"There's a brand new dance":[1] fashion in English men's and women's professional football

Abstract

This article explores the intricate and evolving relationship between English football, its male and female professional players, and the fashion industries from the inter-war years of the last century to the present day. Following an historical overview that engages with traditional understandings of classed masculinity, the article argues that some of the most significant aspects of the contemporary football and fashion relationship can be uncovered by exploring the game's dynamic relationships with race and gender. Additionally, the article illuminates the contrasting roles of social media, with digital platforms and social media sites both allowing players to express their styles and create brands, and influencing production and content in relation to neoliberal and gendered economies. The article combines approaches from cultural studies, fashion studies, media studies, history and sociology, and uses key examples both from within football itself and from selected print and digital sources from the fashion industries.

Introduction

"Why are footballers no longer dressing like sh*t?", asked *Culted* website – a media and entertainment company that, in its own words, 'resonates with Gen Z' – in the summer of 2024 (Pullen 2024). The reality of the underlying observation is debatable. Although the "behind-the-times" male footballer, content in cosy knitwear and "dad" jeans is largely a thing of past, the outfits that players wear on arrival at training grounds and when out on the town still generate mirth and critique, as much as any admiration, across various media.

What is not in doubt is that the football and fashion relationship has developed in original and important modes and directions to reach its current unprecedented level of industry and media attention. Major exhibitions in London – as part of *Football: Designing the Beautiful Game* at The Design Museum in 2022,[2] and the sole focus of *Umbro 100: Sportswear x Fashion* at the University of Westminster in 2024[3] – are testament to contemporary public

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[1] David Bowie, *Fashion,* 1980.
[2] https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/football-designing-the-beautiful-game
[3] https://www.westminster.ac.uk/events/umbro-100-sportswear-x-fashion

interest in football and fashion and its broader social and sociological significance. On a global scale, at the end of 2024, alongside the draw for the 2025 Club World Cup, a three-day *Fashion Meets Football* event took place in Miami in collaboration with Juventus and Adidas (Juventus FC 2024).

Largely missing from popular accounts – and, consequently, forming the essential impetus and direction of this article – is that what is "fashionable" is socially constructed. How footballers' fashion is perceived, promoted, represented and consumed is subject to social and economic structures and shifts in taste and value across influential cultural industries, including football itself. What footballers wear now sits effortlessly alongside stories about the Prince and Princess of Wales' holiday activities in celebrity lifestyle magazines such as *Hello!*: from Arsenal's Declan Rice's participation in London Fashion Week to a (predictably gendered) feature on English player Chloe Kelly's wedding dress. Footballers are attractive to fashion brands as young, fit people who are hugely popular, globally recognisable and influential in marketing terms; and their distinctive combinations of economic and cultural capital help to bridge the classed palette of fashion from *haute couture* to athletic leisurewear. The relationship has come full circle with the design and aesthetic of the football shirt incorporated into lines by *inter alia* Acne Studios, Balenciaga, Paul Smith and Pretty Green.

Sport and leisure research has explored the relationship between English football and fashion in various forms, including the designer labels of the Casual subculture (Redhead 1993), the popularity of (often "retro") replica team jerseys (Stride *et al* 2014), and the use of musical themes in kit designs (Doyle and Burdsey forthcoming). Moreover, sport historians have looked at sports apparel and playing equipment, both their use within sport and their take-up by fashion consumers outside it (Williams 2016). By comparison, and despite the extant

research on celebrity culture in the game more broadly, there has been comparatively little investigation into the connections between fashion and professional *footballers*. Indeed, football is largely neglected in histories of British fashion, perhaps underpinned by its genesis as a professional form rooted in working-class cultural values.

The underpinning shifts that have facilitated the development of the football and fashion relationship are multiple and intersectional, traversing various industries, institutions and actors. The key modern turning point in the political economy of football in England was the formation of the English Premier League in 1992. In the first weeks of its inaugural 1992-93 season crowd numbers looked ominous, a striking 11.7% drop in attendance from the previous campaign (Tomlinson 1992, 43). Yet the Premier League was not a short-term gamble, more an innovative model based on the growth of a global media market. Its marketing slogan hailed it as "A Whole New Ball Game", promising change and novelty, and brought an advertising campaign that hinted at players' fashion and grooming routines. In a blatantly unethical coup, BSkyB had won the media rights to 60 games per season for an at-the-time massive £300million over the next five years (a figure that had reached £5.3 billion for Sky's rights between 2022-25). In 1995 the Bosman Ruling by the European Court of Justice created an international market for player mobility. Drawing upon the European Union's founding principle of the free movement of human labour, it empowered players, offering them the prospect of a more internationalised career, lifting 'restrictions on the movement of out-of-contract players and the numbers of internationals that clubs could include in their respective squads' (Webber 2024, 4). The Premier League's growth and commercial success over the next three decades would have been inconceivable without these cultural, economic and political initiatives that also underpinned the development and growth of a cosmopolitan cultural product within the expanding global media market. In 2024 the

Premier League itself noted that its product was watched in 189 out of 193 UN member states.

