In-and-Out: How Fashion Journalists Write About Black NBA Dandies

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Abstract: The National Basketball Association (NBA), now flush with lucrative television contracts from its broadcast partners and an owner-friendly collective bargaining agreement, is as popular as ever. Besides athleticism only reserved for a small portion of humans and basketball plays that can only be made by not even most elite college players, what also keeps fans on the edge of their seats are the outfits worn by Russell Westbrook, James Harden, LeBron James and the many other fashionable players. Using what Bourdieu’s (1984) termed cultural intermediary in *Distinction* as a conceptual framework, this study will examine how 12 fashion journalists write about Black NBA dandies. According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries are involved in the presentation and representation of cultural and symbolic goods and services, some of whom are salespeople, advertising executives, and interior designers. Cultural intermediaries serve as the link between production and consumption, giving the end consumer access to legitimate culture. As fashion journalists, these participants educate their readers on the latest in bespoke wear, haute couture clothing and Black style. The Black NBA body provides a medium for fashion journalists to highlight the exclusivity and democratic ideals of fashion because of the ways in which they peel off the layers of celebrity, position Black NBA dandies within a network of images, and create a dialectic tension between Black culture and a generic White culture.

Keywords: race, fashion, NBA, Bourdieu, journalism

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Former Oklahoma City Thunder point guard Russell Westbrook's 2017-2018 season was a success. In his second of three seasons averaging a triple double, the combo guard's historical season was put into a unique context by none other than the all-sports platform, *espn.com*. In an article titled, "82 Flavors of Russell Westbrook", staff writers annotated every outfit the then league MVP wore during the season. Interspersed between images of Westbrook's fashionable pieces were footnotes about the price of the outfits as well as commentary by fellow players, media pundits, and pop culture icons. What was most informative about this story was the fact that every aspect of each outfit was explained in terms of hats, sneakers, and shades. It was perhaps a hodge-podge of price points, from people who could engage with fashion based on their economic station in life. Whether it was the affordable \$75 Converse Chuck Taylor high-top shoes he wore before a game against the Indiana Pacers, or the \$1795 Fear of God Denim Alpaca trucker jacket he wore against the Houston Rockets, it was clear that Westbrook's fashion blended the very best of high and low culture. (http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/23002739/82-flavors-russell-westbrook-every-outfit-oklahoma-city-thunder-star-wore-2017-18).

Whether it is NBA players being ridiculed for oversized suits more than 15 years ago, or current players looking bizarre with their nerd chic styles, it is the fashion journalist who lends their expertise, connections, and specialized knowledge to explain clothing. Fashion journalists are indispensable to the fashion industry because of the ways in which they qualify clothing so that diverse audiences can participate in clothing culture, as intended by designers and fashion houses. A surface level reading of Black NBA players in the current socio-historical moment may lead one to believe that bespoke and haute couture pieces being worn are quite restrictive for the general public, but fashion journalists humanize celebrity to invite participation by articulating lines of convergence. While the \$800 Mike Amiri distressed jeans Westbrook frequently wears may be above the paygrade of most Americans, a person will still be able to purchase these kinds of jeans at a lower price point to pair with \$80 sneakers.

What was most relevant about "82 Flavors..." was the way in which the authors used Westbrook's contemporaries to qualify and legitimize his clothing, be it musicians, NBA counterparts, or media critics. From slain rapper Nipsey Hussle describing the point guard as "fearless" to Katie Nolan of ESPN describing his outfits as a "walk of shame," there was no shortage of comments about Westbrook's 82 outfits. Although Russell is only one player, the way in which fashion journalists write about him is symptomatic of the sartorial discourse surrounding NBA dandies. Miller (2009) qualifies dandies as individuals who are "best known as a snappy dressers, but also as beings whose self-presentation identifies them as outrageous" (p. 7). Miller's (2009) qualification of the Western dandy neatly encapsulates the media's reaction to the Black dandies in the NBA, as evidenced by the article on Westbrook. Additionally, fashion journalists graft symbolic value onto these fashionable dandies because they "confirm, modify or reject the ways in which cultural producers position their products on the market" (Janssen, 2006, p. 384). In essence, players like Westbrook, Mike Conley Jr., and LeBron James become the vessel for fashion journalists to explain the intentions of the designers, clothiers, and fashion houses. Although NBA dandies, in conjunction with their stylists, can go viral with hashtags and innovative ways to exploit a social media's platform algorithm, it is the fashion journalist that legitimizes the outfit in mainstream publications, just as the "82 Flavors..." article did with Westbrook.

The purpose of this article is to better understand how fashion journalists write about fashion in the NBA, one of the major American sporting leagues that is numerically dominated by African American players. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) concept of the cultural intermediary, I explain how fashion journalists reconcile production with consumption by qualifying what players wear, drawing lines of convergence between a popular Black cultural aesthetic and mainstream culture, and engaging with images to link these players with their contemporaries and historical antecedents. Where the stylists and designers co-create the material value of the Black NBA dandy's aesthetic, the fashion journalist adds symbolic value to NBA fashion (Rocamora, 2001) by consecrating the designers, clothiers, and stylists who are the genius behind the looks. This article answers the research question: How do fashion journalists write about Black NBA dandies? This research is not only important because of the relevance of fashion in the NBA, but moreover, this work demonstrates how a particular type of Black NBA celebrity gets interpellated in the "fashion system" (Moeran, 2006, p. 729). The Black NBA body provides a medium for fashion journalists to highlight the exclusivity and democratic ideals of fashion because of the ways in which they peel off the layers of celebrity, position Black NBA dandies within a network of images, and create a dialectic tension between Black culture and a generic White culture. In turn, this calcifies the elitism of the fashion system because the players are reviled as not the true auteurs of fashion and creativity but are instead positioned as a nexus of consumption. Just like the fake crossover move popularized by the best point guards in the league, the work of fashion journalists functions to position the NBA player as in-and-out of the fashion system. In essence, they are temporarily in the fashion system because of the clothes they wear, and the countless images of them, but they cannot be consecrated as the true creatives, including, stylists, designers, and clothiers.

