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Manufacturing a Messiah: How Nike and LeBron James Co-Constructed the Legend of King James

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Abstract

This monograph analyzes how Nike and the athlete himself jointly commodified the public persona of LeBron James, with James cast in two normative narratives: (a) the Messiah and (b) hegemonic masculinity, stripping James of his Blackness and making him identifiable to a mainstream audience. The open-ended configuration of these narratives allows for "pivot points" in James' life. Real-life developments fold into the construction of James, mitigating damage and shaping narratives in the process. New avenues of research in critical celebrity-branding analysis focus on areas such as the cross sections of endorsements and social media as well as the process of how mediated narratives normalize subjectivities.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, narrative analysis, normalization, commodification

Sport has become one of America's most prominent, pervasive, and important cultural institutions (McGarry, 2010). Its power to enact, perpetuate, and craft cultural norms reaches all levels of society through a multitude of communicative outlets

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(Warde, 2006), as evident from the sheer amount of money invested in the sports industry to the vast numbers of people who personally participate in sport (Meân & Halone, 2010). As sport has grown, so too has the celebrity power of star athletes, turning these athletes into role models for cultural norms (Lavelle, 2010). This process has been accelerated by the rise in media penetration and platforms as well as the ways in which companies who sponsor athletes amplify them.

The National Basketball Association's (NBA) LeBron James represents an ideal case study of today's multi-mediated, branded athlete. Targeted early in his high school career as a potential superstar, James was featured on both *ESPN the Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated* covers before even graduating high school (Friend, 2002). He signed his first endorsement contract (with Nike for over $100 million) as a senior in high school and has been one of the company's primary star athletes since (Windhorst & Pluto, 2007). In the 8 years since his signing, Nike has run three major James-oriented advertising campaigns, in addition to a number of single-case commercials, ingratiating James to a mainstream audience while uncoupling him from the stereotypes associated with being a Black athlete, which include laziness (Grano, 2010), a hyper-sexualization (Forbes, 2009; Jackson & Balaji, 2011) that turns Black people into either meat (Leonard, 2009) or just a physical specimen (Bigler & Jeffries, 2008), and so on.

This monograph explores the dialogic formation and subsequent management of James' brand through (a) Nike commercials featuring James and (b) James' autonomous actions related to these commercials. The two primary narratives embedded within Nike's television advertisements feature James as (a) the ideal hegemonic male and (b) a Messianic figure. We illustrate how Nike inscribes James with the identifiable markers of a Messiah and the markers of the ultimate hegemonic male and also how these narratives are, in part, responses to James' autonomous actions. This co-construction between celebrity and companies of celebrity brands in today's fractured media environment facilitates the mainstreaming of these brands, highlighting the dialectical tension between resistance and control that Gramsci (1985) argues is innate within all hegemony.

Literature Review

Getting the most return on its investment in LeBron James involved Nike's crafting of narratives surrounding him to make him "safe" to the public. These narratives close the space between James and the fans; therefore, they must be familiar narratives to make James' inclusion seem natural. Since James is Black, he is already an unnatural fit for most normalized narratives as minorities have frequently been symbolically annihilated in mainstream culture (Gross, 2001). Therefore, James is decoupled from his Blackness and recast as White. This decoupling along with the escalation of hypermasculinity and the inflation of Messianic qualities allows James to become both safe and consumable. The manner in which narratives function as loci of power and how they are reified across time and culture will be the central focus of this review.

Dominant Discourses and the Production of Cultural Norms

Normalized narratives are stories embedded within society (Lee & Meyer, 2010)—stories that everyone of a particular culture knows or should know. These narratives generally speak to foundational aspects of a particular culture (Lee & Meyer, 2010). As Fisher (1985) posits, humans are uniquely storytelling beings, communicating with each other and understanding the world through stories. Normalized narratives are stories that are understood across culture, acting as archetypical stories within that culture that can become rhetorical tools of hegemony (Montessori, 2011). These stories become parts of larger corpuses of knowledge or discourses. Discursive formations are bodies of knowledge that guide behavior through governing rules. We use the word discourse in Foucault's sense, where a discourse is the shared understanding of cultural norms and a discursive formation involves the regularities that help to produce such understandings (Foucault, 1972). Normative narratives, then, are one of these regularities, becoming a tool of the dominant discourse to marginalize groups of people through "symbolic annihilation" while keeping other groups of people in power (Gross, 2001, p. 117). In sum, normative narratives reify governing rules of a dominant discourse.

Miller (2009) believes Foucault offers an ideal set of tools to study hegemony within sport, as sport "involves both the imposition of authority from above and the joy of autonomy from below. It exemplifies the exploitation of the labour [sic] process, even as it delivers autotelic pleasures" (Miller, 2009, p. 190). Consequently, sport is a cultural discourse accessible to all with the ability to reify existing normative narratives by reinforcing the governing rules of these discourses through invisible means. However, well-hidden discourse comes into conflict with groups that the discourse marginalizes. This normalizing viewpoint is vital to understanding how it is possible for Nike to untie James from negative racial stereotypes associated with Blackness and fuse him to positive, cultural norms.