Notwithstanding the importance of these economic aspects, our interest here is primarily in emphasising and exploring *social* and *cultural* influences and shifts. To this end, this article makes two main arguments. First, some of the most significant aspects of the contemporary football and fashion relationship, and the more fertile possibilities for sociological analysis, are to be found beyond the common focus on white male players through examining the game's dynamic, conditional and intersectional relationships with race and gender. The developments we outline are rooted in challenges to traditional components and displays of white masculinity in the game, and they work to further destabilise them. These expansions generate novel and more inclusive manifestations of fashion and celebrity; but we also illustrate that, just as in other aspects of their participation, the stylistic predilections of female and Black players continue to be subject to forms of cultural regulation underpinned by gendered and racialised structures and practices. Second, we demonstrate the role of social media and the democratisation of communication around fashion. The agency afforded by digital platforms and social media sites is key to players' capacities to express their styles and create important brands in the process, but, as we highlight, these processes are subject to the neoliberal dynamics, markets and influences of the digital economy as well.

As a contextual precursor to the above discussions, we begin the article with an historical overview of the emerging relationship of football and fashion from the inter-war period and illustrate its embeddedness in normative tropes of white masculinity throughout the twentieth century. In the following sections we consider the challenges to this situation, addressing the considerable influence of female and Black footballers upon the football and fashion

relationship. Following that, we argue for the importance of emphasising shifts in social media and their effects upon fashion, as part of the wider branding and consumption of (digital) celebrity culture in English football. The article provides a critical overview of football and fashion that is distinct and original in its temporal and interdisciplinary range, illuminated by key examples from both within football itself and from selected print and digital sources from the fashion industries.

The emergence and development of the fashionable footballer

Between the World Wars, professional football began to be marketed more ambitiously, with the fashion of white, male players playing a key part. For example, footballers such as Preston North End's Harry Holdsworth and Bill Tremelling could dress in lightweight lounge suits and 'endorse 1937 fashions' (Russell 1997, 93). Such opportunities were relatively rare in the emerging professional culture of the game though, with financial and contractual opportunities far from those routinely experienced today. In his contemporaneous *English Journey*, J. B. Priestley (1987 [1933]) noted how Lancashire women were modelling themselves on female movie actors of the period, whereas male football fans had few examples of mediated role models comparable with the culturally influential and glamorous female stars of film. However, as Bailey's (2012) examination of *Men's Wear* trade magazine illustrates, it was not long before players in the 1950s endorsed garments such as Wetherdair and Stormgard raincoats and Mambo hats. In the 1960s national and club teams were decked out in formal wear produced by Burton, Cavalcade, Escorto, and Reliance, followed by Tootal, Rael Brook, Van Heusen and Peter England in the following decade.

A.H. Halsey (1978) confirmed the continuing theme of cultural change as manifest in popular cultural figures in his 1978 Reith Lecture, selecting Eddie Hapgood, captain of Arsenal FC

and England, as an example of the limited social mobility of professional footballers in the inter-war years. Tied to the maximum wage of the time, Hapgood supplemented his income by advertising chocolate bars and modelling gentlemen's fashions (Hill 2010). In his photograph in the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition of British sporting heroes, Hapgood strikes a model's pose, full-face to camera with groomed hair parted immaculately down the centre, wearing an Arsenal strip with the casual look of an open collar. With baggy football shorts, legs thickened by the protective shinguards of the time and sleeves rolled up as if prepared for some hard physical labour, he combines the model's look with the artisan's physicality (Huntington-Whiteley 1998).

Hapgood is a precursor of what Critcher (undated, 5), in his fourfold typology of the post-World War II male English professional footballer, identified as the traditional/located player, typified by Stanley Matthews whose playing career spanned the pre- and post-war WWII period. Such figures remained rooted in the context of their white, masculine, working-class origins and values, whatever the level of their transcending talent, combining an artisan's pride in their craft with personal modesty and relatively restricted ambitions (Bailey 2012). Nevertheless, Matthews appeared on the inaugural cover of *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, featured in children's jigsaw puzzles, promoted the Co-operative Wholesale Society's own-brand football boots, and became the first and only footballer to be knighted whilst still playing, at the age of 50 in 1965. This indicates a move towards the professional footballer as a public persona/celebrity with a commercial value outside the game itself, to which fashion industries were soon to take note.