Cultural Intermediaries

Cultural intermediaries work at the nexus of production and consumption as they educate consumers on legitimate culture, including, art, cuisine, and social habits (Bourdieu, 1979). In his seminal work, *Distinction*, Bourdieu explains how the social stratification system in France was reified through taste and consumption (Bourdieu, 1979). Bourdieu would position the cultural intermediary as part of a new class within the *petit bourgeoisie* who would largely be responsible for the "presentation and representation" (p. 359) of the previously mentioned cultural products. Cultural intermediaries explain the intentions of the producers to the consumer and the sensibilities of the consumer to the producer (Maguire & Matthews, 2010). The origins of the cultural intermediary can be located within the service and culture economy, which unleashed the creativity of people "undertaking casualized cultural work who have heady educational backgrounds yet live at the uncertain interstices of capital, qualifications, and government" (Miller, 2014, p. 27). What makes the position of cultural intermediaries uncertain, and perhaps precarious, is that, according to Negus (2002), they are situated "in-between creative artists and consumers" (p. 4). Since some cultural intermediaries are not true creatives, including "the critic, the art dealer, the publisher, or the theater manager" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 262), they justify their place in the field by consecrating objects and celebrities. In this way, fashion writers provide the "textual glue that ties the producers and consumers together" (Lynge-Jorlen, 2009, p. 143) as they graft symbolic value onto clothing by explaining the intentions of the creatives.

Mediation represents one tool that the fashion journalist uses to generate symbolic value for the fashion industry so that the intentions of the auteurs are clearly articulated (Sommerland, 2008; Crane & Bovone, 2006). According to Lynge-Jorlen (2009), mediation is, "the process in which magazines' meaning, values, and beliefs are transmitted and circulated" (p. 20). Elsewhere, Lynge-Jorlen (2012) notes how niche magazines position fashion as a frivolous activity that should not be taken as serious as the "legitimate" (p. 15) art magazines. Crane and Bovone note how symbolic values communicated between the pages of fashion magazines "have become as important as the clothes themselves" (p. 322). Sommerland notes how mediation in the fashion industry comes in the form of advertising, public relations, and sales. What is important here is that mediation not only happens through the written word of the fashion journalists, but the advertisements and editorials in the magazines also play a role in mediating discourse. Thus, mediation represents one way in which fashion journalists fundamentally change the nature of what is being presented because they use their "power to consecrate objects" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 262) to reflect the ideological values of the magazine and their field.

While not speaking on fashion directly but engaged in another creative industry, which is advertising, Cronin (2004) describes how advertising practitioners resolve the tension between the client and agency to "mediate conflicting interests" (p. 364). According to Cronin, while the clients want agencies to rely on market research to create campaigns, the latter wants to maintain some distance from the predictability of trends in the marketplace. As it relates to inherent contradictions that could undermine the business structure of the fashion industry, Jones and Hawley (2017) note how Vogue magazine co-opts sustainability to present fashion as an eco-friendly practice if designers would only use "craftsmanship, artisanship, and handmade" (p. 290) materials. In another example, Svedsen (2017) argues that because fashion magazines depend on advertising for revenue, it becomes critical for a writer to hinge "towards his or her own judgement" (p. 110) to establish their work as objective. Mediation is a medium-specific endeavor as journalists, photographers, and editors are tasked with communicating the ideals and values of the magazine, fundamentally changing the article of clothing in the process.

Fashion journalism traces back to the renaissance era in Europe (Taylor, 2004). According to Miller and McNeil (2018), wealthy consumers of books took interest in the looks of exotic people "redrawn from travelers, trades, and missionary tales" (p. 60). The distinction of the first true fashion magazine would be given to *La Galerie des Modes*, a periodical that was published between 1778 and 1779 (Miller and McNeil, 2018). In America, the earliest signs of modern fashion journalism date back to the late 1960s when the *New York Times* transformed the women's section, which covered the proverbial "food, fashion, family, and furnishing" (Granata, 2019, p. 622), to the style section. Since 1925, the venerated *New Yorker* magazine has devoted at "least one fashion critic" (Jones, 2019, p. 2) to its staff to serve as the voice to unite production and consumption. Although modern fashion journalism in America was predicated on the lifestyles of women, according to Granata, these sections would later become "sections meant for a non-gender specific readership" (p. 622). From its inception in the 16th century to the present, what still remains constant about fashion journalism is that it serves as the link that mediates production and consumption.