Viewing hegemony as willing submission to dominant discourses facilitates an understanding of how normalizing narratives function to defuse interrogation of subjugating discourses. However, as Lynch (2002) notes, much of the work on "hegemony has come to be understood in critical research to indicate only one side of [the] dialectic relationship" between control and resistance (p. 439). This article explores both sides of this dialectic relationship by foregrounding James' agency in the construction of his brand and subsequent cultural understandings of race. Such an exploration allows for the dissection of "discourse as a social practice" to be understood as "socially constituted, historical and contingent, rather than essentialist . . . . Discourse [that] can be contested or modified" (Montessori, 2011, p. 171). As will be explored in the coming sections, associated normative narratives code Blackness as a negative attribute (Grano, 2010). Therefore, Nike endeavors to make James fit the normative narratives of Whiteness through the distancing of James from these negative stereotypes and the positioning of positive normative narratives with James as the main character. However, James cannot be untied from his body, as "The body clearly matters" (Woodward, 2011, p. 211), and central to his body is his Blackness.

Commodification of Black Bodies

Stereotypes associated with Black athletes include lifestyles associated with "drugs, violence, cheating, selfishness, laziness" (Grano, 2010, p. 255). Mediated representations are partially responsible for this construction of Black masculinity—specifically Black athletes, as much of the media works to keep Black masculinity contained to reinforce "White ideological stereotypes of Black men" (Balaji, 2009, p. 21). Racism imbued in American culture and history kept Black athletes from endorsements regardless of their transcendent talents. As Johnson and Roediger (2000) catalog in their exploration of O. J. Simpson as the first true crossover Black celebrity, this barrier to endorsements for Black athletes was and is a product of both racism and perceived audience:

> Advertising firms, reacting to research demonstrating that commercials overwhelmingly focused on and appealed to whites, stridently maintained that ads should not "look like America" but should look like what advertisers thought white mainstream audiences thought America should look like. (p. 43)

This produced a culture in advertising where the only use of Black images on products were demeaning—oftentimes "servile and anonymous" (p. 43), creating a system of "commodity racism" (p. 44). The use of these negative stereotypes can be a tool of profit, transferring power over Black bodies to the audience (Oates & Durham, 2004). However, in subjugating its endorsers, a company lowers its growth potential because the audience has less ability to identify with the athletes on a personal level.

Black athletes are associated with "strength, speed, and muscularity" (Anderson & McCormack, 2010, p. 145). These traits are part of hegemonic masculinity, generally coded as White (Trujillo, 1991). For the purpose of this article, we follow Trujillo's definition of hegemonic masculinity, grounding the concept in 5 tenets: (a) power and control, (b) occupational achievement, (c) familial patriarchy, (d) frontiersmanship, and (e) heterosexuality. In the analysis and discussion, the dialogic branding of James is shown to endorse parts of these tenets while challenging others, producing a brand of James that is both raced through the body and de-raced through normative understandings of Blackness. As Anderson and McCormack (2010) articulate, "Black athletes are perceived as thugs, masculinized by their sports space" and they primarily "sweat, fuck, and fight" (p. 145). Nike and James distance his brand from these negative associations of Blackness, while embracing the positive associations.

Branding

Much of the branding literature focuses on products and organizations—positioning brands as the collective construction of identity of all stakeholders of said products and organization. As media diversifies and celebrity culture rises, celebrities themselves become brands (Miller & Laczniak, 2011). Specifically analyzing Nike's strategies, Grow (2008) posits that brands are "(a) living things, (b) sacred entities, and (c) emotional promises" (p. 314), reinforcing the idea that inorganic brands (products and companies) "have 'personalities,' in that they are associated with sets of human characteristics that serve symbolic or self-expressive functions for consumers" (Harris, 2007, p. 297). The goal of a product or celebrity brand is to make their collectively constructed and understood personality align with consumer expectations, so that those consumers will *buy*. For celebrity brands, this purchase includes both the literal purchase of goods and the pathos and ethos the celebrity promotes via public performances (e.g., endorsements, interviews) along with their actual jobs. A hegemonic view of this process reveals branding techniques to be partially responsible for the perpetuation of subjugating racial narratives.

From a social constructionist perspective, brands themselves are dynamic: "*To a consumer brands are a language—a meaning system*. To a consumer to whom the brand exists, it is a way to identify and categorize products. Over time, consumers add to this identification and categorization" (Bendinger, as cited in Berger, 2001, p. 228, italics original). Each time a consumer encounters new brand-related information, the construction of that brand is altered. Therefore, each celebrity performance is an opportunity to positively or negatively change a brand in the consumers' mind. Here, the autonomy of today's celebrity crystallizes the dialectic tension of hegemony, as their actions cannot be attributed to complete manipulation of sponsors, representing the resistance in this tension. In James' case, each time he steps on the court, speaks in an interview, adds a tattoo, or participates in a commercial, his brand is subject to public scrutiny. Arguing that "A *brand is a concept*" (p. 228, italics in original), Berger (2001) posits that active management by the celebrity necessitates Bendinger's understanding of brand as more than a name or a trademark. This expansion of brand to an abstract concept creates a space for the exploration of modern athletes as active creators and managers of their own brand, but brands that are collectively constructed and layered. Miller and Laczniak (2011) provide a compelling explanation of how this works today:

> As consumers, we "buy" celebrities by going to their movies, watching them play a sport, and listening to their music, insights, or witticisms. In addition to selling themselves, celebrities also endorse goods, services, and ideas. In this function, they lend their name, their image and, most important, their personal meaning to the brands they promote. (p. 499)

Put succinctly, the web of media athletes produce creates a system of meaning, constructing their brand. Through this web, athletes become part of consumers' (fans') meaning systems, extending beyond surface interpretations and profit motives of the corporate sport world into the social world of subjectivities, including race.

