

The American Fairytale of A Black Male Athlete

Investigating the Characterization of Black Male Athletes in American Sports and Entertainment

Media

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Abstract

Using the ideology of Charles W. Mills' 1997 *The Racial Contract* and examining the dualism of the American sports and entertainment industries, this thesis examines the different depictions assigned to Black male athletes in order to exploit, while concurrently demean their character. The study uses four hypothesized patterns to qualitatively analyze media examples pertaining to five professional Black male athletes of the National Basketball Association, Professional Golfer's Association, Major League Baseball and National Football League. Together, disclosed themes and sub-themes display different characterizations of the Black male athlete as non-human and animalistic, as well as aspiring for whiteness and a symbol of American prosperity. The media examples hyper-fixate on the body and presence of the Black male athlete, however, dismiss the intellect, individuality, and labor of the figure. This study reveals how these characterizations, fixations, and their deprivations all work together to take advantage of Black male athletes while maintaining a racial hierarchy in society, reflecting that of *The Racial Contract*.

Keywords:

Race, Sports, Athlete, Black men, Media, Exploitation, Stereotypes, Basketball, Football, Baseball, Golf, Commercialization, Sports Marketing

Introduction

For basketball fans, Michael Jordan may be remembered for his time on the Chicago Bulls team; for shoe lovers, he may be remembered for his sneaker line with Nike; for those consuming any form of media in the 90s, however, Michael Jordan will always be remembered for his Gatorade commercial, ‘Be Like Mike.’ The beverage company released the commercial in 1992, featuring Jordan playing basketball in separate clips with teammates, friends, and kids. The glory of the commercial comes from its soundtrack, playing a jingle titled, ‘Be Like Mike.’ All around the world, people fell in love; with the jingle, with Jordan, and unintentionally, with the brand. ‘Be Like Mike’ was so celebrated that ten years later, the jingle-inspired movie ‘Like Mike’ was released, and 28 years later, a remake of the commercial was produced starring basketball stars Jayson Tatum, Zion Williamson and Elena Delle Donne.

This commercial amongst many others demonstrates the significance of sports marketing around the world. The commercialization of sports in the 1980s established itself as an element of pop culture with a heightened and expanded influence on American society. As the arenas, courts, and fields still held the main stage for the sports industry, this new era brought along a new meaning to ‘sports culture.’¹ Sports were no longer just about athletic performance and competition, but instead, athletic attire, athletic beverages, and most importantly, the athletes themselves. Athletes became linked to the products they used, with fans expecting to be (or at least feel) relatable to said product. Businesses recognized the excitement and decided to capitalize on it, signing on athletes to be the face of their brands to represent them and promote their products. The effort was extremely successful, as some of the most influential brand names known today, such as Nike, Gatorade, Puma, and others, saw a spike in their sales and athletes

¹ Smart, B. (2005). Corporate culture and the branding of the sport star: Nike, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446215630>

saw a new source of revenue. Many of the faces representing such brands were those of Black athletes, creating more exposure and awareness to Black style, Black music, and Black culture. Fans began to go crazy over names such as Michael Jordan, Joe Greene, Mike Tyson and Walter Payton. The collaboration of Black male athletes and the brands they represented produced a new archetype for Black masculinity; one that carved more space for inclusion within mainstream media, however, was still restricted by the market. This Black male athlete became the main subject for brands' advertising narratives, however, the narrative it was telling had—and still has—everlasting harm.

American attention and the industries attempting to attract it have been molded to understand Black males and Black bodies under the light of a racialized and objectified history. American history and ideals have exhibited the condemnation of Black masculinity, embodying it as hyper aggressive, animalistic, and unintelligent. The attempt to balance cultural expectations is addressed in Charles W. Mills' book, *The Racial Contract*. In 1997, the philosopher presented a theory he refers to as *The Racial Contract*; an unwritten indenture controlling the behavior of non-white individuals to white society's satisfaction. The contract applies to non-white figures in sports, the entertainment industry, politics, the working class, or any other non-white individual working to succeed in America. *The Racial Contract* demands that adherents balance aspects of non-white culture that America admires as well as aspects of non-white culture that remind white America of how and why they are inferior to any non-white individual. *The Racial Contract* is designed to both amuse and profit white society through the usage of non-white bodies, land, and resources. (Mills, 1997, p. 11) Mills uses historical evidence to support his case, demonstrating similar ways in which the contract still survives today in addition to calling attention to how non-white communities have understood *The Racial Contract* and white supremacy. "*The Racial*