Critcher's second category is the transitional/mobile type of player, represented in the figure of Bobby Charlton who, irrespective of the success accrued to him following the abolition of

players' maximum wage in 1961, continued to evoke the values of the working-class gent. The third category in Critcher's typology represents the incorporated/embourgeoised figure expressive of the dominant culture of the time, and a crosser of class and cultural boundaries: the diligent aspiring figure of Alan Ball was instanced here. These types, as shown in Hewitt and Baxter's (2006) *The Fashion of Football*, prided themselves on a traditional smart look, in the suit and tie of the dressed-up working-class male ideal. A player noted by several of these authors' respondents as the best-dressed of the 1960s was England's World Cup-winning captain Bobby Moore, always "immaculate" whether besuited in the tradition of the working-class male's weekend "best" or casually attired in slacks and polo-neck jumper. Critcher's fourth and final category, the superstar/dislocated individual, marked the emergence of the footballer as celebrity and commodity combined, seemingly classless in a meritocratic world, seen at its most glamorous and simultaneously dysfunctional in George Best. It is in Best – dubbed by the press as the "Fifth Beatle", marking football's status as an increasingly high-profile part of the entertainment industry – that the football and fashion relationship begins to emerge more clearly, as seen in his co-ownership of a menswear business with Manchester City's Mike Summerbee. A fifth category that could be added to the Critcher typology might be the rationalised/cosmopolitan, commodified football celebrity (Tomlinson 1999, 59), represented by the casually attired and business-focused entrepreneurial Kevin Keegan, depicted in a 1972 photo wearing a tank-top, flares and platform shoes, posing behind a work-desk surrounded by newspapers and documents (Huntington-Whiteley 1998). As the "modern footballer-businessman" (Mason 1989, 163), Keegan operated successfully in England and mainland Europe across a range of commercial ventures connected to the celebrity image, establishing a model that hundreds of succeeding players have embodied, not least through fashion.

At the turn of the millennium – and arguably signifying a sixth category in the typology – the style-conscious, cosmopolitan and "metrosexual" (Coad, 2014) player was personified by David Beckham. Beckham emerged in a context of intensifying fascination by the "style press" in 'men's interest in fashion, style and narcissism…in a period in which sport and fashion have become more closely linked, in which footballers and pop stars gravitate to one another's glamour, and in which fame has itself become commodified' (Whannel 2001, 148). Beckham's selective embrace of gendered (manicures, a sarong and an Alice band) and racialised (cornrow hair) fashion and style forms (Cashmore 2004, Rahman 2004) are perhaps of most significance for the key themes addressed in this article. They epitomized a less rigid notion of masculinity that allowed for more aesthetic playfulness, self-styling and a 'testing of cultural boundaries' (Coad 2014, 188), but also laid him open to critiques of cultural opportunism and appropriation. Men's fashion magazine *GQ* editor Dylan Jones neatly summarises Beckham's popular appeal:

> I think his feminisation is funny and clever and fascinating. He is quintessentially working class, he's heterosexual, a brilliant sportsman, he's famous, self-deprecating, he's the most famous man in Britain, so it makes it very easy for him to walk around in sarongs or do funny things with his hair (cited in Hewitt and Baxter 2006, 226).

Beckham's fashion impact continues well into his retirement, perhaps most famously in his ambassadorial role at the British Fashion Council.

The Premier League has provided the framework for the evolution of the modern male footballer within a mediated form of global consumption: it frames him as a commodified figure representing a rational/cosmopolitan "type" adapting to the demands and opportunities of an evolving global media culture – including the negotiation of personal status and identity on worldwide social media platforms and, for some, the opportunity to present themselves as fashion leaders. Such a communications infrastructure has opened opportunities to undermine the hegemony of the stereotypical white male footballer; players of colour, both male and

female, have transformed the cultural 'look' of the game and are at the heart of the story of the rise and rise of the fashion-conscious footballer, as we see in the succeeding two sections.

Football, fashion and gender

Twenty years after FIFA Present Sepp Blatter urged women players to wear 'more feminine outfits' including 'tighter shorts' (BBC Sport 2004), provoking USA star Brandi Chastain's (2004) prompt condemnation of his 'ludicrous' sexist proposal, issues pertaining to clothing in English women's football remain prominent. Rather than dealing with archaic administrators, the debate now focuses largely on modifications to sports kit in response to players' health concerns and whether manufacturers can – or, indeed, have the willingness to – keep up with the pace of the women's game's growth. For instance, the England team and various club sides have moved to darker coloured shorts amid players' apprehensions around wearing white kit during their periods (Taylor 2023). There have also been calls for more resources to be put into the design and manufacture of boots marketed to female players to cater for a wider range of specific foot shapes, considering elevated levels of anterior cruciate ligament [ACL] injuries (Ingle 2024). Chloe Kelly removing her match shirt and sprinting across the Wembley pitch wearing a sports bra, after scoring the winning goal for England in the Euro 2022 final, rekindled memories of Chastain's cultural iconicity after removing her own shirt after the USA's 1999 World Cup victory (Javed 2022) and the subsequent impact that gesture had on representations and participation among women and girls. Nonetheless, residual gendered inequalities in merchandise provision reemerged during the 2023 World Cup when it emerged that Nike had not originally made a replica jersey for England goalkeeper Mary Earps available for sale (Dale 2023).

