrylic Daze* No. 1. ed. Andy M, p. 6.

²⁸ The Northern Avenger, 'Made to Intimidate: Before Dr. Martens Ruled', *Creases like Knives*, 27 March 2017, <https://creaseslikeknives.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/made-to-intimidate-before-dr-martens/>.

²⁹ Manchester Pop Archive, *Sounds*, 6 November 1976, p. 78.

distanced their brand from negative subcultural associations, with a F25-34 employee in the Wollaston factory, testifying that she thinks Dr Martens are ‘honest about their history but understandably don’t want to bring attention to the negative aspects of skinhead culture, as the brand has always been for everyone.’



[Figure Four] - Roddy Moreno, Member Of The Late 1970S Oi! Movement Post Punk Band The Oppressed.³⁰

However, it is important to note that the skinhead subculture was not homogenous, and anti-Nazi groups such as ‘Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice’ also used Dr Martens as a symbol. The SHARP banner displayed in figure four states ‘fight fascism’ and includes the image of the boot stomping on a Nazi swastika. Nevertheless, by reclaiming the boots, the anti-Nazi skinhead movement displays an acknowledgement of Dr Martens’ history as a weapon associated with violence and prejudice.

Punk proliferation

Following the adoption of the boots by skinheads, Dr Martens became significant markers of subcultural capital in resultant postwar subcultures. The continuity of Dr Martens through skinhead, punk, 2-Tone,

³⁰ Roddy Moreno, Member Of The Late 1970S Oi! Movement Post Punk Band The Oppressed, Mirrorpix, 23 April 1989, <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/roddy-moreno-member-of-the-late-1970s-oi-movement-post-punk-news-photo/2155363987> .

Oi!, goth, psychobilly, grunge, and indie subcultures demonstrates the interconnectedness and common heritage of postwar subcultures. Notably appearing on the feet of Pete Townshend, who noted ‘with my new “Air Soles” I literally started to fly’, Dr Martens were soon adopted by punk bands such as The Clash.³¹ Dr Martens were particularly significant within the punk subculture directly due to their prevalence as work boots as, although punk fashion was localised in London shops, Dr Martens were available in second hand markets nationwide.³²



[Figure five] The Clash on cover of Sounds.³³

Dr Martens, unlike Pug Shoes and Jam Shoes, did not advertise in the advertisement section of Time Out, Sounds or New Musical Express.³⁴ Instead, Dr Martens were featured in these publications on the feet of revered bands- including the a feature on Madness in a 1980 edition of The Face, a 1979 title feature of NME stating, ‘An Old Doc Marten Won’t Let You Down’ and the front cover of Sounds featuring The Clash wearing Dr Martens (figure five).³⁵ This demonstrates that Dr Martens were organically adopted by music subcultures, rather than being advertised to them directly. With punk fanzines complaining of ‘people getting bored with the commercialised plastic existence that we’re all forced to live in’, Dr Martens interpretation as an anti-fashion choice of footwear within these subcultures was important to its longevity within postwar subcultures.³⁶

³¹ Martin Roach., Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 5.

³² Tamara Abraham, ‘The Rise and Fall of Dr Martens- from punk rock boot to a bland school run staple’, The Telegraph, 1 December 2023. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/brands/doc-martens-punk-rock-boot-mainstream-classic/>.

³³ Sounds, 29 October 1977.

³⁴ New Musical Express, 10 March 1979, p. 52.

³⁵ Manchester Pop Archive, ‘Mixed Punk Fanzines’, The Face No. 1, May 1980, ed. Nick Logan, p. 23; New Musical Express, 15 September 1979.

³⁶ Manchester Pop Archive, ‘Mixed Punk Fanzines’, Glast Up Issue 2, May-June 1977, p. 11.