Contract is an exploitation contract,” (Mills, 1997, p. 9) performing as a means of asserting and persisting white domination. In order to do so, the contract reminds non-white communities of their liberties and fortunes while simultaneously degrading them, pointing to nature as a point of reasoning for racial differences and eliminating the concept of an unjust racial system.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to identify the facets of *The Racial Contract* that make Black male athletes a commodity for the American sports and entertainment industry. The study is conducted through a textual analysis of media pertaining to five Black male athletes amongst the National Basketball Association, Professional Golfer’s Association, Major League Baseball and National Football League. In defining the characterization process of Black male athletes by the entertainment industry, this research will provide important insight on the ways in which the Black male body is commodified while simultaneously being dehumanized. The two coinciding actions can be hard to identify, as American society is acclimated to recognizing social racism as macroaggressions rather than the microaggressions that perpetuate institutional racism in the first place. Both, however, can be found in the so-called ‘praise’ of Black athletes being covered and marketed in the media.

Many studies have identified and dissected aspects of Black masculinity and Black culture that pose a threat or sense of discomfort to the American gaze. Moreover, a great deal of work addresses the mechanisms of utilizing named aspects in order to perpetuate such discomfort and distaste for Black masculinity and culture. In noting that, I argue it is equally important to explore and examine elements of the two that are used as points of obsession and ultimately, profit-making for American business. Not only is such recognition significant for the fans consuming normalized stereotypes and ideals, but further, imperative for the morale of the athlete being stereotyped and idealized. This research can contribute to the widely studied field

of intersections between race and sports and while doing so, can assist in establishing the limitations and/or advantages of the entertainment industry for Black Americans.

Literature Review

Mills' 1997 *The Racial Contract* provides a means of grasping the system of racial dynamics that prospers off of non-white cultures while asserting and upholding white dominance through both written and unwritten societal customs. It acts as a "rhetorical trope and theoretical method for understanding the inner logic" of how societal beliefs based on race have come to "structure the politics of the West and elsewhere." (Mills, 1997, p. 6) The contract declares the clear divide between the whites and nonwhites, assessing the channels that have supported such segregation throughout time. The historical aspect of the contract addresses "how society was created or crucially transformed, how the individuals in that society were reconstituted, how the state was established, and how a particular moral code and a certain moral psychology were brought into existence." (Mills, 1997, p. 10) The system then created can be seen to shift and fluctuate throughout time, however, never deviating from the racial domination once proclaimed.

In an essay similarly analyzing *The Racial Contract* in the context of Black professional athlete, Michael Vick, and his treatment from the media after being criminally charged, Katharine Zakos points to two specific ways in which the theoretical framework can be understood. The first application of *The Racial Contract* to Black professional athletes is the accreditation to an *American* archetype. The contract is constructed by white ideals in order for the only beneficiaries of the contract to be the white collective. (Zakos, 2022, p. 97) This process, thus, asks for the conformity of any Black figure to fit said archetype, fitting "a certain lifestyle and expected code of conduct." (Zakos, 2022, p. 104) The standards include talking a

certain way, acting a certain way, dressing a certain way, and most importantly, not causing any disruptions. Moreover, for Black athletes, the contract asks for compliance to this modification as compensation for the opportunity to play alongside white athletes. This exchange can be connected to the historical idea of the American archetype—what it means to be American, and what it means to be an American man— and ultimately, Black male athletes' inevitable failure of achieving it.

The second application of *The Racial Contract* to Black professional athletes addressed by Zakos is the use of the Black body as a point of consumption for white entertainment. Mills underlines the attempt of maintaining the notion of racial differences being based upon biological differences, and instead, places responsibility on “social materialism [...] [that] manifests itself materially in the body.” (Zakos, 2022, p. 96-97) The social inferiority placed on non-whites produces a “subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities the whites either already inhabit or establish or in transactions as alliances with these polities.” (Mills, 1997, p. 11) Such low standing climatically symbolized the ‘nonwhite’ body as less than human and produced a creaturized ideation of ‘nonwhites’ as beings. This manipulated engineering of the biologically different, low standing, and less than human ‘nonwhite’ applied specifically to Black people, breeding the dynamic that still exists today that grapples with the fascination and fear of the Black body. This dynamic produces two different narratives of the Black body, in both manners, carefully governing the image presented through stereotypes and wrongful depictions.