Co-Constructing "King James": 2003–Present

Opening Tip: Commercials Before a Cohesive Campaign

Rookie Statline (2003–2004 Season): 0 All-Star Appearances, 0 First-Team All-NBA, 0 Most Valuable Player Awards (MVP), 0 NBA Championships

James Talks. The hype surrounding James was considerable from before entering high school. It continued to crescendo as he became the first sophomore to ever win Ohio's Mr. Basketball and then received regular visits from shoe company representatives, including Nike founder and CEO Phil Knight (Wahl, 2002). Crafting himself as the next great NBA player, James unflinchingly embraced the hype surrounding him, stating: "they let that 17-year-old golfer [Ty Tryon] on the PGA Tour. You've got tennis players competing professionally when they're 14. Why not basketball players?" (Wahl, 2002). More directly, James projected himself as a great player:

> "A lot of players know how to play the game," LeBron says, "but they really don't know how to play the game, if you know what I mean. They can put the ball in the hoop, but I see things before they even happen. You know how a guy can make his team so much better? That's one thing I learned from watching Jordan." (Wahl, 2002)

In this quote, James calls attention to his greatness as a by-product of his cerebral abilities, not his physical abilities, negating the stereotypes surrounding most Black athletes. Furthermore, he cements the heir-apparent narrative by mentioning Jordan as someone he aspires to emulate. James embraced the media-supported narrative constructing him as the next Jordan, even if others lamented the pressure this placed on a 17-year-old (St. John, 2003). A consistent story frame from his time dealt with the pressure the hype created. Yet, James owned the hype, crafting a forceful image of himself while culling both the control and the frontiersman tenets of hegemonic masculinity: "I never complained about the media ... I worked hard. I put in every hour to make myself better. Jesus Christ made me famous. None of you all made me famous" (St. John, 2003). James constructs himself as a self-made celebrity rather than a media-produced figure, connecting himself to a higher power. Intentional or not, the Messiah narrative originates with his reference to Jesus.

Nike Responds. There were two main commercials that aired during his rookie year with James as the centerpiece. The first debuted the night of his first game, featuring a dramatization of his first game. In it, James gets the ball on the opening possession at the 3-point line. As the announcers talk about the pressure on James at just 18 years of age, he freezes. Mike Bibby (a veteran All-Star point guard), who is guarding him, shrugs his shoulders and looks around in bewilderment. The camera pans out and we hear jeers from the audience as the announcers state "I've never seen anything like it." This continues for almost the entirety of the 60-s spot, until in the closing seconds James smiles and laughs at the camera and drives toward the basket. The screen fades to black with Nike's "Just Do It" slogan accompanied by the sound of a made basket. In response to the jeerers who had yelled "You're a joke" and "You ain't nothing," the spot reverts to James running to the opposite end of the floor as he says "That's funny." The title of the spot, "Pressure," bolsters the presentation of James as someone who does not easily rattle and someone who is one of a kind—a transcendent talent. Thus, the commercial builds on the brand that James himself built through his interactions with media outlets in high school.

The spot also enhances both normative narratives that Nike and James jointly construct. First, by showing James as completely in control of the situation, the spot demonstrates his power, enveloping the first tenet of hegemonic masculinity. The spot plays with expectations by offering James an awkward beginning, but giving James the last laugh—literally—shows he is in complete control of not only himself but everyone around him. This control is also the first hint of the Messiah narrative. Since James controls the whole arena—and seemingly the world—as we get shots of fans in their living room watching the game on television, he is a figure that transcends personhood. Second, this control situates James in a cerebral narrative, as he has power through his stillness. It positions James on the mind side of the Cartesian mind/body duality, distancing him from negative Black athlete stereotypes, amplified even more by the omission of the visual of James making the layup.

James Acts. In his junior year of high school, James was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with the headline "The Chosen One" (Wahl, 2002). James welcomed the headline, soon tattooing "Chosen 1" from shoulder to shoulder (Nike LeBron, 2009). This was the first instance of James' ink revealing a branding strategy (as his first tattoo) but not the last. His next tattoo, also inked in high school, was of a lion wearing a crown. Early in his rookie NBA season, James updated this tattoo with the label "King James" (Nike LeBron, 2009). Both of these tattoos are reference points for the crafting of James' brand that Nike utilizes. Furthermore, both speak to the Messiah narrative crafted around James and continuing through the entirety of Nike's campaigns.

Nike Responds. The first cohesive Nike ad campaign for James aired during his rookie year, the "Witness" series, was immediately imbued with a religious connotation with the tagline, "We Are All Witnesses." While obvious religious connotations are incorporated, it is important to ground this campaign in what preceded it. The Messiah narrative, while only permeating parts of the "Pressure" commercial, is clearly illustrated in his next commercial, "The Book of Dimes." This commercial aired after the tagline "We Are All Witnesses" had been released in print ads but before the series of television ads aired. James is dubbed "The Chosen One" to open this spot, reestablishing the Messiah narrative and referencing James' tattoo. The setting of the commercial is what appears to be a religious service on a basketball court, with the preacher, actor/comedian Bernie Mac, at a pulpit under the hoop. Behind him is a gospel choir and Mac is preaching to a crowd. He starts "Let us read from the playbook, the King James playbook." The reference to "King James" intones three different normative narratives: first, it fleshes out the religious narrative as the King James Bible is pervasive in American Christianity and links directly to the setting of the commercial; second, it elevates James to the role of a leader, fitting both the control and familial patriarchy tenets of hegemonic masculinity and also tying into the "Witness" campaign; and finally, it reinforces James' self-constructed nickname, "King James," lending him more power. By using two self-appointed monikers James had tattooed on himself, Nike illustrates the power of individuals in creating personas while also co-opting James' autonomy, demonstrating the hegemonic dialectic.

