

SPORTS

## Is the NBA a slam dunk for luxury marketers?

October 19, 2021



*Louis Vuitton is one of several LVMH brands with a closer relationship to the NBA or its players. Image credit: Louis Vuitton*

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Luxury has a longtime relationship with the sporting world, but in recent years the connection between luxury and the National Basketball Association has only grown closer.

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Although several luxury brands already had established relationships with NBA players, French fashion label Louis Vuitton's partnership with the league itself marked a turning point when it was announced in January 2020. As the 2021-2022 NBA season tips off on Oct. 19, the league's luxury credibility has only grown particularly within LVMH.

"The NBA is the world's most influential fashion and luxury brand showcase in the world," said James Denman, head of innovation and marketing at **Yard NYC**, New York.

"The NBA has taken great pains to cultivate a global fanbase over the last decade and that has paid off handsomely for both the league and the players," he said. "[The league is] blessed with a generation of bold, vivid players who have built their own brands in the wider culture, as well as smartly partnered with luxury brands."

Luxury tips off

The world's premier men's professional basketball league, the NBA is the third wealthiest professional sports league ahead of the English Premier League (EPL) and trailing the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB).

While ratings have stumbled amid the COVID-19 pandemic in line with overall industry trends the NBA remains highly influential and has one of the youngest and most diverse fanbases in sports.

According to a **Statista survey** from September 2021, more than half of consumers ages 18 and 44-years-old consider themselves to be NBA fans and about 30 percent of Gen Z and millennials are "avid" fans of the sport.



*WNBA champion for Mot & Chandon, the league's official Champagne. Image credit: Mot & Chandon*

"The NBA is easily consumable," said Wes Goldberg, a Miami-based [NBA writer](#).

"Young people consume the sport through highlights on their phones the NBA, unlike the NFL, does not strictly prohibit the use of highlights by third parties the very same place where they are getting ads for brands on their timelines," he said.

Outside of the U.S. where basketball trails football in terms of popularity the NBA's biggest market is China, where its business operations are worth more than \$5 billion. It is no coincidence that luxury brands which increasingly rely on Chinese affluent consumers are drawn to China's most popular sports league.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the league recently agreed to a deal with short video platform operator Kuaishou Technology as a content partner in China. This follows an extension of a livestreaming deal between the NBA and Tencent Holdings, further entrenching the sport with Chinese consumers.

The NBA also is set apart by its star power.

"Players don't wear helmets and there are only five on the court for a given team at a time, so they are more visible to people," Mr. Goldberg said. "Therefore, it's much easier [for players] to establish a brand, associate with products and companies and so on.

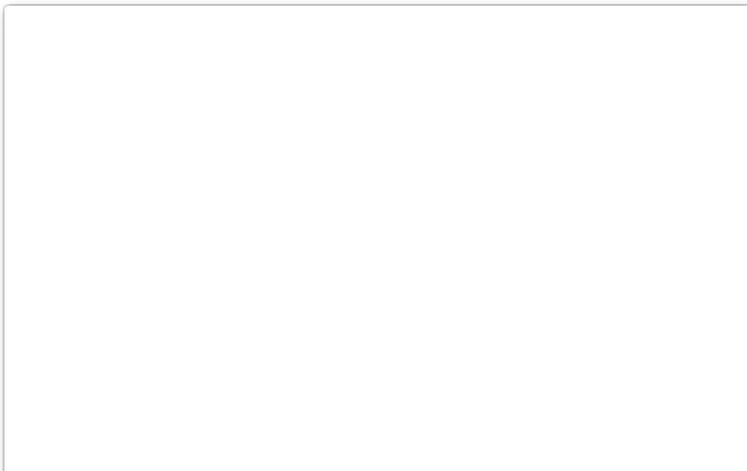
"Young people are increasingly considering themselves LeBron [James] fans' or Steph [Curry] fans' instead of Lakers fans' or Warriors fans,'" he said. "That loyalty only boosts these athletes' earning power, and the engagement of the brands associated with them."

LeBron James the NBA's most recognizable star and one of the most popular athletes in the world signed his first major endorsement deal as an 18-year-old in 2003: a \$93 million contract with Nike. His first luxury sponsorship came in spring 2011, when he signed with Swiss watchmaker Audemars Piguet.

*LeBron James has been an Audemars Piguet ambassador since 2011*

The four-time NBA champion was also part of another memorable moment for the NBA and luxury.