By virtue of its novelty and the ways in which it registers as an index to "taste" (Kristensen & From,

2012, p. 28), fashion journalism becomes of significant importance in matters of novelty and symbolic value in the context of a transient institution. According to Polan (2006), the inherent novelty and transience of fashion complements journalism's reliance on "maintain[ing] at least an illusion that the information they disseminate is new and original" (p. 155). Moeran (2013) demonstrated how glossy magazines not only mediate between production and consumption by legitimizing and endorsing seasonal styles, they also adapt to the "chaotic" (p. 120) fashion system. The perpetual changes that happen in fashion make it imperative for fashion journalists to comment on the linearity in their industry, thereby enforcing "symbolic boundaries" (Van de Peer, 2015, p. 599) that assign aesthetic judgements to clothes. But it is also important to realize that although fashion journalists like to wax terms like "fresh, modern and contemporary" (Konig, 2006, p. 213) to emphasize that they understand the transience of fashion, they do pay homage to older styles, those qualified as "classic." This demonstrates the linear progression of the fashion system.

This also happens to be the function of the fashion blog. Fashion blogs have made a significant impact on fashion journalism because of their scale and impact (Rocamora, 2013). Rocamora (2012) concedes that it is the fashion blog that has been able to challenge the "lasting quality of the glossies (p. 97). In much the same way as traditional fashion journalists, Kuleva and Maglevanaya (2017) qualify fashion bloggers as cultural intermediaries because of how they "reconnect the hierarchical world of fashion producers and the broader audience of fashion consumers" (p. 46). Separately, Jenss (2013) notes that fashion blogs have been instrumental in the proliferation of images of vintage and nostalgic looks returning to fashion shows and magazine covers, as there is a need for "showcasing ever-new images, styles and different looks" (p. 138).

What these works show is how fashion bloggers have used their platforms to merge production with consumption by not only democratizing fashion by combining luxury with fast fashion, and vintage clothes with the new, but they also make fashion ubiquitous on the Internet. Relatedly, Matthews (2018) notes how the British version of Vogue has adapted to the digital era by going beyond the singular bounded magazine, thus offering multi-form content on its Website and social media platforms. In fleshing out how fashion blogs have now been legitimized by traditional fashion media, Rocamora (2016) argues that fashion bloggers lend their authenticity and independence by contributing columns to the likes of Vogue Paris and "Style.com", among other magazines. The current study adds to the literature by situating the Black NBA dandy within the fashion magazine's need to "suggest multiple ways one can participate in fashion" (Matthews, 2018, p. 403).

More recently, the fashion system has turned to celebrities to drive consumption. Haid et al. (2006) explains how the "cult of celebrity" (p. 179) has helped fashion media and brands generate publicity. Haid et al. (2006) writes, "Sometimes the celebrity will attract more publicity because of the outfit, as in the case of Elizabeth Hurley and the Versace dress, commonly referred to as 'that dress' because of the rather flimsy safety-pin fastening" (p. 179). The unlikely benefit of celebrities becoming fashion leaders in the press is that, according to Gibson (2006), "anyone with disposable income can participate" (p. 25), making consumption and impact far more democratic now than in previous times. As an example, Warner (2013) demonstrates how Sarah Jessica Parker, the star of hit HBO show, *Sex and the City*, was positioned in *People* and *Harper's Bazaar* as the cultural intermediary who

could educate consumers on legitimate culture. Specifically, Parker was able to maintain the delicate balance of showing how ordinary women could participate in the fashion system via affordable clothes (Warner, 2013). On the other hand, the actress used haute couture and her understanding of it to separate legitimate culture from popular culture. The cult of celebrity provides a unique opportunity to situate the rise of the Black NBA dandy in the context of the cultural intermediary, specifically, how fashion journalists qualify the sartorial aesthetic of Black NBA players.

Any discussion of the self-fashioning Black NBA dandy would not be impactful without unearthing the historical antecedents of the Black body in relation to White oppression. Miller (2009) locates the Black dandy within the larger apparatus of White control, as early European slave masters dressed their African subjects in finery to reflect their wealth. African-American slaves began to use self-fashioning as an act of resistance against their masters (Miller, 2009). Using portraits of the younger W.E.B. DuBois, the first African American to graduate from Harvard University, Ballard (2020) notes how the father of American Sociology used fashion to penetrate “white and black Boston with more legitimacy” (p. 21). As it relates to sport, Runstedtler (2012) demonstrates how former heavy weight champion, Jack Johnson, used clothing in the early 20th century for “political rebellion” (p. 149) to disrupt Victorian prescriptions for racial and sexual norms. This discussion of the Black dandy provides the backdrop to better grasp how fashion has been used in the NBA by largely Black players to counter the regimes of control by White “governors” in the league.

The emergence of the Black NBA fashionable dandy must be located within the context of individuality, self-expression, and the restrictive forces of White paternalism and anti-Black racism in the league (Moralde, 2019). Leonard (2020) notes how Black NBA players who experiment with nerd chic styles do so to respond to and resist the narrow sartorial choices that are available to most Black men. While the sports and fashion media have made positive remarks on the new Black aesthetic, Leonard warns “this does little to transform the stereotype but instead leaves them unscathed as ties and cardigans remain as symbols of goodness and whiteness” (p. 146). What started as a knee-jerk reaction to the infusion of Hip-Hop culture in the league, the dress code has largely been evaded with one player, Russell Westbrook, perennially violating it with no fine of record (Cramer, 2019). Additionally, Garcia (2019) notes how the Black NBA dandies capitulated to the former commissioner’s anti-Black dress code on “their own terms” (p. 116), wearing professional and business-class attire in non-normative ways. Having established the paradigm of fashion journalists as cultural intermediaries, and the historical antecedents of the Black dandy in the NBA, this study will add to the literature by situating how the likes of Russell Westbrook, LeBron James, and James Harden (among others) are qualified by the fashion press.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

The purpose of this research is to better grasp how fashion journalists write about Black NBA dandies. The findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of fashion journalists, but at the time of this writing,

the participants have yet to be engaged in the academic literature. Whereas quantitative scholars believe there is one fixed reality to be discovered by a detached researcher, proponents of qualitative research suggest there are multiple realities that are meaningful to participants (Ely et al., 1991). Because of these beliefs about multiple realities that are created socially and interactively, special "attention is paid to the diversity of perspectives of the participants" (Flick et al., 2004, p. 8). This qualitative study renders a possibility of better understanding the production side of not only symbolic value, but also cultural commodities. As will be described in the results and discussion section, the interview method yields rich insight into the ways in which fashion journalists qualify the symbolic value of Black NBA dandies.