Until relatively recently, *sports* women were not ascribed celebrity status, rendering their attribution and recognition as fashion leaders unlikely. Yet, fashion brands now actively seek out partnerships, collaborations and endorsements with women footballers, utilizing the distinctive, emerging cultural capital that the women's game holds. For example, on appointing Alex Scott as a brand ambassador for its *Every Moment is an Occasion* campaign, Reiss (2022) stated that the range 'showcases a vibrant new palette and inspires the wearer to live confidently. This is synonymous with Alex, her history, and her own personal style'. Current England captain, Leah Williamson, is likewise a brand ambassador for Gucci, in a partnership that, according to *The Space Between* marketing agency, 'aligns with Leah's principles as a young, progressive woman unafraid to be herself and advocate for others, embodying authenticity' (Kapadia 2023). In December 2023 Williamson also appeared in the BBC television series *Out of Office*, playing piano with the BBC Concert Orchestra, expanding her cultural profile far beyond the contours of the football stadium.

In recent years, Williamson fronted Nike's collaboration with London designer Martine Rose; while fellow Lionesses stars Lucy Bronze, Alessia Russo and Chloe Kelly had prominent involvement in campaigns for ALIGNE, Adidas' Z.N.E. athleisure collection, and Calvin Klein underwear, respectively (Dale 2024). Alessia Russo and Ella Toone were cover stars for *Elle UK*, Leah Williamson for *GQ* and Chloe Kelly for *GLAMOUR* (Karpel 2023). Lauren Hemp, Lauren James, Toone and Keira Walsh have all received substantial individual fashion profiles on the *Versus* music and culture website.

After decades of the game's marginalisation (Williams 2003), Culvin and Bowes (2023, 1) identify that 'significant changes have impacted the political, social, and economic field(s) of women's football' in recent years. Growth in participation rates among women and girls,

record attendances and the staging of matches at what have historically been men's stadiums, a flourishing in global tournaments and competitions, increased financial investment and prize money, and expanded media coverage have all occurred as the game professionalizes (ibid.). The above fashion examples speak to the growing profile of women's football and women footballers, and the concomitant, though still gradual, emergence of a fashionized celebrity culture in the English game. Audience research suggests that elite women players have become key role models, although some fans view that as a burden experienced differentially to male players (Allison *et al* 2024, Dunn 2016). In short, as Liston (2023, 176) notes, 'women's football is becoming more deeply embedded in the global social fabric, having emerged in the latter quarter of the twentieth century and offering a cultural alternative to the ideologies enshrined in the men's game'.

Culvin and Bowes (2023, 5) contend that 'women's relative inferiority in football cultures means that for women to enter the male dominated world of football, they must challenge dominant gender ideologies, contradicting conceptions of femininity and female appropriate involvement in sport'. Themen (2024) points out that women's football can thus be a space of challenge and subversion, where notions of "tradition" and normative ideas of femininity are contested and resisted. The growth of celebrity culture in women's football poses important sociological questions in relation to this situation, not least in how the emergence of leading players as fashion influencers invites us to consider how their identities and activities conform or not to these hegemonic models. Specifically, it is valuable to consider whether the involvement of elite women footballers with the fashion industries – through their own individual social media "branding" and media coverage of off-pitch activities, and their associations (formal or informal) with designer labels and fashion houses – provides opportunities, namely: to articulate their identities (gendered and others) and lifestyles; to

gain agency and influence over how they are represented in the media; and to make a living in a career that is short, precarious and comparatively poorly paid (Culvin 2021). These connections highlight a nuanced and intersectional interpretation of gender, identity and style, and challenge the idea that representations of sportswomen that do not focus on their role as athletes are necessarily objectifying and sexualizing. For instance, Harris and Trussell (2024) illustrate how social media can facilitate forms of self-representation that foreground agency, empowerment and authenticity, and can disrupt existing objectifying discourses of women's bodies in/and beyond sport (see Pocock and Skey 2022, Rogstad *et al* 2024 on the complexities and contestation of these representations and associated patterns of consumption).