"The Cleveland Cavaliers 2018 NBA Finals partnership with Thom Browne was the definition of a game-changer," Mr. Denman said. "Having the entire team turn up in the full Thom Browne experience set a new bar for style and luxury within the NBA and changed the narrative around luxury and sport."



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Thom Browne (@thombrowne)

### *U.S. fashion label Thom Browne dressed the Cleveland Cavaliers during one NBA season*

In 2019, Mr. James who has more than 100 million followers on Instagram alone also began working with LVMH-owned German luggage label Rimowa. He most recently appeared in the brand's newest "Never Still" campaign alongside Patti Smith, Rihanna and Roger Federer ([see story](#)).

"It's no surprise to see LeBron in a campaign for Rimowa," Mr. Denman said. "He uses the product, embodies its spirit and there is no downside for either party."

In January 2020, LVMH's flagship fashion house announced a global, multiyear partnership with the NBA Louis Vuitton's first deal with a North American sports league. In addition to becoming the NBA's first official trophy travel case provider, Louis Vuitton's menswear artistic director Virgil Abloh will design an annual capsule collection ([see story](#)).

Louis Vuitton tapped Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander as the face of the first LV x NBA collection, released for spring/summer 2021 ([see story](#)).

Streetwear designer Don Crawley collaborated with Mr. Abloh for the pre-fall 2021 capsule collection. Limited-edition Louis Vuitton basketballs were produced by Wilson Sporting Goods, the NBA's official game ball supplier, and will be inaugurated this season.

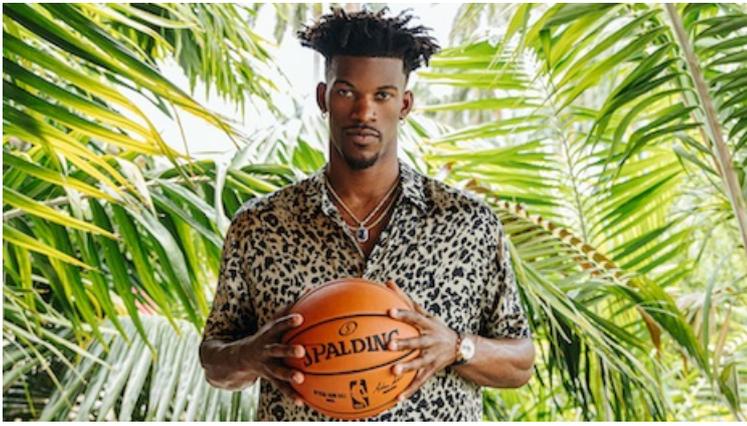
### *The second LV x NBA capsule was inspired by the 1990s*

LVMH's Cognac brand Hennessy established its own partnership with the NBA in February 2020, becoming the official spirit of the NBA as well as the Women's National Basketball Association, the G League development league and USA Basketball ([see story](#)). The agreement was expanded globally in early 2021, making Hennessy the league's first global spirits partner ([see story](#)).

Fellow LVMH house Mot & Chandon also became the official Champagne of the NBA. The brand launched its "Greatness Under Pressure" campaign during the 2021 NBA playoffs, featuring four-time WNBA champion Sue Bird and NBA All-Star and Olympic champion Carmelo Anthony ([see story](#)).

Following its acquisition of U.S. jeweler Tiffany & Co., the French luxury conglomerate accomplished a celebratory trifecta as Tiffany has crafted the NBA's championship trophy for more than four decades. 2021 marked the second year in a row that the Larry O'Brien Trophy was presented to the NBA Finals champions in a bespoke Louis Vuitton travel case ([see story](#)).

Like Rimowa, LVMH's Tag Heuer has formed a partnership with an individual NBA player. The Swiss watchmaker added Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler to its roster of athletic ambassadors in May 2021 ([see story](#)).



*Miami Heat player Jimmy Butler. Image credit: Tag Heuer*

Meanwhile, Swiss watchmaker Tissot became the NBA's first official timekeeper during the 2015-2016 season. Details of the multiyear partnership were not disclosed at the time.

"The league's move toward a luxury rebrand, while unprecedented, also makes a lot of sense culturally considering that luxury is trying to become a lot more accessible, driven away from elitism and tied into pop culture," said Eric Dahan, cofounder/CEO of influencer agency [Open Influence](#), Los Angeles.

"Streetwear, sneaker culture and athleisure have become very relevant in the luxury sector in recent years, and rising sales reflect that."