Participants

A total of 12 fashion journalists (see Appendix for participant names and demographic information), who write about fashion more broadly, and NBA style in particular, were selected. The participants represent the broad spectrum of fashion journalism, as some are traditional print journalists, bloggers, and electronic media contributors. The majority of the participants are male and African American. Although fashion is an industry that is perceived to skew female, the fact that the majority of the NBA players are Black men may explain the demographics of the sample. The entire sample of participants is based in the United States, but what truly makes this expansive is the fact that in the age of social media, a story can go viral and have international impact. Additionally, the older participants could retrospectively talk about their experiences writing before the former commissioner of the NBA, David Stern, mandated the league-wide dress code.

Data Collection

A convenience sample was used for this research. The study was first approved at the university level. To recruit participants, I followed fashion journalists on Twitter and Instagram, then sent direct messages to invite their participation. After sending informed consent documents, I coordinated a time to interview the participants over the phone using an Olympus digital voice recorder. Once saturation was reached after the twelfth interview, I stopped data collection. According to Mason (2010), saturation occurs when the researcher is not likely to render any new and meaningful information from the data. During the 12th interview, it became clear that the participant was repeating the same things that were said in the previous interviews.

Instrument

The 12 semi-structured interviews, which were informed by the literature on fashion and cultural intermediaries, lasted no more than 45 minutes. The benefit of the interview protocol as a qualitative instrument is the fact that according to Ely et al. (1991), "some of what is out there, like people's thoughts, can only be approached through an interview" (p. 78). The utility in the semi-structured interview is how it allows the researcher to stay within the framework of the interview protocol, but it "gives plenty of freedom of movement in the formulation of questions, follow up strategies and sequencing" (Hopf, 2004, p. 204). This flexibility became important when I interviewed

participants who wrote for traditional print magazines, electronic media, and multi-platform mediums. I asked questions about the participants' professional background and entry into fashion writing, their most popular stories, and how they construct pieces about Black NBA dandies. Some of the questions were: "How did you get into fashion writing?", "How would you write about a generic Black dandy versus a generic White dandy?", and "What is the role of the fashion media in the modern NBA?" The interviews were recorded on the garage band software for Mac and transcribed in Dragon Naturally Speaking. After transcription, the participants were given an opportunity to corroborate the accuracy of the data with member checks.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, I coded the data in Microsoft Word for Mac. I used in vivo coding because it allows researchers to capture the words of the participants (Saldana, 2009). After the first round of in vivo coding, I utilized descriptive coding to summarize blocks of text with a word or phrase. After the two rounds of in vivo and descriptive coding, I used pattern coding to truncate the codes to concepts, which were then qualified as themes. Subsequent to three rounds of coding, I utilized thematic analysis to locate patterns to address the research question (Grbich, 2007).

Discussion & Analysis

In this section, three themes will be discussed in reference to the research question: How do fashion journalists write about Black NBA dandies? Through an analysis of the data, three themes were discovered: (1) We peel off the layers of celebrity, (2) the image is everything, and (3) we make connections. The names for the participants are pseudonyms.

Theme 1: We Peel Off The Layers of Celebrity

Within this theme, the participants explain how they make players' fashion choices accessible to their readership. They peel back the layers of celebrity to reveal to their audience the true creatives behind the trends. Drawing from Negus (2002), because fashion journalists inhabit the space between the creatives and consumers, it behooves them to justify their position by being the interlocutor for the designers, stylists, and clothiers. The participants understand that the players do not dress themselves and, as such, are not the originators of outfits. The fashion journalists "consecrate" (Rocamora, 2016, p. 237) particular individuals, namely stylists and designers, as auteurs of creativity. In another respect, one of the participants believes NBA players cannot dress and thus go for trends. Ken believes, "people in the spotlight tend to either wear what this stylist tells them to wear or what they see somewhere on trends." Ken's quotation underscores the idea of the fashion writer being a critic who has specialized knowledge and can relay their knowledge of the fashion industry, stylists, designers, and trends to the public through both social and traditional media. This is also illustrative of how cultural intermediaries, according to Negus (2002), link consumer to celebrity in that they thoroughly explain the use and exchange value of clothing by qualifying how the dandy wears them, as well as the histories of the creatives behind these outfits. While a

commoner might be blindly impressed by the likes of what Dwayne Wade, LeBron James, and James Harden wear, the participants have inside knowledge of the background information and can thus, in the words of Svedsen (2017), lean “towards his or her own judgement” (p. 110). While it has long been argued that fashion journalists do not levy legitimate criticism because of their close ties to the industry, by peeling off the layers of the celebrity the participants are able to have some autonomy by “unpacking fashion through critical thought” (Jones, 2019, p. 6). As Konig (2006) mentions, in recent years the fashion press has pivoted towards celebrity to consummate the marriage of high culture with popular culture. The participants can trade on the celebrity of NBA dandies while still maintaining neutrality. This provides a unique entry point for casual fans and readers to participate in the hierarchical fashion system, as they can experiment with clothing at their price point, be it sneakers, hats, or watches.