Goth, feminism and queerness



[Figure six] Dr Martens' 'Tough As You' campaign with Viv Albertine.³⁷

Viv Albertine of The Slits wore Dr Martens as a part of her style that was deliberately 'all in your face, fuck off you hypocrites'.³⁸ In the 1980s, goths adopted the utilitarian and aesthetically unisex boot which allowed women comfort in a rejection of the idea that 'beauty is pain'. The adoption of a masculine boot was not a rejection of their sexuality- on the contrary. Women had the freedom to chose to convey their sexuality in unconventional and comfortable fashions- Albertine stated that her style meant that 'men didn't know whether to fuck us or kill us'.³⁹ Goths also wore Dr Martens to explore and convey their sapphic sexuality, with purple laces traditionally representing lesbianism in lace code.⁴⁰ In this way, Docs served as a method of communication within subcultures as a rejection of heteronormativity through fashion. Dr Martens have gleefully adopted this association and have recently collaborated with non-binary artist Wednesday Holmes to customise the classic 1460 with illustrations representing 'queer joy' for pride 2023.⁴¹

³⁷ Dr Martens Tough As You, Dr Martens, https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/tough-as-you.

³⁸ Viv Albertine, 'Viv Albertine on the 1970s: 'If we terrified men, that's a result'', The Guardian, 2 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/02/viv-albertine-the-slits-1970s-suffrage-if-we-terrified-men-thats-a-result> [accessed 25 July 2024].

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Em Kelsall, 'Skinheads and Socialism: The History of Doc Martens' Lace Codes', Her Campus, 17 March 2022, , <https://www.hercampus.com/school/psu/skinheads-and-socialism-the-history-of-doc-martens-lace-codes/>.

⁴¹ 1460 Wednesday Holmes For Pride Smooth Leather Boots, Dr Martens, https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/1460-wednesday-holmes-pride-smooth-leather-boots-white/p/31216009.

Today, Dr Martens is a public listed company with profits of £877.1 million in 2024. It is no longer solely owned by the Griggs family as it was sold in 2013 to private equity firm Permira.⁴² Although this may be the reality of operating a successful multinational corporation in the twenty-first century, Dr Martens claim of innate rebellion against the ‘system’ has been questioned by M45-65, who stated ‘I think the present company... is more concerned with profits... even though it likes to tout that history as something important to them’, with another F19-24 respondent who strongly disagrees that Dr Martens is transparent with its history testifying she would rather buy from ‘Solovair (the original makers of AirWair)...which are more sustainable... than Dr Martens’. This criticism fits into a wider debate regarding ‘performative corporate allyship’ and ‘rainbow washing’ performed by many fashion brands.⁴³ However, the fact that and Dr Martens chose to incorporate and further these movements within their advertising and donations is testament to the acceptance of feminist, queer and punk ideals within a significant portion of consumers in the British footwear market. Dr Martens donated £1.9 million in financial year 2023 to five projects dedicated to women’s empowerment, LGBTQ+ rights, and anti-racism.⁴⁴ This is in line with M19-24’s testimony that ‘Dr Martens’ strong support of LGBTQ+ rights on their social media platforms shows not only transparency, but solidarity with their history’. Whether their dedication would be genuinely perceived as authentic if associations with these movements no longer generated profit, the fact remains that Dr Martens’ emphasis of their foothold in LGBTQ+ movements pushes for positive change within society.⁴⁵

⁴² Annual Report, Dr Martens, 2024, p. 6.; Daily Mail Historical Archive, ‘Dr Martens Is Sold’, 25 October 2013, p. 79.

⁴³ Miriam Barker, ‘LGBTQ+ Pride: Firms Accused of Rainbow Washing’, 27 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-62597165>.

⁴⁴ Annual Report, Dr Martens PLC, 2023 https://www.drmartensplc.com/application/files/8316/8624/2435/Dr_Martens_plc_Annual_Report_2023.pdf.

⁴⁵ Dr Martens UK Celebrates Pride, Dr Martens https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/for-pride.

The workboot



[Figure seven] Ladies' Dr Martens Derby Style Shoes c. 1995.⁴⁶



[Figure eight] Black elasticated shoes as issued to LUL staff circa 1995.⁴⁷

Dr Martens' identity as a working boot continued alongside its subcultural appropriation. Following Dr Martens' popularity with post officers, by 1995 Dr Martens were offered as part of the official uniform for delivery staff, shown by the manufactured shoes 'especially made for Royal Mail' in seven ten. M65+ stated 'as an ex-postman, Dr Martens were standard uniform as they protected your feet when walking for hours each day'. Dr Martens also held contracts with Transport for London and manufactured shoes embossed with the London Underground symbol, demonstrated in figure eight.