However, involvement with fashion by women players reflects the problems and contradictions of contemporary neoliberal markets and digital economies. As Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a: 17) argue, sportswomen's social media representations remain strongly influenced by gender norms that converge at the intersections of postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities, and which accordingly 'encourage sportswomen to act as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for the construction and promotion of their online identities as marketable media products'. Associations with the fashion industries bring unprecedented economic gain and new forms of visibility for an elite group; but the liberatory potential of (self-)branding can still be limited. Moreover, fashion activities and representations may be re-feminising particular elite women players, in varied and complex ways (see for instance the fashion styles of Leah Williamson: @leahwilliamsonn); but the outcomes are both enabling and (re-)regulating. While fashion and stylistic content that offer the potential for distinct sources of representation *outside and beyond* sport might be less subjected to hegemonic objectifying and sexualizing gazes, in certain instances, these frames and

narratives can be as gendered, sexualising and heteronormative as previous tropes, with players remaining exposed to the corporeal and stylistic judgements of their followers (ibid.). As Toffoletti and Thorpe (ibid.: 13) contend:

> the power social media seemingly affords female athletes to control how they are represented in the media by forging their own profile and brand is not necessarily a form of gender emancipation for individual athletes, nor is the market an antidote to gender inequalities in sport coverage.

Female athletes are expected to display a higher degree of intimacy in their social media self-representation and to mediatize much more so-called "backstage" content outside their athletic roles than male athletes (see Wanzer *et al* 2024). This is produced via visual aesthetics, tone and voice, but primarily through sharing more content from their personal lives (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018b). As the examples of Scott and Williamson as brand ambassadors outlined above testify, the 'athletic labour of femininity' requires female athletes to produce an idealised neoliberal – individualised, authentic, entrepreneurial and empowered – subjectivity, whilst also presenting these acts as enjoyable leisure rather than commercial publicity (ibid).

Football, fashion and race

Substantial growth in the number of Black British players throughout the men's English Premier League era (although markedly less so in the more recently established [2010] Women's Super League), as well as a broader internationalization of its players, staff, owners and supporters, has been integral to the competition's success and profile. A major social consequence of this shift has been the transformation of players' dressing-room cultures, off-field social practices, and consumption and stylistic habits towards more diverse, cosmopolitan tastes. These processes reflect, embody and acculturate the heritages of the racially diverse players and fanbase that constitute and shape the domestic modern game in distinct and lasting ways (Jacobs 2022). Of particular relevance to this article are the ways

that forms of Black-influenced fashion, hair styling and cultural products have become more popular and conspicuously consumed among players from all ethnic backgrounds; and, at the same time, centrality of these accessories to the ways that Blackness is stigmatized and censured in professional football cultures and beyond.

The changing cultural status and influence of Black footballers, not least in their emergence as socially-embedded celebrities rather than simply sport stars – epitomized by Marcus Rashford's social justice campaigning for free school meals for disadvantaged children (Napolitano 2022) – provides critical context for new forms of marketing and consumption in the fashion industries. Players such as Jesse Lingard (JLINGZ) and Dele Alli (via the boohooMAN label) were among the first to develop their own fashion lines, and footballers of colour – male and female – have subsequently become fundamental to understanding contemporary manifestations of the football and fashion relationship. Mohamed Salah has exhibited his varied fashion choices via international glossy magazines and his own Instagram account, wearing *inter alia* Adidas Originals, Stone Island and Givenchy. His teammate Trent Alexander-Arnold is a brand ambassador for GUESS Jeans, while former player Alex Scott undertakes a similar role for Reiss (see previous section). Reece James has walked the runway for Nahmias. Alongside modelling their collections, Marcus Rashford has teamed up with Burberry on projects to support socially excluded young people in London and Manchester (de Klerk 2020). Intersections with gender and sexuality have also come to the fore, most famously in Dominic Calvert-Lewin wearing an ambiguously gendered "school uniform" of shirt and tie, blazer, short culottes, white ankle socks and chunky black loafers on the cover of Arena HOMME+.

The relationship between race, football and fashion also illuminates forms of (racial) capital and consumption pertaining to the modern game. Market providers have swiftly responded to these cultural trends, making football fashions available as a vehicle for new and alternative forms of distinction and identity in everyday leisure cultures, while generating new possibilities for the expression of cultural and symbolic capital. Popular sports brands like Adidas, Nike and Puma have all used models of colour – including famous non-sport figures like Little Mix singer Leigh-Anne Pinnock in Umbro's "sports-luxe collection" for women (Fabric PR, undated) – to project a particular multicultural urban aesthetic in an accelerated process of the branding of Black bodies. More broadly, forms of sport- and gym-influenced fashion lines – 'athleisure' (Craik 2020) – have made important transitions into mainstream fashion (de Klerk 2018), alongside the elevated fashion status of more conventional sports apparel. The 2018 Nike-manufactured Nigeria national team replica shirt received three million pre-orders and sold out in minutes. The kit was covered in streetwear blogs, and modelled by musicians and DJs, including Skepta, Not3s and Julie Adenuga (Abiade 2018). Ajax Amsterdam FC and the Dublin-based football club, Bohemians FC, have both produced kits inspired by Bob Marley. Coventry City FC (the 2-Tone record label), Liverpool FC (house music) and Manchester City FC (the Hacienda nightclub) have all played in strips with designs influenced by Black music cultures from their home cities (Doyle and Burdsey forthcoming). In 2022, Arsenal FC launched a warm-up shirt in the colours of the Jamaican flag as a tribute to London's iconic Notting Hill Carnival and the club's selection of nine Black players in a match twenty years earlier, and they continued the colourways in a tracksuit two years later. In 2024, the club's away kit involved a collaboration between manufacturer Adidas and London-based African heritage brand Labrum, featuring the Pan-African triptych of red, black and green, and a pattern that represents cowrie shells (Wright 2024). In 2023, Erling Haaland was appointed as an ambassador for Beats by Dr Dre