The peeling off the layers of celebrity portends to narrow the gap between the average demographic and the celebrity who, in the case of some NBA players, may be coming across wealth for the first time. One of the participants approaches writing about NBA players with the preconceived notion that they do not fully understand legitimate culture. Budden believes:

I have that preconception like these dudes because when you're going to school, when you are playing ball in school, you will have time to work or make money... Some guys like LeBron are usually clean but then you got guys like Dwayne Wade; he is like over the top.

Budden sees NBA players as people who are just now coming into money, which makes them behind the curve when it comes to sartorial rules. As it relates to celebrities being pretentious, Warner (2013) explains how Sarah Jessica Parker used her understanding of high fashion to explain how money does not make someone part of the legitimate class. Reminiscent of how fashion journalists positioned SJP as an arbiter of taste, Budden calls out these fashionable players for not practicing “restraint” (Warner, 2013, p. 384). Because Budden has specialized knowledge about the creatives behind trends, he becomes less impressed with NBA dandies.

The humanization of the celebrity enables more people to participate in the fashion system, and sneaker culture best represents this. High-fashion designers like Virgil Abloh (Off White and Nike), Yohji Yamamoto (Yohji Yamamoto and Adidas), and Masaba Gupta (House of Masaba and Puma) frequently partner with traditional athletic sneaker brands to engage the downstream consumer. And as Kuleva and Maglevanaya (2017) argue, fashion bloggers have been instrumental in allowing new consumers to participate in the hierarchical and exclusive world of fashion. While celebrities have been known to make sneakers popular to consumers, one of the participants, Los, does not mince words when giving his honest opinion on new releases. He noted:

They did the gold foamposites (shoes); I got a pair, Nike gave me a pair. You know I wasn't really feeling them. LeBron (James) was in them around All-Star weekend. Everyone was going bananas over them. And I was like, I am not really feeling them.

In this quote, Los explains how he has to temper the hype surrounding releases among his contemporaries in the sneaker community. While the above quotation demonstrates how Los reigns in the hype surrounding releases, what is more important is how celebrities are not “cool” enough to pull off an average looking sneaker. This democratizes fashion because it puts celebrities in the same class as their fans because a poorly designed sneaker (from Los’s point of view) cannot be undone by the initial shock value of LeBron James wearing it.

While it is evident that the participants benefit from their intimate relations with the fashion industry, peeling back the layers of celebrity demonstrates their autonomy. As Granata (2019) notes, one of the reasons why the fashion press has not been taken seriously by the general press can partly be explained by the association of clothing with the frivolous sensibilities of women and its “tight relation” (p. 555) with the industry. The critiques levied at celebrities, and the ways in which they don clothes, represent mediation, as it provides “some truth” (Granata, p. 565) about the material reality of these articles of clothing. Another point to consider is how, according to Lynge-Jorlen (2012), the niche fashion press has come to represent a hybrid platform that fuses “avant-garde positions with fashion and celebrity culture” (p. 9). The Black NBA dandy becomes a vessel to unite two worlds of fashion: high fashion and sneaker culture. Being able to explain high culture by dusting off the veneer of celebrity gives the participants a unique pocket to act as cultural intermediaries and resolve the tension between high culture and popular culture. And as mentioned in the literature review, having a celebrity participate in the fashion system lowers the barrier of entry because, in the words of Gibson (2006), “anyone with disposable income can participate” (p. 25). Although the bespoke clothes worn by a handful of NBA players would not be worn by some readers anyway, the participants, by use of negation, demonstrate ways in which clothes should be worn. This invites participation in fashion by the fans, but because they are not the real creatives and they do not understand the sartorial rules, it positions NBA dandies outside of the fashion system.

One way that participants tease out the weakness of the Black NBA dandy is to expose these players for not being the original auteurs of style. It demonstrates how money does not equate with style and creativity because of the fashion faux pas of NBA dandies. In characterizing Bourdieu, Svedsen (2017) notes, “fashion writers play a crucial role in creating the creators” (p. 109). Karen puts NBA players in the same class of celebrity as movie superstars. She notes:

People would often say ‘what Hollywood actress do you think has style?’ And oftentimes I’ll say ‘I don’t really know.’ But I can tell you who I think has really good stylists... Athletes are moving farther along in that direction because I know they work with stylists.

Karen’s commentary also speaks to how, as a cultural intermediary, she uses her insider knowledge to reveal the truth about the creators of NBA celebrity. That people are in effect asking her which celebrity has the best style underscores Karen’s importance in the industry as not only a writer, but also as someone who truly understands fashion. To borrow from Bourdieu (1980), in critiquing the Black NBA dandies, the participants reveal the “truth of artistic practice” (p. 266). This truth can range from the participants acknowledging the designers responsible for the fashion trends that are in demand for the season, to the stylists and personal shoppers who help create the

image of Russell Westbrook, LeBron James, and Chris Paul. The tension here is how magazines leave readers enchanted with the clothes worn by celebrities, but there is a market correction because the athletes are being exposed for not being the true auteurs. Karen exerts her social and cultural capital by divulging that people come to her seeking privileged information about celebrity, and she and her contemporaries “convince[s] their peers more easily of their opinions for they embody large amounts of field-specific resource” (Van de Peer, 2015, p. 600). Additionally, the participants can position their cultural labor within this fashion system, as they name and “consecrate” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 262) the real creators: the designers, clothiers, and stylists.