⁴⁶The Postal Museum, *Uniform*, 'Ladies Dr. Martens Derby Style Shoes', 2022-0142.

⁴⁷ London Transport Museum, *Pair of shoes; black elasticated shoes as issued to LUL staff circa 1995*, 2006/14620, <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/collections/collections-online/uniforms/item/2006-14620>.

Police officers also wore Dr Martens, with F45-65 stating that as ‘a retired police officer... footwear of choice was Dr Martens’. It is interesting that, despite many contemporaries asserting that police behaviour at riots ensured that they ‘can only see the police force as a rod of oppression’, groups that held these beliefs wore the same shoes as the police.⁴⁸ Yet, for these groups, Dr Martens communicated vastly different messages- one of rebellion, and one of order.

Customisation



[Figure nine] Anarchy customised boots.⁴⁹

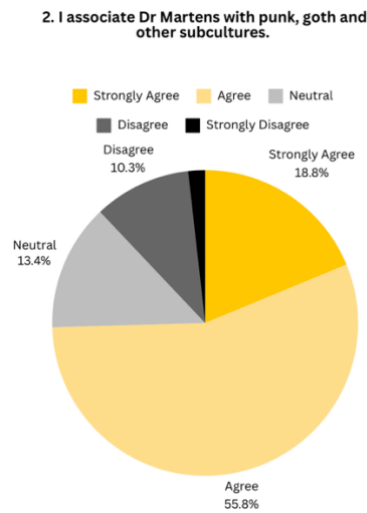
Customisation and expressions of individuality are significant indicators of Dr Martens’ material history. Dr Martens were often customised by coloured laces, artwork and corporate embossing. The customised black 1460 anarchist boots shown in figure eight and displayed in the Camden Dr Martens store communicate a richer visual understanding of the individual boot’s material history than an unaltered 1460. This demonstrates that Dr Martens are utilised to communicate different concepts or ideas, depending on their context, such as the outfit paired with them, their customisation or their display with other objects. For example, MP Tony Benn adopted black 1461 Dr Martens to communicate unity with the working classes.⁵⁰ By wearing the same shoes that the workers, whom he campaigned for and attended rallies with, he effectively communicated his solidarity to the movement.

⁴⁸ New Musical Express, 5 May 1979, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Dr Martens Camden Store, ‘Anarchy Customised Boots’.

⁵⁰ ‘What’s Up, Doc? The Enduring Appeal of Dr Martens’, BBC, 25 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-45952572>.

Impact of subcultural heterogeneity



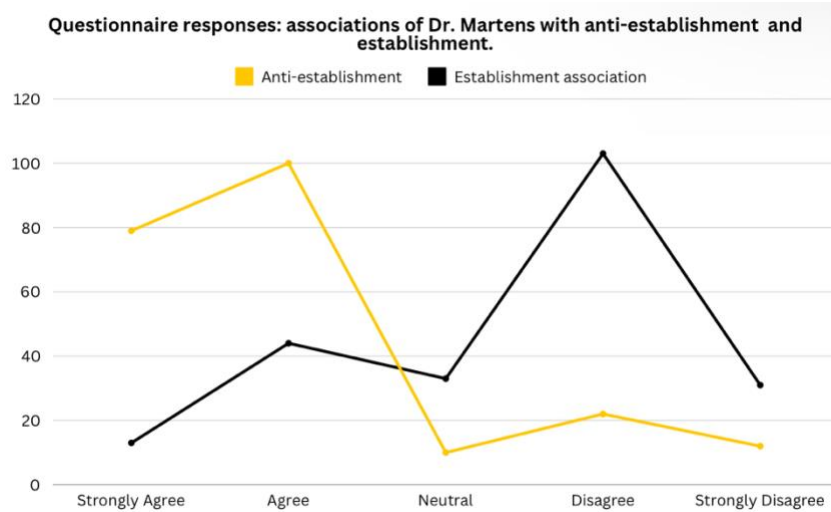
[Figure ten] 2024 Questionnaire.