The end of this commercial features James passing out *dimes*[1] during the worship service, where the effects of his passes are either a miraculous basket or the bolstered spirit within the pass receiver. The entirety of James' screen time is accompanied by the choir singing his praises. While the Messiah narrative is overtly enforced in this ad, the hegemonic masculinity narrative is a bit more subtle.

Of note is that this commercial was offered later in James' rookie year, when it had become clear that despite his overwhelming physical size, quickness, and athletic advantages, James often deferred to teammates with passes. Nike uses this as a way to reinforce tenets of hegemonic masculinity by elevating the familial patriarchy aspects of this trait. The preacher says that James "Didn't ask for hops … " instead he "asked for court vision" because "he wanted glory for the team." This statement, coupled with the choir singing about his unselfish passing, places James as the head of his team's family, ensuring their success through the involvement of the other pieces. James is framed as "safe" because he shares and is therefore uninterested in the normal pursuits of the "unsafe" Black athlete. It also references James' own descriptions of his game from high school, as being a facilitator is the crux of what James described as important to elevate himself above those players who just know how to "put it in the hoop" (Wahl, 2002).

Fast Break: Witness

2005–06 Season: 2 All-Star Appearances, 1 First-Team All-NBA, 0 MVP, 0 NBA Championships

Nike Continues. In 2006, James' third year in the NBA, he led his Cleveland Cavaliers to the playoffs for the first time. The "Witness" campaign had been in heavy rotation in print promotion, but Nike waited until the playoffs to unveil its first cohesive television campaign centered on James. The first spot in this series again focuses on the Messiah narrative. The 30-s spot includes fans in the city of Cleveland idolizing

James, holding signs and donning T-shirts with the slogan, "We Are All Witnesses." Additionally, we see relics in James' image, from a bobble head to a child's drawing. Fans are also shown painting their faces in preparation to see James—donning the ceremonial garb to pay homage to their deity. The spot concludes with a building-sized billboard portraying James as, literally, larger than life. James is again trumpeted in this spot as the Chosen One, a basketball player God gave to Cleveland to lead them to the Promised Land. Nike is asking the audience to forget about how they normally view athletes and instead elevate James to level predominantly reserved for admiration and worship.

The campaign did more than just reestablish established tropes; it added nuance to the Messiah narrative by filtering in hegemonic masculinity into future commercials. These ads came in two different forms, (a) slow-motion, black-and-white shots of James doing something amazing on the court with either an awestruck fan's voice-over or an inspired gospel music, or (b) spots featuring fans talking about James and the variety of gifts he possesses. The former ads do much the same as the first ad of the campaign, showing James as an idolized figure worthy of worship. The latter ads have this element, as each of the narrators is identified by his or her name and "Witness" at the beginning of the spot, alluding to the disciples. However, James' hegemonic masculinity is collectively amplified, as the fans generally focus on his physical prowess, his achievements on the court, or his leadership on the court and in the community.

In all, 23 documentary-style spots were offered featuring only one fan or one group of fans (typically a family) per spot. There is no video of James present, instead we are merely offered the witness/witnesses proclaiming their joy and allegiance to the church of James. The majority of the spots make reference to the first tenet of hegemonic masculinity, either describing a specific play where James showed physical force or grafting this attribute onto James himself. For example, one witness says, "The L-Train is the moment where LeBron can just not be stopped. Where he chooses to go through an opposing team and just bring it home." The imagery of James as a train was mentioned multiple times, amplifying the tenet of control and power as trains are nearly unstoppable once moving, in complete control of their destination.

Another recurring theme is tenet two, occupational achievement, as many of the spots speak to James' youth (at this point just 21) and the fact that he was already a multiple All-Star selection. The familial patriarchy and frontiersmanship tenets are also intoned, as James is described as the leader of both the team and the city, charting new territory for both. Other aspects of these commercials bolster Nike's attempts to make James "safe." By keeping James off camera, the audience only has the glowing reviews of James to imagine. Each spot includes a drawing of James done by the witness in the commercial. Only 1 of the 23 drawings is colored in; meaning that James is portrayed as White in the other 22 drawings. This illustrates the untying of James from his race, especially coupled with the absence of James on screen, as his body cannot be decoupled from his race. Additionally, several spots focus on James, the person. Specifically, these spots intentionally confront the negative stereotypes associated with Black masculinity and sports stars by situating James in a compassionate light. One spot speaks to James' work in the community, while another speaks directly to his character, saying, "He's proven that he's a nice person and you don't have to be rude or crude to make it in the world." These spots reinforce the Messiah narrative, with the witness/witnesses acting as disciples by spreading his words and deeds.

Here again, Nike builds James as a figure bigger than and better than what is expected. The dual narrative of hegemonic masculinity and Messiah is untethered as James defies the codes of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, as James' career arc begins to level and his natural boyish tendencies persist, the link to masculinity is a harder sell. In 2008, after a surprising playoff run to the finals, Nike started a new line of commercials, diverting from James' own personality and, in hindsight, building on the Messiah imagery.