headphones, alongside LeBron James in the brand's "The King and The Viking" campaign (Houston 2023).

However, the above developments exist alongside the ever-present spectre of structural racism and anti-Blackness. Together with the contingent usage, celebration and commodification of their stylistic attributes and labour in the name of racial capitalism, the personal actions and choices of Black sports stars are subject to forms of racialized scrutiny, control and opprobrium (Andrews 1996). These actions contrast directly with the routinely lenient and even laudatory takes on any putatively excessive consumption practices by white players (Burdsey 2021, Leonard 2017). Comparative examples from other sports include the NBA's (National Basketball Association) attempts to control the "Hip-Hop dress" of its players (Lorenz and Murray 2014) and criticisms of Serena Williams's all-in-one "cat suit" playing outfit (Allen 2022).

Critiques of the fashion and style of Black footballers have always been part of the way their (intersectional) Blackness has been "policed" (Burdsey 2021, Campbell 2020, King 2004), as seen in attempts by managers to control the cultural proclivities and social activities of generations of Black players. They also manifest themselves in media representations that discursively and visually discipline the Black (sporting) body. Perhaps most infamously in English football, Jason Lee was subjected to the racial microaggression of having his dreadlocks ridiculed – via the song "He's got a pineapple on his head" – on the popular 1990s Friday night TV show *Fantasy Football League* (Carrington 1998). In contrast, David Beckham's decision to braid his hair in cornrows while playing for England in 2003 may have led to accusations of misplaced opportunism and even cultural appropriation but not racialized deviance, and he was spared the public humiliation that Lee and other Black

footballers have experienced (Moran 2000; see Joseph *et al* 2024 on the stigmatization and control of Black hair within [neo]colonial sporting structures).

This phenomenon is tied up in wider, longstanding perceptions of Black people in football, and white resentment towards the social and economic trappings of their sporting success. For example, Campbell (2020) found that coaches of Black players would bar them from nights out in London through fear that "Black London boys" being culturally attuned to the glitz and glamour of the capital's party scene would hamper their capacities for high-level performance. When Dele Alli signed for Everton in 2022, former player and now pundit Glenn Hoddle suggested that Alli's fashion interests were a distraction to his career. Hoddle added that Alli's outfit, as he was introduced to fans on the Goodison Park pitch – loose cut Chrome Hearts jeans, unbuttoned Prada bomber jacket, Lanvin trainers, beanie hat and gold chain – made him look as if 'he'd just got dragged off the street' (cited in *Versus* 2022). Raheem Sterling is castigated by the media for seemingly *all* his off-field pursuits, from having a tattoo to shopping in high-street store Primark and endorsing Clarks shoes (Burdsey 2021). Critiques of Dominic Calvert-Lewin's fashion choices and their mediatized dissemination – in the context of the example outlined earlier in this section, plus his collection of designer handbags (Maoui 2023) – intertwine with tropes of hegemonic masculinity and barely veiled homophobia and transphobia. In contrast, Jack Grealish falling out of favour from first-team selections with Manchester City FC and England is seldom attributed to his involvement in fashion, namely a multi-million-pound sponsorship with Gucci. Unlike their white teammates, Black players are required to sacrifice, abstain or carefully navigate the symbols and accessories of celebrity, including how they engage with and express their fashion.

Representation and consumption of football and fashion on social media

The insatiable hunger of print, television and social media for stories and images fuels feverish interest and demand among fans and followers in any aspect – however trivial – of elite footballers' personal and professional lives, including their fashion and lifestyle consumption (Church Gibson 2013, Raphael 2019). In turn, this has created opportunities for players to build personal brands, linked not only to their sports performance and successes but to how audiences connect with them as celebrities too. Bernardo *et al* (2022) illustrate the importance of professional footballers cultivating a mediated public persona, sourcing sponsorship opportunities and increasing their market value and wage-earning potential as well. Drawing on Borland and MacDonald (2003), Bernardo *et al* (2022, 596) describe the appeal of a footballer as "derived", not just from participation in the sport, but from the convergence of 'sales of sporting goods, advertising and merchandising'. Consequently, in the contemporary attention economy of social media, fashion and self-styling are important tools for celebrity footballers to shore up their market value. Smith's (2022) work on Premier League footballers' citizen roles as performed on social media (Instagram and X [formerly Twitter]) during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates a prominent level of engagement from both players and fans. Looking at how well-known footballers performed these roles on social media, Smith illustrates a notion of celebrity "influence" that exceeds mere lifestyle and appearance.