Theme 2: Image is Everything

Within this theme, the participants explain how their work would not be possible without the images of fashionable NBA dandies. Taylor (2004) establishes that the visual plays a significant role in the creation of fashion journalism, as it was the only way the Europeans could learn about the “other” (p. 5). As it is humanly impossible for the participants to be present at 1230 NBA games, they rely on images from the Internet. Just as the early French fashion press relied on “clothing of distant peoples” (Miller & McNeil, 2018, p. 60) to enchant their readers, fashion writers, too, depend on the visual. Bo, who has experience putting together year-end most fashionable player lists, explains that he goes to social media to curate content. He noted:

I really just look at the social media and I see if it is kind of a recurring clothing item. I have to guess what they really enjoy wearing, yet that I think that it is a fashionable trend. That means if Westbrook is wearing some like lime green pants and like a button-down purple shirt; that kind of thing—it’s very bizarre.

Bo explains how some of his curated lists begin with a broader understanding of the many images that circulate on social media. It is not only about the viral images, but this process requires a broader understanding of players like Russell Westbrook, James Harden, and Mike Conley Jr, who are known for having their outfits shared, retweeted, and liked on social media. What also connects the current hype surrounding Black NBA players and the origins of fashion journalism is the fact that diversity drives the shock value among readership. It follows that just as Europeans in the Renaissance Era were more interested in the “strange manners, habits and clothing” (Taylor, 2004, p. 5) of the Other, the participants are hedging on readers’ appetites for “bizarre” outfits from Black NBA dandies. As Matthews (2018) demonstrates how Vogue magazine has changed its strategy to become more “people focused” (p.406), participants rely on the images of celebrity to drive traffic. In this respect, the participants broker viral images of NBA dandies by adding commentary.

Images of fashionable NBA players have become so popular that they drive traffic to blogs, Websites, and social media as stand-alone content. To one of the participants, the image of the dandy can often have more purchase within print and digital circles than the actual text. Regina explained:

There is a push in every newsroom to get your stories posted on Facebook to go viral. But as a writer

covering sport, and especially covering fashion, it is not necessarily about the words as it is about the images as well. I can write something about let's say Cam Newton, but what really gets people to make it go viral is a photo of Cam wearing something outrageous.

What puts Regina's approach in contrast to Bo's stance on writing about fashionable NBA dandies is the way in which the image itself lends credibility to the copy. To borrow from Crane and Bovone (2006), the images of Cam Newton's outrageous clothing become more significant than "the clothing themselves" (p. 322). Although one should not discount the crucial commentary of Regina's work, to borrow from Jones (2019), what has become increasingly important for fashion criticism is the condition that the discourse "steadfastly remains in a symbiotic position with the fashion image" (p. 4). As it relates to this symbiotic relationship, it is customary to expect the "bizarre" and "outrageous" looks from NBA dandies. To build anticipation for a story, a participant may find a picture before the first words of the story are ever written. Bobby remembers:

On the way out, I had bumped into Draymond Green and he had some Kobe's in his hand. Some Kobe 11s in his hand and I just saw a signature on it. And I said 'Dray, can I take a picture of those shoes?' So he was cool, he let me take a picture of the shoe. I tweeted it out, and it wound up getting like almost 2,000 retweets. Like the NBA retweeted it.

What is interesting about this experience here is that the image of the Kobe shoe was repurposed by a sneaker style blog to promote one of their stories about the shoes the now-deceased Bryant wore during his last NBA season. The repurposing of Bobby's photo is an example of what Jones and Lawley (2017) allege is "intertextuality" (p. 285), in that his random shot of the Kobe sneaker influenced another story. Intertextuality not only manifests with the example of Bobby, it is also prevalent across multiple participants. That is to say, the images they select for their stories are informed by "the web of knowledge" (Jones and Hawley, p. 286) floating around on the Internet. What was an original photo, taken at a particular point in time and place, would immediately be shared and repurposed by other media platforms. To borrow from Jenss (2013), the images of viral-worthy dandies democratize fashion, as fans contribute to the proliferation of visuals on the Internet. However, although this allows for greater participation by downstream consumers, the hierarchical structure of fashion remains unchanged because of the ways in which fashion journalists consecrate the true creatives. Rocamora's (2013) discussion of the fluidity of the fashion blog helps here because it shows how the fashion system needs images to drive consumption and allow more people to participate in the "information society" (p. 68).

The participants also use images to engage the NBA dandy when they collaborate with the athlete on a story. The creation of a story enables the journalist to use fashionable or non-fashionable images of the past to propose a new reality for readers to ponder. Cammy remembers a point when she engaged the subject with pictures of his contemporaries:

I would literally like scroll through Instagram and check out different outfits that guys are wearing, and they are like 'that'll be cool, I could wear that.' 'And what about it do you like?' I

think a lot of them are like 'holy shit, I have so much to do.' And I'm just like 'relax, photo shoots are supposed to be fun.'