The overarching condition of *The Racial Contract* is the control and containment of the non-white body. Through this framework of the ‘Racial Contract,’ I will delve deeper into the historical ties to American sports in connection to American archetypes and accredits, as well as

the representation of Black figures in sports in connection to sentiments of fear and fascination of Black bodies displayed through the media.

The American Construction of Sports Culture

When constructing a story about American sports, it is essential to recognize it as an extension of American culture. American sports not only represents the ideals and culture of American society but further, contributes to the reassurance that such American culture still exists. A big component of American culture, however, is the mythology it is based on; a certain set of ideals the country has always *attempted* to be founded on, and an image it has *attempted* to portray itself as. Said mythology can be recognized through the country's sports culture,; the sports figures they glorify and the nationalism they implement through the sporting events.

American society has gripped onto a mythological archetype in the pursuit for an agent of national identity—a cultural artifact and a symbol of the country's pride and strength. The agency American sports has attained in representing American culture means determining *who*, then, will act as a representative of that culture, and that *who* has been carefully constructed into nothing less than the embodiment of the longstanding values and attitudes of the country. The ideals of American culture associate themselves with the personification of masculinity—the symbol for strong, hard working, care taking, and *heroic* figures. Analyzing heroism within American sports culture displays the manner of which sports acts as one of the few sites for society to both construct and follow heroes. (Butterworth, 2007) As portrayed in the media today, modern sports heroes “are models of athletic competence and of social values who are admired for their outstanding and skillful athletic performance, their courage, [and] expertise.” (VandeBerg, 1988, p. 138) The embodiment of the American hero can also be noted for its “masculine ideology, constituted by strength, size, power, and the ability to tame and harness the

forces of nature.” (Butterworth, 2007) A crucial component to the construction of such heroes, however, is their whiteness.

The mythology following American heroism adheres to the narration of a white Christian male, a figure of adoration that is looked up to and attempted to reflect. The “American exceptionalism” of the hero figure, disables the use of black figures to serve as such heroes, leaving room for the white man, and the white man only. (Butterworth, 2007) The vainglorious character of American culture is represented in the relationship of the individual hero to American values. (Butterworth, 2007) Thus, while “sports is an enactment of American mythology,” the hero figure functions as “a mythological enactment of whiteness.” (Butterworth, 2007)

In addition to casting an American hero, American sports work extremely hard to cultivate this sense of national identity into a national community. Michael Serazio and Emily Thorson state, “sport has been one of the chief vehicles for the imagined community that is nationalism.” (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 153) That community then furnishes “a sense of harmony and unity, [that creates] albeit fleetingly, a homogenizing effect.” (Alabarces et al. 2001, p. 549) As a space of gathering between individuals with the same intention of being entertained, sports events allow a sense of commonality and shared identity among strangers. The provision of entertainment from the athletes then further contributes to this connection, as the shared desire and commitment for the success of one party or the other creates a semblance of closeness that transpires between the fans and the athletes themselves. Despite the ‘shared connection’ being grounded in a theorized feeling or emotion, it is, moreover, facilitated by the embedded tradition of honoring the United States military within— most commonly before— a game. That form of celebration and accolade may come from the singing of the national anthem

before the game or taking a moment of recognition for army veterans during the game. The act of such recognition in any form displays the way in which “nationalism and militarism are exceptionally suffused throughout the sports spectacle.” (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 153) These traditions have found a home in sports events, ultimately militarizing the sports themselves.

The militarization of sports is further enhanced by the sentiment of sports being a site of neutrality and nonpartisanship, becoming extremely relevant when sports events are then used as a platform for protest. This can be seen in the case of NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who in 2016 took a knee during the national anthem in light of the police brutality and overall social injustices committed towards African Americans. Despite the fact that this protest had nothing to do with the military, but rather, the institutionalized racism of the entire country, it was read as anti-military. Serazio and Thorson argue, “the militarization of sports is *why* protesting at sports is read as anti-military,” transforming any type of protest into an act of rebellion against the so-called ‘unity’ of the country. (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 154) The protest became a point of tension amongst the whole country involving other athletes, fans, the NFL franchise, and not too soon after, President Donald Trump. The conversation quickly turned from the matter of racial oppression in the country to the allowance of athletes expressing any form of political opinion during games.