Sports spectatorship and mediation have developed regimes for the visual consumption of professional athletes' bodies. This has enabled male – and, increasingly, female – footballers to commercially leverage their celebrity status and idealized physique by modelling underwear (prominent examples include former Premier League stars David Beckham and Freddie Ljungberg, and, more recently, Jude Bellingham and Neymar for Kim Kardashian's

Skims label). These fashion partnerships are mutually beneficial, creating financial synergies between the fashion label and the celebrity player. Not only do they both reach new consumer audiences through the crossing of fashion and sports audiences, but the fashion brand gains valuable endorsement from a famous footballer, and the celebrity footballer also gains validation, confirmation and extension of their status by being celebrated as a fashion model.

Social media is central to how professional athletes and sportswear manufacturers alike build and manage their public persona as a marketable product (Loureiro *et al* 2024, Pegoraro and Jinnah 2012). It is a key mechanism for engaging with fans and offers a platform for sportspeople to promote other products given the significant contribution from brand endorsements to their income (Klostermann *et al* 2023). Whether managed by the individual player or their PR team, social media has given footballers more control over their celebrity status as product. Whilst often integrated into a larger ecosystem of commercial structures, including club management, public relations agencies, sponsors and publishers, social media platforms give individual celebrity footballers access to more direct communication with fans and wider audiences. The Portuguese star, Cristiano Ronaldo, for instance, has one of the highest numbers of followers on Instagram (600+ million followers in 2024). Importantly, as Klostermann *et al* (ibid., 1) also point out, social media 'enables [players] to share private moments, ideas, opinions, and feelings with their subscribers', which are key aspects to creating a sense of relatability and authenticity which is vital to the parasocial relationships through which celebrityhood is produced. However, successfully mobilizing one's celebrity brand and influencer capital on social media requires both resources and skills to forge these connections and create newness to refresh interest over time. This is where fashion is key.

The impact of visual social media on the football and fashion relationship is illustrated by accounts such as @footballerfits and @femalefootballerfits (https://footballerfits.co.uk) that are dedicated to documenting players' fashions. Using the aesthetic conventions of fashion photography and alluding to the most prestigious and studied arenas of fashion, such as the catwalk, these Instagram accounts post images of players as they appear in different outfits in stadium "tunnels", from where they enter the pitch after getting changed for a game. The tunnel framed as a catwalk offers a direct intersection of football and fan, and examples from @footballerfits and @femalefootballerfits show how players make creative use of this particular frame to produce an aesthetic of personal style and of being fashion-knowledgeable (see for example "Jules Koundé's hardest tunnel fits at Barcelona so far").[4]

Fashion is an already established cornerstone of celebrity reporting, which on social media exists alongside sports celebrities' own curating of images of themselves wearing clothes that communicate their style and attitude to life. It offers opportunities for footballers to show individualism and add dimensions to their public persona, beyond what they are known for on and off the pitch. As culture and industry, fashion is driven by the desire for the new, and its straddling of the everyday and extraordinary feeds visual consumption of celebrity in the social media flow. Professional footballers' use of social media can also be linked to what Law *et al* (2021) describe as increasing demands on footballers to engage in conspicuous consumption to shore up their market value and to fit in with a collective identity of leading an aspirational lifestyle. For audiences, the heroic journey of becoming financially independent, as a successful football professional, portrayed as achieved via hard work and honing of talent, is often what is appealing in displays of lifestyle and consumption. Footballers who are successful both as sports personalities and as social media influencers

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[4] https://www.instagram.com/p/CnzKSuctV1W/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D&img_index=1

can acquire ambassador deals for luxury fashion brands (e.g. Jack Grealish's deal with Gucci as noted above; and French player Kylian Mbappé with Dior and Hublot). Of course, this applies to a limited, privileged elite. Such demands can pressurize other, less successful and high-profile players to engage in similar, aspirational consumption practices as a means of gaining acceptance in dominant occupational subcultures (ibid.), or they remain completely outside them. Moreover, as discussed earlier, key differences exist between male and female players regarding the expectations and regulations placed on their online visibility and the outcomes and value that derive from that (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018a).

Concluding remarks

This article has argued that some of the most significant aspects of the contemporary football and fashion relationship are to be found beyond the common focus on white male players through examining the game's dynamic, conditional and intersectional relationships with race and gender. Key developments taking place in football and fashion are rooted in challenges to traditional components and displays of white masculinity in the game, and they work to further destabilise them. The role of social media and the democratisation of communication around fashion is central to these shifts. The agency afforded by digital platforms and social allows players to express their styles and create important brands, sometimes challenging but at others reinforcing neoliberal dynamics, markets and influences of the digital economy.