What is most instructive about Cammy's statement is the way in which she recalls photos of other players being used to inform her conversation with her then subject. Cammy not only exposes players for not understanding the sartorial rules of fashion, but she also exploits the images available to her to write a story. Another thing to point out here is the one example of mediation that is going on between the NBA player at the photoshoot and the participant. In part, Cammy is couching the looks of the dandy within broader discourses of available images of his counterparts, but it also creates a veneer of sameness across several NBA players on social media. That is to say that while the NBA player at the photoshoot became overwhelmed with the many possible looks on social media, these many photos actually constrained the possible looks and alternatives for him. This is reminiscent of Cronin's (2004) idea of multiple regimes of mediation, in which mediation is done differently at select parts of the downstream value chain. Speaking on advertising practitioners, Cronin (2004) notes how they, "are constantly scouring the terrain of popular culture for new ideas, images and techniques to meet their clients' brief" (p. 354). Essentially, fashion writers use images of NBA dandies to curate, create, and inform the stories they write about fashion, ultimately limiting the representation of NBA dandies. The photograph of a dandy has already been informed by his contemporaries and the self-fashioning subjects that came before him. The participants' dependence on images for content has a way of demonstrating the linearity of the fashion system because journalists juxtapose the subjects of their feature stories with previous images that are available to them on social media platforms. This has a way of keeping fashion a novel thing by linking the news story with images and stories of the past. What is also relevant here is how individuals who are active on social media can participate in this fashion exchange because while they do not have access to the latest catwalk images, they are able to witness the bizarre outfits of Dwayne Wade, Russell Westbrook, and Mike Conley Jr. That is to say that the past, directly or indirectly, has a way of informing the present and the NBA dandies are precisely positioned within the fashion system. And as it relates to the last theme about NBA dandies not being true creators and auteurs of fashion, in this moment, Cammy's subject was positioned as one who is overwhelmed with the minutiae of self-fashioning because he "has so much to do," making it another example of how players are positioned in, but out, of the fashion system.

Theme 3: We Make Connections

Within this theme, the participants explain how they make connections to resolve the tension between Black players and mainstream, read White, culture. Speaking of another culture on the margins of society, Tommy explains how writing about Black NBA players is similar to reporting on the eccentricities of gay club culture. Tommy explained:

It is a little bit akin to writing about the club fashion. Or certain fashions in the gay community. There is a type of exuberance to it that I think is shared...It is not so much fit or like how they are constructed. It is sort of an exuberance. It can be colors. It can be, you know, a lot of bling. There

are also guys that are incredibly conservative in the NBA.

Although gay culture rests at the margins of American society, what is instructive about Tommy's quote is that he is able to make connections between the very popular NBA players and the marginalized subjects in the club community. This is reminiscent of Miller's (2009) comment about Black culture and Black dandies, particularly in the 20th century, being syncretic in that they are "collaged and intersected by literal and symbolic or metaphorical manifestations of gender, sexuality and class" (p. 189). Where Tommy and Miller conjoin is the space where Blackness as a marginal positionality opens itself up to a mix of dominant and marginalized subjectivities. Leonard (2020) acknowledges that some Black players even experiment with nerd chic styles to upend the, in the words of Tommy, "conservative" notions of masculinity. While gay culture and nerd chic are not one in the same, what is obvious is that they are both diametrically opposed to dominant mainstream culture because of how players use them "on their own terms" (Garcia, 2019, p. 116).

Another point to consider is how participants choose to take the ethnic ideal of Black American culture and center it for mainstream consumption. Journalists do this by articulating points of convergence so that readers can better understand how Black culture is American culture. Cali notes:

You identify commonalities in the cultures. Because, as I always tell people, 'you know, there are a lot of things that are deemed so different about Black people.' You see it represented in words like 'urban' and 'ethnic'... There's nobody, or to me, very few, who are more American than Black people. I think footwear is a place where it all meets.

For Cali, the goal is to link the commonalities and explain the differences instead of doing it vice versa. Having established that cultural intermediaries mediate between producers and consumers, it is relevant to consider how Cali brings what is fundamentally American about Black culture into clearer focus. That is to say that Cali is "chang[ing] what is mediated" (Sommerland, 2008, p. 171) because he is offering a peculiar way of seeing Blackness. Instead of taking the usual approach of proffering Blackness as something that is marginal, Cali couches Blackness in the pantheon of Americana. Similar to the glossy writers in Moeran's (2006) research, Cali is democratizing the use of clothes as they go from the margin to the center. The Black NBA body becomes a medium to experiment with the exclusivity of elite haute couture brands and the democratic and egalitarian accoutrements of sneakers, hats, and watches.

Whether it is vibrancy, edginess, or being an individual, the Black body can be used as a fulcrum to bolster ideas about rebellion. Mitchell noted:

I mean Black man's clothes, there is a whole context of history there. There is a social and political context of clothing as protest, as sort of like personal style statement is a reflection. It is saying something about your place in the world and how you wish to be read and to be perceived in a way that is not necessarily going to be the case for the White player. It may be interesting to think about Russell Westbrook in

juxtaposition to the culture around Afro Punk.

Implicit here is the recognition that the Black body has always been a site for political activism. What Mitchell calls *prot.est* by Black men is actually a continuation of Black athletes, one of which is Jack Johnson, using clothing for protest (Runstedtler, 2012). Ballard (2020) and Miller (2009) note how African Americans have used clothes and self-fashioning to incite political rebellion. Certainly, present-day Black athletes are not dealing with Jim Crow racism, but Cramer (2019) notes how fashionable NBA players use fashion to take control of their bodies amidst White paternalism. It is clear that the Black body, in effect, represents American ideals of political rebellion and protests, so naturally some participants can easily link the marginal culture to the broader mainstream American culture.