Half-Time: The LeBrons

2007–08 Season: 4 All-Star Appearances, 2 First-Team All NBA, 0 MVP, 0 NBA Championships

James and Nike Collaborate. "The LeBrons" began as James started his fourth year, just after he led his team to the NBA Finals well before most NBA analysts expected it (Zant, 2007). While these commercials aired, the "Witness" campaign continued, but "The LeBrons" allowed Nike to expand James into a fuller character. "The LeBrons" are commercials centered on a household of four LeBron Jameses. All four characters are played by James himself: wise (the elder, crotchety father), business (the slick, savvy brother), kid (the energetic, preteen brother), and athlete (James, as traditionally presented). The campaign focuses on the domestic life of these characters, casting them in three different settings: around the dining room table, on the basketball court, and in the pool. Each of the three alter egos are stereotypes and also ways for Nike and James to satirize some of the criticism James had faced at that point. Specifically, kid and business can be viewed as responses to critics of James who say that he is too immature and/or image conscious to be successful (Hench, 2009). The criticism of James at the time was that he did not possess the hegemonic masculine qualities needed to succeed because he was not man enough; being cast as either too immature and boyish to be in control (Cottos, 2009) or too slick and image-focused (Wolf, 2009), violating the rugged frontiersman tenet.

The character wise is a device to reference the familial patriarchy narrative, while business is a tactic to show James as a frontiersman. In each commercial, business is either on his cell phone making a business deal or looking in the mirror and grooming himself. He comes under the scrutiny of the other LeBrons. These jabs are a way for Nike and James to agree with the criticism against being all show but also deflect the criticism. In one of the pool spots, after being taunted by wise, business executes an intense and impressive dive off of the high dive. This shows that despite some of James' flash, he has talent and competitive drive underneath.

The character of kid is a foil for James' boyishness. James became well known for his over-the-top antics at the beginning of games, including his chalk toss (where he dusted his hands and threw chalk in the air) and also his bombastic team entrances (which included elaborate, rehearsed setups). In "The LeBrons," kid is a preteen who idolizes James, listens to music constantly, dances, daydreams, and causes issues through his pranks. Wise and business chastise kid for his behavior, while athlete tunes it out. This character allows Nike to remind the audience of James' youth (22 years), alluding that he has time to mature. Contrasting kid with the driven athlete also allows Nike to confront the criticism of James' boyishness.

Another angle in which to view these commercials is Nike's continued emphasis on the Messiah narrative. Each of the LeBrons is not the actual James, with athlete coming the closest to being a direct stand-in for James. They fuse to make him the Messiah he is; "The LeBrons" becomes an allegory (albeit four-pronged) for the Holy Trinity. There is wise with his years of wisdom, business with his hidden talents, looks, and charisma, and kid who knows that basketball is a game and should be fun. Athlete is the "true" James who is able to absorb the wisdom imparted from his alter-selves to be a better Messiah.

These alter-selves are also strategies to refocus James' image as the ultimate hegemonically masculine man. Since athlete does not talk, he embodies the stoicism of a frontiersman. This counters the negative stereotypes of Black athletes as physically gifted but not hard workers (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). He is shown working out in each spot, intoning the control and occupational tenets of hegemonic masculinity, as the alter-selves comment on how this behavior will push him, as wise says, "through Detroit."

James Hones the Narrative. The LeBron's commercials expanded to a 2-season, 15-episode, web cartoon produced by James' production company, Spring Hill. The cartoon follows the exploits of the family through a variety of trials and entertaining setups, but what is most pertinent to this analysis is James' reflections on the show. In the video introduction to the show, James reveals that each of the four characters is a representation of him in some manner: "It [The LeBrons] goes back to the four characters who I feel like I am, on a day-to-day basis" (Prada, 2011). This description references the pressure James faces as a global icon—one who must simultaneously be wise, business savvy, and an athlete. Kid, the series protagonist, allows James to display both humanity and vulnerability. By owning all the characters, including kid, as part of the everyday James, James builds himself as multidimensional, someone capable of adapting—another example of the cerebral narrative James and Nike craft. Furthermore, James grounds the series in his brand, overtly stating, "I think everyone is gonna have an opportunity to relate to 'em" (Prada, 2011). Such comments display his humanity in that he wants to connect to others yet also shows the commodified side of the business, as it speaks to audience.

In a further development of James as the King of the sporting world, James distances The LeBrons from previous explorations of brand. In an interview at the premier of The LeBrons, James responds to a question about how the cartoon is linked to Jordan's part-animated movie *Space Jam*. James gives deference to the movie, but then distances his own show from it, claiming it all his own and not inspired by Jordan, saying, "This is my own inspiration, this is my own story and I'm looking forward to sharing it" (James, 2011). Here, again, James intones hegemonic masculinity as he separates the show from Jordan, grounding himself as a frontiersman.

