

SPORTS

Louis Vuitton x NBA: Good play or a step out of bounds?

February 12, 2020



Louis Vuitton is teaming up with the NBA. Image credit: Louis Vuitton

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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Luxury brands have long had an affiliation with sports, but it is largely been to elite sports such as golf, tennis, polo and other equestrian events, motor sports and sailing not so much rough-and-tumble team sports including football, soccer or basketball. Those team sports have largely been the province of Nike, Adidas, Under Armour and Puma, a brand that Gucci-owner Kering spun off in 2018 to focus exclusively on its luxury labels.

Now LVMH's Louis Vuitton, the world's **most valuable luxury brand**, is stepping onto the court in an unprecedented collaboration with the NBA.

Part of that agreement is keeping within Louis Vuitton's history and heritage: It will provide the display case for the Larry O'Brien Trophy awarded to the NBA's winning team, as it has done for yachting's America's Cup and the FIFA World Cup for soccer.

The other is a step outside its usual zone: a **capsule collection** of apparel and accessories designed by Virgil Abloh. This collaboration is breaking new ground for both the NBA and **Louis Vuitton**, which is its first with a North American sports league. The collection will be released this October.

"We have done other collaborations with other fashion houses before, but nothing at this level and at this scale," said **Mark Tatum, NBA deputy commissioner**. "We know from social media that our fans follow and are big fans of the Louis Vuitton brand. We know that they're going to be excited about this new partnership and collaboration."

In announcing the collaboration to **WWD**, Michael Burke, Louis Vuitton chairman/CEO, said, "Louis Vuitton has long been associated with the world's most coveted trophies, and with this iconic partnership the legacy continues victory does indeed travel in Louis Vuitton."

Darren Coleman, author of **Building Brand Experiences** and managing consultant at Wavelength Marketing with a Ph. D in brand marketing, agrees.

"Making travel trunks for such trophies harks back to the brand's heritage," Mr. Coleman said. "This carries wonderful undertones of victory and success.

"The idea of traveling with Louis Vuitton fits comfortably within the parameters of the brand," he said.

But the move into NBA-licensed fashion has him scratching his head. It feels a little too mass market and not exclusive enough.

"It could take the sheen of brand equity and exclusivity that have been built over decades with well-established customers," Mr. Coleman said. "This presents a very real brand challenge.

"It is a different ball game," he said. "The risks are far higher."

Authors J.N. Kapferer and V. Bastien in their seminal book, *The Luxury Strategy*, delineate those risks.

"Stretching has allowed luxury houses to grow more quickly, without being limited to organic internal growth or finding themselves prisoners of the regression of their original trade Herms and the disappearance of horse-drawn carriages," they write.

"In these luxury brand stretching strategies, it is necessary to separate what is brand stretching in luxury (Herms and silk), which is generally legitimate, and what is stretching beyond luxury, which is often very dangerous," they say.

In the case of Louis Vuitton, it is stretching into the urban streetwear and sports scene through this and other collaborations, such as Louis Vuitton x Supreme and, more recently, Louis Vuitton x League of Legends Collection partnership with Riot Games.

"League of Legends has huge global appeal and is particularly popular in strategically important markets for Louis Vuitton like mainland China and South Korea," Mr. Coleman said.

The marketing success of these collaborations is without question.

Both previously released capsule collections sold out online in record time, but an unknown number of those pieces were **scooped up by speculators** looking to make a profit on the secondary market.

"These collaborations are primarily about driving scale and increasing mainstream awareness," Mr. Coleman said.

But that is where the danger to the esteemed Louis Vuitton brand lies.

Messrs. Kapferer and Bastien warn luxury brands that diversifications beyond their core ranges, such as Louis Vuitton moving outside leather goods and into popular fashion, threatens the brand's legitimacy.

"Outside this territory, the brand becomes a premium' brand, and profitability falls," they write.

Specific to Louis Vuitton, they add, "The rigor and seriousness of leather goods have nothing in common with the show-off' side of fashion."

As much as luxury marketers such as Louis Vuitton must remain culturally relevant, and streetwear and team sports including the NBA are important cultural touch points for the younger generation that Louis Vuitton and other legacy luxury brands must cultivate, this collaboration might be stretching the brand too far.

"Think about how it plays out in practical terms," Mr. Coleman said.

"An NBA in-store experience would probably be to pulsing rhythmic hip-hop," he said. "I can't see the traditional Louis Vuitton customers enjoying that."

The world of luxury is changing.

Without a doubt, we are going to see more of these unlikely pairings of heritage luxury brands with brands that reflect contemporary cultural movements.

For example, **Prada recently announced** a long-term partnership with Adidas and **Dior launched sneakers** with Nike and the Jordan Brand.

But as for Virgil Abloh, who is guiding menswear fashion at Louis Vuitton, he sees the streetwear fad burning itself out this year, according to a **December interview with Dazed**.

"I would definitely say it's gonna die," Mr. Abloh said. "Like, its time will be up. In my mind, how many more T-shirts can we own, how many more hoodies, how many sneakers?"

WHAT MR. ABLOH sees on the horizon is a return to vintage.

So maybe right now he and his team are deep in the Louis Vuitton archives looking for vintage inspiration that will bring Louis Vuitton back to its roots and its recent flirtation with popular culture will be short-lived.



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