#### Stylish stars

Beyond LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton, more luxury brands are recognizing the influence of NBA stars.

"Brands want a player who has personality, an eye-catching sense of style and a unique persona," Mr. Dahan said.

"When looking to partner with an athlete, follow their social media and consider why fans engage with them."

German automaker Mercedes-Benz enlisted three-time NBA champion Klay Thompson of the Golden State Warriors for a humorous campaign centered on its S-Class sedan. The series of short films play up Mr. Thompson's personality and on-the-court talents ([see story](#)).

#### *Klay Thompson for Mercedes-Benz*

When it comes to luxury brand ambassadors, athletes including NBA stars are most associated with watchmakers and automakers.

With the growing popularity of streetwear, however, and more players experimenting with their personal style, fashion brands have taken notice. Players' tunnel entrances have been compared to runway shows, with stars such as Dwyane Wade, Russell Westbrook and James Harden taking to the concrete catwalks to showoff their suits, sneakers, luggage and accessories.

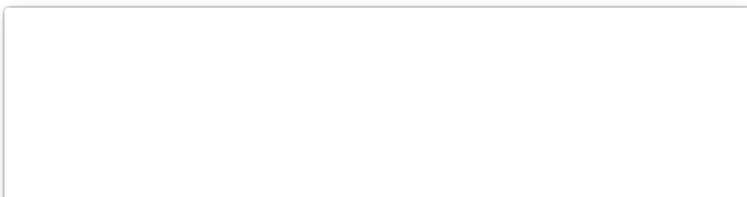
With the growing popularity of streetwear, however, and more players experimenting with their personal style, the sport has become more fashionable.

"NBA players are essentially considered fashion influencers, known for their off-court style as much as their game," Mr. Dahan said.

Players' tunnel entrances have been compared to runway shows, with former and current stars such as Dwyane Wade, Russell Westbrook and James Harden popularizing the concrete catwalks.

"For NBA insiders, we live in the player empowerment era," said Yard NYC's Mr. Denman. "That agency in the way they present themselves has created its own unique opportunities.

"The arena tunnel, for example, has gone from an ancillary part of the game-day experience to an obsessed-over media moment, where players are clothed head-to-toe in luxury brands and sneakers," he said.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Paul George (@ygtrece)

### *Paul George in Burberry*

Fashion labels have taken notice.

"The NBA is fashionable," Mr. Goldberg said. "Like modern hip-hop whose stars associate with NBA players and vice-versa it's also luxurious."

In early 2021, German fashion label Hugo Boss collaborated with the NBA on a capsule collection, available at more accessible price points than Louis Vuitton's offerings. Nine of the NBA's 30 teams were represented in the capsule collection, including prominent franchises such as the Chicago Bulls, Los Angeles Lakers, New York Knicks and Miami Heat.

To promote the collection, the fashion label assembled a new #BossTeam. The lineup includes three-time NBA champion and Golden State Warriors star Draymond Green and NBA G League player Isaiah "Zay" Todd ([see story](#)).

Of course, sneakers cannot be overlooked as the stylish intersection for basketball and luxury.

Italian fashion label Gucci featured NBA player Kyle Kuzma in the "Stitches in Time" campaign alongside artist Dominic "The Shoe Surgeon" Ciambone, who created three limited-edition collection pairs of Gucci Basket sneakers. The Washington Wizards player has more than 4.9 million Instagram followers and is well known for his colorful and versatile style ([see story](#)).



*P.J. Tucker in the beige Miami sneakers. Image credit: Dolce & Gabbana*

Similarly, Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana partnered with P.J. Tucker on new iterations of its Miami sneaker. The collaboration which was limited to 100 pairs of the sneakers, signed by Mr. Tucker, paired with exclusive NFT digital authenticity certificates launched in June 2021, before the forward was coincidentally traded to the Miami Heat ([see story](#)).

Luxury's winning streak with the NBA and its star players is unlikely to cool off anytime soon.

"Where the NBA truly stands out is how well it's hot-wired into culture, local and global, and is supported by a healthy eco-system of ancillary interests," Mr. Denman said. "So, for luxury brands looking to make connections with the NBA, you have the ability to be innovative in your marketing and media mix, as well as capture a wide audience of both young and old.

"But the bar is constantly being pushed," he said. "As the relationships become ever closer, there will be more and more opportunities for luxury brands to have players embody the brand."

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