Post-Decision Pivot: Rise

2009–10 Season: 6 All-Star Appearances, 4 First-Team All-NBA, 2 MVP, 0 NBA Championships

James Acts. The "Rise" campaign began shortly after the airing of *The Decision* on ESPN, an hour-long special in 2010 where James announced his plans to leave Cleveland in order to play with two other superstars (Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh) in Miami. While criticism typically accompanies a hometown athlete leaving via free agency, the scrutiny was heightened since James left via television spectacle. The criticism of the choice to do *The Decision* was near universal (LeBron James apologizes for 'The Decision,' 2011), and Nike and James' next campaign attempts to assuage some of the vitriol. The "Rise" campaign is an illustration of how advertisers build open-ended narratives with multiple interpretations because it both responds to an autonomous act of James and advances previous narratives Nike built with James. Furthermore, the "Rise" campaign is a clear exemplar of the dialogic nature of James' Nike advertisements, responding to criticism James received for "The Decision" while directly addressing the audience through questions—staging much of the commercial on the set of The Decision.

Nike and James Respond in Unison. The initial commercial of the campaign starts with James on the set of *The Decision* staring at the empty chair across from him. After 5 s of silence, James asks "What should I do?" He then lifts his head, looks into the camera, and asks "Should I admit that I made mistakes?" The remainder of the 2-min spot includes 15 primary settings, casting James in a variety of roles from his high-school self, to an old-west villain, to a *Miami Vice* cop, to a poet. Throughout the flashes to different scenes, James peppers the audience with questions.

The two most telling personas that James dons for the commercial are that of a wild-west villain and of a poet. The former is a direct reference to the frontiersman tenet of the hegemonic masculinity that Trujillo (1991) explored, but the commercial differentiates it from the typical hegemonically masculinized western hero. As this persona appears on screen, the words "The Villain" flash across the bottom and James asks "Should I accept my role as the Villain?" This persona complicates the frontiersman tenet because the villain is typically thought to be cowardly in his immoral ways. Therefore, by casting James as a potential villain, James is complicating masculinity. This is furthered with the unambiguous use of the feminine-coded persona of the poet. In this section of the commercial, James actually embodies the character through speech, reading Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*: "You may hurt me with your words/cut me with your eyes/still like air, I'll rise." The poetry counters the hegemonic formation of masculinity, as it is a contradiction to the tenet of physical force and control. By using words to take control of a situation, the actor cedes physical power to others. James chooses to fight with words, subordinating himself to those who fight with physicality.

However, the poem James recites poem, describing overcoming the hate of others while highlighting the author's power to overcome adversity. This commercial, as well as James' decision to deviate from the hometown hero/savior narrative, serves as overt political statements. While choosing to leave in free agency is not political on its surface, it is a political action, as it exposes the capitalistic underpinnings of sport. More specifically, deviating from the savior narrative that had been constructed, as the greatest hope to end the city of Cleveland's then 45-year championship drought in the four major sports, highlights the capitalist nature of sport. Since sport is a producer of cultural norms, its capitalistic underbelly is oftentimes eschewed for the more human element. While James' desire for a championship (or 9 as he said in his introductory party in Miami) was his stated goal of the move and he signed for less money to go to Miami, much of the criticism of his choice dealt with the perception that he wanted to enhance his brand with *easy* championships.

The closing shot is of James acrobatically completing a layup in slow motion around a defender while his voice-over asks, "Should I be who you want me to be?" The message is that James is man enough to be who he wants to be without the influence of others. Of course, it is not that simple. This spot acknowledges the criticism James received for leaving Cleveland for an unmasculine team-oriented approach in Miami. By acknowledging the criticism, the final question intentionally rings false. Clearly, James does take the criticism into account if he makes an ad in response to said criticism. Furthermore, while the final play of the commercial displays James' athlete gifts, it does so in a less than hegemonically masculine way. To finish at the rim with a layup and a question, James forgoes the more masculine slam dunk and statement available to him. Conversely, the slow-motion effect allows for the embodiment of masculinity that James' body represents to be fully digested as "slow-motion photography lets viewers linger over the 'natural' bodies of athletes, making it an effective vehicle for her monumentalizing of Aryan supermen in sports" (Johnson & Roediger, 2000, p. 60). The final shot elevates the greatness of James' ability, while also allowing for the co-option of his position—as slow motion affords the viewer a clear picture (Johnson & Roediger, 2000), and, therefore, understanding, of the path travelled by the athlete.

This commercial challenges hegemonic masculine narrative from previous spots as it is constructed from James' autonomous life choices. James narrates the entirety of the commercial, never once stating anything, instead merely asking questions, which runs counter to the control and physical force tenet of hegemonic masculinity and continues the narrative built in "The LeBrons" where Athlete is silent. While this spot challenges hegemonic masculinity on multiple fronts, it does so in a coded way. Since there are multiple readings of the commercial, an audience could see James as the hegemonic masculine ideal; seeing the questions as rhetorical and therefore threatening to the audience or some sort of challenge to them, thereby erasing this more feminine style. Additionally, since the spot and the campaign are called "Rise," Nike is doing little to hide the Messiah narrative. This narrative affords James the ability to both confront and redefine masculinity while still embodying much of it. This alternative reading casts James as the Messiah. Like Jesus, James forges his own path and, instead of fighting back against his attackers with physicality, he uses his words and actions as symbols of his fight. Put simply, Nike builds a narrative for James' resurrection, should he win a championship—a fairly sound gambit given his choice to play for Miami with two other All-Star players.