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has seen an extraordinary burst of technological and communications developments, which have incrementally redefined our social, cultural and political lives in the era of spectacle and mass communications. Goldblatt emphasises the distinctiveness of the football industry in that the 'raw material out of which the media-football complex constructs the spectacle remains intensely local' (Goldblatt 2014, 38).

Consumption and self-fashioning need not therefore be wholly controlled by the mechanics of the spectacle; the gradual then intensifying coming together of football and fashion in the ways discussed in this article confirms the visionary claim of Wilson (1985, 12) that fashion has the capacity to contribute to the 'connected tissue of our cultural organism'. It does so – among other connectivities – via the sphere of football culture, which can challenge forms of exploitation by national and global businesses and corporations. The football and fashion relationship has many outcomes, both manifest and yet to emerge: some challenging a dominant culture of the men's game, others merely confirming the status quo of the élite; some reinforcing the privileges of whiteness and reiterating anti-Blackness, others cementing a sense of everyday multiculture; some flattering those who have experienced dramatic forms of social mobility and enhanced cultural status, others prioritizing interventionist activism to make the game a more credible force for equality and inclusivity.

Bruzzi (2000) identifies that modern footballers might be fully and sincerely embodying identity, aspiration and (life)style outcomes; or they may just be acting as very well-paid fashion mannequins for sponsored outfits that most ordinary people can only dream of purchasing. Perhaps they are doing both. The bearer of fashion is never the architect solely of their own agency. Greenblatt (2005, xv) recalls the "compelling" argument of Michel Foucault that the 'innermost experiences of the individual' are 'called into being and shaped by the institution that claimed only to police them'. To return to *Culted's* provocation at the start of this article, footballers may *still* be "dressing like sh*t". The key difference, then, is arguably less about players' sartorial choices themselves; rather, it is more a case of the elite fashion industries and associated media influencers deciding that footballers now possess cultural values that are worth marketing and monetising to popularise their own high-end goods, augmenting a celebration of excessive consumption as identity in the process. While

footballers and fashion houses benefit, the distance between ordinary fans and their heroes only grows, economically and culturally. Indeed, most of the fashion houses endorsed by elite women players are far beyond the financial reach and outside the cultural spheres of everyday consumers (although brands such as Drew House, endorsed by Lauren James, retail at the upper end of a high street budget). This reinforces a perceived inaccessibility of these players, with the celebrated popularity of, and identification with, the England squad far less evident among socially and racially excluded girls (Football Beyond Borders 2023). The England women's squad is regularly comprised overwhelmingly of white players and, notwithstanding the fashion linkups of the likes of James and Taylor Hinds, plus ex-player Alex Scott, other players' associations largely reinscribe the whitened femininity of the domestic and international game (Burdsey 2021, Leslie-Walker *et al* 2024, Ratna 2017).

That is not to say that the football and fashion relationship has no value outside of its economic advantages for a privileged few. Fashion can change lives, create alternative identities and subvert social structures. Subtle changes in cultural expressions of masculinity can be observed by comparing the official off-pitch outfit of the England men's team in 2018 – a business-like three-piece navy suit, worn with a formal shirt and tie – to the 2024 outfit, which centred a relaxed knit polo shirt and used a soft colour palette. Whilst the tailored suit is associated with 'hegemonic masculine configurations of practice – power, status, and rationality' (Barry and Weiner 2019, 151), the later outfit signals a shift that the then team manager Gareth Southgate linked to his coaching methods: 'This year, it will be more short-sleeved knits than a suit and tie, because we're trying to create a relaxed environment…When you're working with young lads, you don't want to be too stiff – in what you're doing or wearing' (cited in Christensen 2024). This stylistic shift also embraces an 'effortless' and less performative masculinity, aligned with broader cultural trends where markers of power, social

status, success and taste are coded using more subdued designs and softer colours. Football and fashion are increasingly linked to social justice too. The designs of Hattie Crowther have both brought attention to the rights of LGBTQ+ communities in relation to the 2022 Qatar men's World Cup (Rodgers 2022) and functioned as a rejoinder to the racist attacks on social media towards England's Black stars in the aftermath of the men's EURO2020 final (Muk 2024). In 2024, musician Self Esteem collaborated with designers The Art of Football to produce a special football shirt to stimulate discussions on domestic abuse (Enemua 2024).

Whatever footballers are doing with their clothes, this article demonstrates one thing is incontestable: the football and fashion relationship offers a novel, instructive and significant lens to explore football's continuing importance as a site of ongoing social struggle and a field of cultural contestations.

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