There has been a “long tradition of discouraging athletes of color from articulating dissent, for sport is believed to be a meritocratic space.” (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 153) Despite the “cultural and ideological role based [...] on that unity” (Butterworth, 2007, p. 53) mentioned earlier, there seems to be extensive effort in maintaining “the appearance of the separation of sport and social life.” (Butterworth, 2007, p. 53) The idea is that sports events are

supposed to be a space in which people can gather to watch the game and simply forget about the outside world. Thus, this militarized state of neutrality in sports has particularly strong repercussions for Black athletes who speak up on the social and political matters of the country. While matters of the world live both inside and outside the arenas, “many seem to cling to a delusion that sport can maintain ‘neutrality’ from politics.” (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 153) This very privileged mindset asks athletes (of all races) to forget their identity and perform their function of entertaining the crowd. Moreover, it reminds athletes of color that their presence on the court or field is sustained due to such neutrality. As commercialized sport grew, the now critical sponsorships needed to ‘sanitize’ sport and distance it from anything that might be construed as controversial, ultimately dimming the political imagination of athletes. (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 155)

Here lies the constant reminder that sports arenas are imagined to be a space in which “race has no bearing on outcome [...] and demonstrates that anyone who hustles enough, irrespective of background or identity can find success.” (Serazio & Thorson, 2020, p. 153) This success, however, bears the price of assimilation, asking the subject to abandon aspects of their ‘of color’ race to make those not ‘of color’ feel more comfortable. This request asks athletes of color to be what Kevin Hylton construes as an “aracial sporting icon,” (Hylton 2009, p. 88) a rewarding figure who produces minimal threat from physical or emotional confrontation. This space in which athletes of color are meant to essentially forget their race simultaneously affirms the “possessive colonizing white gaze that ... demands subservience (i.e., ‘knowing your place’) asserts its racialized disgust.” (de B’béri and Hogarth 2009, 91) As time goes by, these demands become normalized and what can be defined as “insidious common sense racism [...] [that] manifests itself as accepted truths in sports dialogue.” (de B’béri and Hogarth 2009, p. 92)

Despite the lack of freedom to express one's culture, political beliefs, and individuality, Black professional athletes are then looked at to symbolize the inclusion and development of racial harmony in American sports. Sporting culture was seen as an outlet for "meaningful experiences with integration and the possibilities of harmonious interracial interaction" (Hartmann, 2000, p. 233) for many white Americans that converted sports from a simple event, occupation, or hobby into "an avenue of racial progress." (Hartmann, 2000, p. 232) While sports for African Americans was both a space for community building and social interaction as well as an "important symbol of racial accomplishment and a source of pride and collective identification," (Hartmann, 2000, p. 233) it was, for white Americans, a new channel of exposure between them and Black culture. This new channel did not come with a newfound communication or understanding of Black culture, but rather, a shared celebration and interest in the talent—and ultimately entertainment—that it was producing. The common interest transformed sport into what seemed to be a form of collective identity, making it easy for white Americans to see sports as a "social force." (Hartmann, 2000, p. 233) On the surface level, this force worked towards harmonizing the two communities, however, simultaneously acted as a means to justify the mistreatment of both Black male athletes as well as Black Americans as a whole. The sports arena and all of the media surrounding it displays the "indispensable role that mass-mediated, popular cultural sites play with respect to the formation of race in the contemporary United States." (Hartmann, 200, p. 243) As indispensable as that role may be, it has also proven to be extremely delicate, as the images that permeate the media under the lens of sports can easily confuse celebration for conformity and allure.

What it means to be American and what it means to represent America are two questions that tie directly into the lack of space for Black sporting figures to be admired and recognized as

their most authentic self. In trying to fit into both the American hero archetype as well as the American nationalized community, aspects of one's Black identity have to be surrendered. The heroesque, militarized, neutral, and nationalist aspirations of the American sports image idealize the white male athlete, leaving the Black male athlete to act as a symbol of prosperity in sports' facade of racial progress.

Black Representation in Sports

Stereotypes and depictions of Black male athletes stem from the portrayal of Black men as a collective. The historical representation of Black men feeds into our understanding of Black male athletes, ultimately establishing sports (consisting Black male athletes) as what Linda Tucker identifies as a "racialized site of containment." (Tucker, 2003, p. 307) The 'site' Tucker refers to is made up of historical and racialized characterizations, stereotypes, and depictions, then illuminated through the Black male athlete. The objectification of Black men can be drawn back to slavery, reducing and recycling the Black male body as a means of profit. (B'beri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 93) The physical bondage, captivity, and servitudinal aspects of slavery no longer exist, however, the cycle of dehumanizing and commodifying the Black body continues on. Contemporary slavery cages Black masculinity in the Black body through abiding misrepresentations that define it as its state of physicality. (B'beri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 93)