Additional commercials in the "Rise" campaign employ other Nike celebrities (Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant) challenging James and questioning his new path. The chosen respondents to James are who he is supposed to be heir to—2 players with 11 collective NBA championships. The response commercials act as both touchstones for where James' narrative is supposed to go (championships and a plaque in the Hall of Fame) and maps to get there. In this reading, these commercials position Jordan and Bryant as prophets for James to follow, continuing the religious rhetoric. The spots also create fatherly figures—deflecting some of the criticism James endured for the decision by rendering the action forgivable in its childlike logic.

By amplifying the religious rhetoric in these spots, Nike relies on the resurrection narrative to buoy the perceived failing masculinity of James. If James is able to win a championship, then the obvious path for Nike is to show these failings in masculinity as mere trials on James' path toward his rightful immortality. If he is unable to win, Nike can continue to subordinate his version of masculinity, thereby explaining how the most talented player in a generation could go ringless. This move avoids the Black masculinity frame, while aligning with the criticism of James. However, it also allows for multiple interpretations and, therefore, does not alienate the entire audience, specifically the remaining fans of James. It also reminds the audience of how immensely talented James is, clinging to what is left of his ideal hegemonic masculine persona.

Discussion and Implications

Dialogic Conclusions

As McDonald (1996) claims, cultural and historical context are vital to the understanding of how race is constructed and how it operates as a signifier through a particular person. While this manuscript largely refrains from an overt investigation of the historical and macro-cultural foundations of race in the 21st century, it does investigate these important questions through the context of neo-autonomy athletes now possess via multi-platformed-mediated performances. Furthermore, the context outlined within this article—where Blackness is viewed stereotypically as deviant—is an extension of McDonald's (1996) contextual analysis of Jordan. The post-Reagan America where racism marginalizes Black bodies through political and hegemonic forces is largely still in place. The major difference is that celebrities now have more outlets for their own expression. This newfound autonomy bleeds into the athlete's endorsements, where celebrities (even at very early stages in their careers) influence how sponsors frame them.

Critical Implications

Race. Nike's primary strategy for making James consumable is to avoid the negative stereotypes of Black athletes/masculinity and highlight the tenets of Black masculinity that function as a surrogate for White hegemonic masculinity. These negative stereotypes and understandings of the "Black athlete" are partially due to Black athletes being fused with "the Black criminal" in cultural understandings (Cunningham, 2009, p. 40). This fusion has been embellished in the NBA through the "'incestuous relationship' with hip-hop" that includes a culture of tattoos, violence, posses, and music (Cunningham, 2009, p. 42). In a sport with predominantly Black athletes (Lapchick, 2012) and a majority White audience (Quantcast, 2012), this linkage creates a complicated process for celebrity acceptance; especially when said celebrity is a large Black man with tattoos. As shown in the "Witness" analysis, some of the work to separate James from these associations was the literal whitewashing of his image through White portraits and his actual body's absence from the screen. This whitewashing is also accomplished by tying James to Jordan as his heir apparent, a tie linking Jordan's previously decoupling from racialized framing (Andrews, 1996). Since Jordan reached a level of transcendence that blurred the line between man and God for many ardent fans, the use of the Messiah narrative with James is unsurprising. As the heir apparent to a God, James transcends not only race but also mortality.

But James can never fully be dissociated from his Blackness, nor should he. This understanding affords Nike and James an opportunity to incorporate the dual meaning of certain attributes of Black masculinity to place James in a White narrative. Therefore, James is shown as powerful and a master of his body, befitting Black masculinity, but also White masculinity. However, the more overtly negative stereotypes of Black athletes/masculinity are avoided by Nike, which, in addition to being a strategy, is also reflective of the fact that James does not embody many (or any) of these negative stereotypes. This avoidance of Black masculinity extends beyond just overtly negative stereotypes, as it includes the avoidance of settings and set pieces associated with Black masculinity or Black athletes, particularly hip-hop music

(Cunningham, 2009) and street ball (Lavelle, 2010). In spite of this avoidance, James' own style couples him with some of these associations, since he dons multiple tattoos, maintains a posse, and oftentimes fraternizes with hip-hop stars. These contrary elements, from the perspective of hegemony, point to the additional agency afforded to today's celebrities. James' transgressions against a completely White ideal masculinity are resistive acts against a hegemonic discourse: "subcultures use style to draw attention to the contradictions in hegemonic discourse . . . Through cornrows, dreadlocks, and tattoos, clear markers of Black hip-hop and street culture, many Black athletes retain what they consider authenticity" (Cunningham, 2009, p. 52). In the dialectic of hegemonic masculinity, James resists the complete domination of White masculinity through his tattoos—given primacy through Nike's use of these tattoos in commercial dialog ("King James")—links to hip-hop, and maintenance of a posse.

Furthermore, another illustration of this hegemonic dialectic and also the tension it creates comes via James' own ambition to separate himself from parts of traditional Black masculinity, and instead embrace a more "[W]hite managerial masculinit[y]" (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2005, p. 128). James was widely criticized for his statement from his rookie year proclaiming, "In the next 15 or 20 years, I hope I'll be the richest man in the world. That's one of my goals. I want to be a billionaire" (Ellis, 2005). He later expanded this goal, explaining that he wants to be a global icon (Arango, 2007) and that he wants his money to work for him (Isidore, 2007). These goals align with a White hegemonic masculinity, one where power is wielded through capital, and where work is divorced from the manual labor and physical prowess often associated with Black masculinity. These goals, if accomplished, would elevate James to equal status with most NBA owners and executives. The foundation of the desire to reach this status is obvious within a capitalist culture, especially one where: "[W]hite managerial masculinities are often more valued than are [B]lack masculinities" (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2005, p. 128). However, it must be noted that in a dialectic view of hegemony, James' achievement and pursuit of these goals should be viewed as resistance and co-option to and of White hegemonic masculinity, in addition to assimilation into this discourse. In other words, in James' transcendence of the negative stereotypes of Black masculinity, he is whitewashed (as a token) and also challenges these stereotypes, reframing Black masculinity.