Urban or ethnic, which is a code word for Blackness, has popular appeal. Urban can refer to hip-hop culture, basketball infused athletic leisure and even remnants of the crack-cocaine era. It is widely believed that the dress code instituted by former commissioner, David Stern, was done to quash the associations between the worst of rap culture and the league (Leonard, 2020). But in a rather ironic way, because of the ways in which fashion “bubbles-up” (Gibson, 2006, p. 26), that is styles on the streets are adopted by elites, the images on the catwalk sometimes reflect the bygone era of ‘80s and ‘90s drug culture. Although Ken commends urban culture for adapting to the mainstream by “settling down” and promoting form-fitting clothes, elite fashion houses have demurred to integrate elements of the ‘90s hip hop aesthetic. He notes:

There are as many lines that go to a Northface jacket that a drug dealer would wear in 1993 as there is to a really well-made performance piece of tech gear. Like it is impossible to trace it all back. But it is basically casualwear. I don’t think I’m an expert, but I think it gets really complicated when you start looking at a runway and you are trying to figure out what is streetwear and what is tailoring.

Ken not only spots trends from the distant past, but he also demonstrates how, when it comes to fashion, the history and the present are “mutually excluding and mutually dependent notions” (Van de Peer, 2014, p. 323). Van de Peer argues how the fashion press attempt to maintain symbolic boundaries and present the industry as modern by keeping a clear distance between the present and the past. While tech wear and athleisure are popular at the moment, it is impossible for Ken to not identify the “otherness” (Van de Peer, 2014, p. 334) of the drug era. As Lynge-Jorlen (2009) notes, fashion journalists secure their cultural intermediary status by presenting themselves as insiders who can produce content for a “restricted audience of connoisseurs” (p. 143). Ken, in effect, is articulating the lines of convergence between the past and present while also sharing his specialized knowledge of fashion. The participants’ ability to articulate the lines of convergence between Black culture and main culture is perhaps the final piece to the puzzle, as they are able to carefully explain the aspects of this marginalized culture that are often co-opted by the fashion system.

Conclusion

This article illuminates the work of fashion writers who qualify Black NBA dandies to their readership.

The participants peel off the layers of NBA celebrity by revealing the creatives who assist the players, they rely on images to inform their writing, and they articulate the lines of convergence between Black culture and mainstream culture. The use of the cultural intermediary as a conceptual framework helps explain how fashion journalists mediate between Black NBA players and their readership. Using the Black body as a medium, the participants assist in the democratization and exclusivity of fashion. That is to say, while Black NBA players purchase clothing that is above the paygrade of most people, fashion writers use the Black body and situate it within the fashion hierarchy. The utility of viral images, connections between Black culture and mainstream culture, and the humanizing aspects of the celebrity, bring the Black celebrity down to Earth so it can be consumed by the downstream consumer. Fashion journalists enable ordinary citizens to see themselves as part of the fashion system because of the parity that is being circumscribed between themselves and Black dandies. However, the drawback is that with the humanizing of NBA celebrity and revealing the true creatives, the participants do stabilize the fashion system, meaning the idea that taste does not equate with money.

The importance of the cultural work of fashion journalists is that they not only add symbolic value through legitimizing the clothing of dandies, but they also situate the NBA dandy within the broader discourses of the fashion hierarchy via sharing their specialized knowledge of the industry. With respect to using photos, peeling back the layers of celebrity, and articulating lines of convergence between Black culture and mainstream culture, the participants have a feel for the game. It is the disposition of the participants that provide them with the specialized knowledge to break down the pageantry of the NBA. The celebrity status of the Black NBA body enables the participants to experiment with the exclusive and democratic adherents of the fashion system. This constellation of specialized information, viral-worthy images, and points of convergence between Black culture and mainstream culture, reifies the hierarchy of the fashion system.

Future scholars should explore how fashion journalists write about Black National Football League players. The significance here is that the football season has 1/5th as many games as the basketball season. One might surmise that the 16-game season may compel players to make a statement because they have a limited number of games to do so and they wear helmets, making them less visible than their NBA counterparts. Another point to consider is how sneaker culture is critical to NBA fashion as recently, the NBA lifted restrictions that allows players to wear different colorways during the game. The scholars who investigate this will perhaps show how these Black NFL players find pockets to resist the controlling facets of the "shield" as they can only wear different cleats during select weeks of the football season.

Another aspect in this area of fashion to explore is the ways in which sneaker culture has been co-opted by elite fashion houses. As was previously mentioned, European fashion houses in the vanguard have already begun to partner with sneaker designers for collaborations. From the data in this study, it is clear that the sneaker has become a significant piece of the outfit, so it behooves these designers to integrate it into their branding. Additionally, the sneaker represents an entry point to articulate a line of convergence between some aspects of Black culture and mainstream culture, because everyone has to wear shoes. Sneaker culture also invites more participation in fashion because individuals who are fortunate to purchase shoes in the primary market can either

wear the hyped item or sell it for thrice its price in the secondary market.

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Appendix

Participants Names and Demographics

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Platform (Print, Website, Blog)
Cali	Black	Male	Print, Blog
Cammy	White	Female	Print
Bobby	Black	Male	Blog
Mitchell	Black	Male	Print
Ken	White	Male	Print
Tommy	Black	Male	Print
Budden	Hispanic	Male	Print, Blog
Regina	Black	Female	Print, Website
Bo	Asian	Male	Website
Parini	White	Female	Website
Los	White	Male	Print
Karen	Black	Female	Print