The pattern within America's management of dynamics between the country and Black male athletes directly links to America's management of dynamics between the country and Black men in general; both containing pillars of both fear and fascination. (Tucker, 2003, p. 307) The two sentiments of fear and fascination are very different, yet equally destructive tools of operation that have dehumanized Black figures. Historically, such management has been carried out through lynchings of the Jim Crow Era and Blackface minstrelsy. (Tucker, 2003, p. 307) The

lynchings of Black individuals were execution style murders that, while ending in a much more brutal manner, made the scene a performance of the Black body for a white audience to be entertained by. Such rituals usually involved the dismemberment of the Black males' body parts—specifically the penis—in order to paint the victims as hypersexualized criminals and rapists. (Tucker, 2003, p. 310) Blackface minstrel shows were dramatized and offensive performances of Black figures in which “white men performed their obsession with the parts, functions, and attributes to which they reduced Black male bodies.” (Tucker, 2003, p. 309) The fascination of the Black body's parts and the fear of the Black body as a whole entangled in act lynchings and minstrel shows were “methods of protecting and recuperating white masculine authority” and are what now inform the racialized system that plays out in the media representations of Black male athletes today. (Tucker, 2003, p. 314) Fear and fascination ‘twin’ the animalistic Black male with the dazzling Black athlete (Hoberman, p. 314); the Black body is assembled as the “threatening criminal and the heroic ballplayer,” (B'éri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 94) all within the same breath.

Society presents young Black males with few visible options for success, pushing them toward sports and, to a lesser extent, music. Enck-Wanzer describes the “mass-mediated representations of Black athletes [to] serve as one of the few domains where African Americans are shown to be superior to whites; such depictions simultaneously serve to preserve (white) cultural hegemony by legitimizing the racist notion that Blacks are naturally superior physically (and whites, superior mentally).” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) This false narrative does not simply attempt to attack the present or future work of a Black male, but further, makes claims against the biology of the Black body, seizing that body from the moment it's born.

As children, the world—specifically through the lens of the media—makes young black boys believe their only career option lies in the sports industry—with fewer but existent chances of succeeding in music—as their success is dependent on their athletic ability rather than their intellect. (Zakos, 2022, p. 99) Beyond the lack of intellect and natural athleticism, Black men are berated as undisciplined, deviant, unruly, violent, animalistic, unproductive, irresponsible, promiscuous and uncivilized thugs associated with crime, and more importantly, “polar to the preferred white norm.” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 94) This institutionalized ideology has effects on Black men of any profession, however, is heightened when not only does that Black man succeed, but they do so as Black male athletes, using their ‘natural athletic abilities.’

The scientifically unproven, however, highly ideologized proposition of Black men being naturally strong, athletic, and ‘animalistic’ further associates their characterization with hyperaggression. Perceptions have maintained linking athleticism to violence and aggression; the notion further stipulated when that athleticism belongs to an African American. (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) “The socially constructed figure who is physically and athletically gifted, but unintelligent, aggressive, and inherently dangerous” exemplifies the “broader culture of racialized fear in the United States.” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) One example of this thought process is the relationship between Black athletes and domestic violence cases. Despite the normalized and unattended issue of domestic violence against women in the United States, the media tends to focus solely on cases that involve prominent names in popular culture, highlighting the parties engaged in the horrific act rather than the act itself. (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) The names of Black male athletes are commonly displayed at the forefront of such media topics, as “in 1995, [the majority of] articles about intimate violence were either entirely about O.J. Simpson’s abuse of his wife or an extension of this case to examine partner abuse in America.” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) Media reports

of “abusive athletes naturalize black male aggressiveness,” further, producing “corporeal inscriptions on Black male athletes as domestic abusers [...] [that] naturalize domestic violence within the realm of Black masculinity.” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) White male athletes receive little to no coverage or attention in the media in regards to domestic violence. In comparison, the stories of their Black counterparts are presented with the intention to reproduce, republish, and replant the overarching image of a “black athlete out of control.” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) Focusing on Black male aggression while subsequently dismissing the aggression of white masculinity functions to establish broader structures of patriarchal dominance, heightening the scrutiny of African Americans and rescuing the safety of white masculinity. (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) Simultaneously, the matter pits race against gender, placing the Black males at the center of the issue and deflating the concern for domestic abuse in general. (Enck-Wanzer, 2009) With such narrow focus and misplaced concern, “domestic violence becomes yet another popularized social issue that might be (over)exposed in efforts to scrutinize black masculinity.” (Enck-Wanzer, 2009)

The Black man becomes either “an object of worship for his physical skills or [...] an object of fear and loathing for his criminal and violent behavior.” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 104). There is no space in between, leading to the conformity and submission of Black male athletes, if not already crucified for hyper aggression in the media.