The reason that Dr Martens have an ability to associate with, and obscure, various parts of their history is due to their proliferation in many social groups. Dr Martens have translated 20th century history into 21st century marketing techniques which, as Davies notes, ‘provides a representative framework that evoked connotations of longevity, authenticity and individuality’.⁵¹ This is shown in figure ten, with 74.6% associating Dr Martens with subcultures. By virtue of its synonymy with various subcultures and occupations, Dr Martens have effectively aligned themselves with a mix of positive and capitalisable aspects of a multitude of social groups- as ‘tough as’ the workers, as a representation of the positive outspokenness of the LGBTQ+community, and as a blank canvas allowing subcultural customisation linked to individuality.⁵² This widespread proliferation in certain social groups has also allowed Dr Martens to successfully distance themselves from their negative associations within their subcultural history, from their status as a weapon in football grounds, a prize possession by fascist skinheads, and as a representative of police brutality.

⁵¹ Cath Davies., ‘Smells like Teen Spirit: Channelling Subcultural Traditions in Contemporary Dr Martens Branding’, in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), (New York: Sage Publications, 2016), p. 201.

⁵² Dr Martens Tough As You, Dr Martens, https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/tough-as-you.

Working class identities



[Figure eleven] 2024 Questionnaire.



[Figure twelve] Police and youth in Southend 1979.⁵³

Although these three Docs-wearing groups appear diametrically opposed- left-wing and right-wing antiestablishment subcultures, and working adults whose occupations were interpreted by these anti-establishment movements as upholding the establishment, these groups are united by a common theme: working class pride. Dr Martens could legitimately exist as the uniform of the anti-establishment, which 80.2% of respondents were aware of, and the uniform of upholders of the establishment, which 59.8% of respondents were unaware of, for this reason. Although Dr Martens represent different themes to each group- self-expression, violence and protection- each group's adoption of Dr Martens

⁵³ Virginia Turbett, 'Mods (and Rockers) Southend 1979', (London: Café Royal Books, 2023).

communicates working-class pride. Joe Strummer of The Clash stated, 'Dr Martens go hand-in-hand with youth subcultures, maybe because of the working-class background of the band, and this fits in with the punk ethic'.⁵⁴ Therefore, although it may seem peculiar to see police wearing Dr Martens also clashing with punks wearing Dr Martens in figure twelve, both of these groups wore Dr Martens to emphasise their working-class roots. However, Dr Martens have increasingly distanced themselves from their association as a work-boot and their working-class history, as Dr Martens no longer manufacture work boots.⁵⁵ This is despite their praise by service-people, having traditionally been as a 'boot of choice' with police 'boot allowance'.⁵⁶ As a result, 58.9% of questionnaire respondents do not associate Dr Martens with a work boot or the police. More cynically, this may be because, as subcultural fashion has penetrated the mainstream, the 'alternative' fashion sector of the market has become larger and more profitable than the personal protective equipment market.

Changing target markets

In his corporate history, Roach claimed that Dr Martens were 'wrenched unwittingly' from the workplace by the skinheads.⁵⁷ This sentiment employed through Dr Martens' marketing is significant for two reasons: firstly, the boot found itself adopted by this youth subculture 'unknown to the company', reinforcing Dr Martens authenticity and organic place within British subcultures, and secondly, they were 'unwittingly' taken from their original target market, therefore distancing themselves from any illusions of deliberate association with violent skinhead subgroups.⁵⁸ This begs the question, to what extent does the physical object of a pair of Dr Martens carry history? Dr Martens claim that the violence is committed by the person who wears the boots, not the boots themselves, but simultaneously attest that the boots have an 'innate sense of anti-establishment' aligned with punk

⁵⁴ Martin Roach., *Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression* (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 63.