Religion. Nike uses a Christianity narrative as another frame for James, separating James from his Blackness while erasing the need to show James as a sexed being in compliance with the fifth tenet of hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo, 1991). The Messiah narrative is easily identifiable and, therefore, a quick way to ingratiate James to the audience. Nike is not the first company to employ this normative narrative. As Mallia (2009) illustrates, dwindling shock value of profanity and nudity has made religion the last great taboo. Since religion is sacred to many, its use in advertisements demands viewer attention. While this attention would seem to be negative, Mallia demonstrates how it actually represents a positive step toward message acceptance. Another benefit of using religious imagery is that the narrative is already established with the audiences—what Mallia labels as visual mnemonics. Essentially, religious narratives are normative narratives; and Christian narratives are normative narratives in America. So long as the audience is not inordinately offended, the advertiser can link the audiences' preexisting conception of religion to the product or endorser in the commercial. Advertisers approach such religious narrative with trepidation, as overtly coupling it can lead to the perception that the brand is inauthentic (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). However, subtle use of religious narratives often causes feelings of iconic authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). While the king narrative was used for Jordan and he became a God-like figure on his own (Denzin, 1996), the overt use of the Messiah narrative accelerated the racial neutering of James. It also allows more avenues for future advertisements, useful in an age where athletes possess more face time and mediated outlets to defy their endorser-manufactured personas.

Another way the Messiah narrative divorces James from negative stereotypes of Black masculinity is, paradoxically, by linking James to the Black community. In the "Book of Dimes" commercial, the religious service is at a stereotypical Black church: the preacher is Black, the choir is Black, and most of the patrons are Black. Furthermore, the functioning of the service are those of a Black church, with a preacher operating in a call-and-respond fashion. In the "Witness" campaign, gossip music continues this linkage. On first glance, this seems to undermine the work to decouple James from his Blackness. However, this strategy is safe because the setting is a shared, dominant setting, Christianity—a setting removed from the negative connotations of Black masculinity and link to the positive narrative of Black spirituality, which is often embedded within the "magical Negro" trope found in film and television (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009, p. 136).

Conclusion

Nike's attempts to streamline a "safe" narrative surrounding James were occasionally thwarted by other media offerings of James as uber-celebrity. A primary example of this conflict is a 2008 *Vogue* cover featuring James. While this represented the first-ever Black male cover model for *Vogue,* Guerroro (2011) examines the overtly racist nature of the depiction. James plays King Kong who has taken a White supermodel hostage. This characterization is in direct contrast to the frames Nike builds around James. If given the choice, it is clear that Nike would not permit such a portrayal as they famously made James confiscate a tape showing a college player dunking over him to protect his hegemonically masculine persona (Hench, 2009).

It is impossible to account for all mediated constructions of athletes in today's media landscape. However, by examining Nike's handling of James, we are able to discern the strategies advertisers employ to become both the reinforcers of cultural narratives and the endorsers of hegemonic systems. Such examinations also underscore how the newfound autonomy that today's athletes possess to craft/re-craft themselves can cause issues for the advertisers building these narratives. In Cunningham's (2009) analysis of the incorporation of defiance, he reframes Hebdige's process of normalization for sport and Black athletes. This reframing is telling for this analysis, encapsulating much of what is analyzed in this monograph:

> subcultures are eventually incorporated by the empowered: (a) in commodity form—the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, etc.) into mass-produced objects and (b) in the ideological form—the normalization of the Other or the transformation of the Other into "meaningless exotica." (Cunningham, 2009, p. 53)

James is at the forefront of commodifying himself and his subjectivities into safe forms so that he may be consumed by the masses. In some ways, it seems James represents the convergence of the autonomous, multi-mediated athlete; the narrative crafting, advertising/capitalist machine; and the cultural obsession with hip-hop and young Black culture. This convergence allows James to toe the line between multiple subjectivities, including hegemonic masculinity, God, and hip-hop. James, then, projects an image as a good boy hip to hip-hop culture, while also being insanely athletic. And he is not alone in this uber-safe persona, as many of the NBA superstars of today fit this description (e.g., Kevin Durant, Dwyane Wade, Derrick Rose) versus the old guard (e.g., Allen Iverson, Latrell Sprewell).

As a pertinent coda to this analysis (encompassing 2003–2011), the legend of LeBron James has shifted a great deal since then. Transcendent performances resulted in his first NBA Championship in 2012; boyish enthusiasm (such as an enthusiastic embrace of a heat fan upon making a half-court shot) has silenced most critics of James outside of Cleveland, Ohio. The role of villain was one that neither James nor Nike was ready to embrace and developments shifted where such mediated narratives were not necessary. The safe commodity, that is, LeBron James has risen again—in a safe, homogenized format for all to enjoy.

Current Statline: 8 All-Star Appearances, 6 First-Team All-NBA, 3 MVP, 1 NBA Championship

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Notes

1. Dime is slang for assist in basketball.

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