⁵⁵ Slip Resistant Originals, Dr Martens, https://www.drmartens.com/uk/en_gb/slip-resistant-footwear

⁵⁶ Dr Martens Launch New Service Collection, Fire Buyer, <https://firebuyer.com/dr-martens-launch-new-service-collection/>;

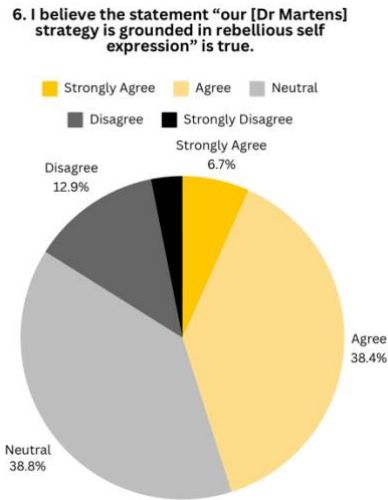
⁵⁷ Kavanagh, Simon, 'British Police Uniform Part 3 – Belts, Trousers, Skirts, Footwear', *Avon & Somerset Constabulary*, 9 July 2015, <http://avonsomersetpolice.blogspot.com/2015/07/uniform-part-3.html>.; The Postal Museum, Uniform, Ladies Dr Martens Derby Style Shoes, 2022-0142.

⁵⁸ Martin Roach., *Dr Martens: A History of Rebellious Self-Expression* (Northamptonshire: AirWair Ltd, 2015), p. 29.

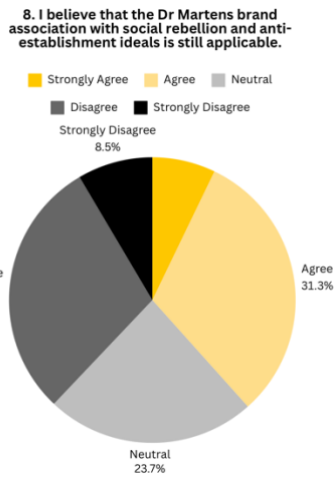
⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 42.

ideals, due to the ideals of the individuals who historically wore the boots.⁵⁹ What makes the boot innately absorb the ideals of some wearers, but not others?

Conclusion



[Figure thirteen] 2024 Questionnaire.



[Figure fourteen] 2024 Questionnaire.

Although 45.5% of respondents agree and 16.5% disagree that ‘Dr Martens strategy is grounded in rebellious self expression’, there is a difference of only 0.6% between figure thirteen and fourteen in respondents who believe Dr Martens’ brand association with social rebellion and anti-establishment ideals is still applicable. This demonstrates that although respondents tend to recognise that Dr Martens

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 67

utilise rebellious and self-expressing aspects of their history, a considerable proportion no longer believe that the emphasis on rebellion within their marketing strategies is genuinely applicable. This is in contrast to a 25.6% increase in belief that Dr Martens emphasis on rebellion is still applicable held by Dr Martens employees, suggesting an emphasis on anti-establishment history in the company's internal business culture.

Perhaps the complaint of Steve Cundall at the beginning of the punk movement, 'its like Rotten, he sings about Anarchy, but really he'd like a big, nice house in the country', is similarly applicable to the Dr Martens brand.⁶⁰ Ultimately, it was the working-class origins of the brand, and its incorporation into working class movements, both positive and negative, that played a vital role in its proliferation. Having established that there is an association between Dr Martens and the phrase 'rebellious self-expression', originally forged authentically following the adoption of the boot by the skinheads and subsequent subcultures, this genuine association is continued and altered, rather than completely manufactured, through Dr Martens marketing. Dr Martens have, understandably, distanced themselves from the more negative aspects of their 'bovver boot' history. Previously emphasising the original 1460 price of £2 (roughly £39, adjusting for inflation), and the large second-hand boot market by which they were adopted by subcultures, a pair of Dr Martens now cost £170; suggesting their entrance to high fashion and success within a neoliberal market while utilising and commoditising anti-establishment ideals.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Manchester Pop Archive, 'Mixed Punk Fanzines', Acrylic Daze No. 1. ed. Andy M, p. 5.

⁶¹ France, Kim., 'Dr Martens, Again', (The New York Times, 06.10.92), accessed 29.06.24, [available at <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1992/12/06/219892.html?pageNumber=501>], p. 501.

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