There is no escaping the presence of African Americans in the sports industry, however, there have been many efforts to avoid its reality. There is a prevailing assumption that the mix of races and cultures in the sports industry implies the idea that “sports transcends race [...] [and] represents an ideal space for racial indeterminacy.” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 90) The eagerness to consume the “hip-hop-pop-culture dominated by urban Blacks” (B’béri & Hogarth,

2009, p. 90) in current day sports is used as exoneration from being racist. Similarly, those in the industry believe that “they cannot be racist because they work with, employ, or cheer for Black people all the time.” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 104) The gravity of the term ‘racist’ in contemporary America has supported the challenge of discrimination while simultaneously brutalizing the ability to call out the “mechanism that makes the oppression possible and efficient.” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 92) The weight that comes with using or being the term ‘racist’ results in the shortcoming of recognizing it, and how it may lay in between the way we as a society define it. “Covert racism is usually unseen” (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 92) and takes form in the systems of representations constructed by racist behaviors. (B’béri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 93) Covert racism is ever so present in sports media, as representations and ideologies recirculate through coverage of every event and game, normalizing its presence and ingraining its meaning into society.

The stereotypes of Black culture and Black masculinity contribute heavily to the defamation of the Black male athlete. While the success of African American males in sports continues to develop, it coexists with the continued acceptance and normalization of everyday, subtle, or even unconscious racism. Where the presence of Black male athletes has undoubtedly increased over the years, the question now is whether that presence has, in fact, been beneficial to the representation of Blackness as it is constructed by whiteness.

Methods

Applying the foundation of Charles W. Mills’ *The Racial Contract*, the goal of this study is to identify the different aspects of a Black male athlete that appeals to the media and thus, makes that figure a commodity for both the sports and entertainment industries. The study does so by undertaking a textual analysis of media surrounding five different Black male athletes.

Black female athletes were not analyzed in this study due to longstanding gender discrimination within the sports and entertainment industry. The intersection of gender and racial discrimination would require a much longer and deeper study.

The data collection and examination were used to answer the following questions concerning American sports and entertainment industries' different methods of illustrating the Black male athlete:

Research Questions

1. How is the Black male athlete characterized in the advertisement? How does this characterization reflect the ideology of the 'Racial Contract?'
2. Considering facets of the 'Racial Contract,' in what ways does the media example deprive or hyper-fixate on the race of the Black male athlete?
3. What aspect of the Black male athlete is characterized as special or unique, so that it then becomes appealing and eventually, profitable to and for America?

The selection of Black male athletes was conducted with no exclusion of any sports franchise. That being said, I attempted to select at least one athlete from America's most popular sports: basketball, American football, golf, and baseball. Ice hockey and soccer are two additional sports extremely popular in America, however, do not hold big nor longstanding names for Black male athletes. In total, 24 athletes were looked at before being further narrowed down reliant on the number of advertisements they could produce. An important criterion for each athlete was that the majority of their media examples were produced before their retirement. Ultimately, five athletes were chosen, two from the National Basketball Association, one from the United States Golf Association, one from the Major League Baseball corporation, and one

from the National Football League. The career years between the five athletes range from 1987 to 2023.

The first athlete chosen was Scottie Pippen from the National Basketball Association (NBA). Pippen was drafted in 1987, playing 17 seasons and earning multiple titles as a NBA Champion, All-Star, Olympic gold medalist, in addition to other accreditations. Pippen was selected for this study due to the height of his name during the 1990s, playing alongside one of the biggest names in basketball history, Michael Jordan, and being one of the main figures in the transition of sports culture. Retiring in 2008, Pippen walked away from the NBA with many endorsements and a net worth of \$20 million.²

The second athlete chosen was Tiger Woods from the Professional Golfers' Association of America (PGA). Woods started playing professional golf in 1996, winning 82 PGA Tour titles so far.³ The athlete retired for one year in 2009, after a cheating scandal and car crash that led to Woods' admittance to a behavioral rehab center.⁴ Woods was selected for this study due to the gravity of his name around the world despite the lack of diversity within the sport of golf, only three percent of American golfers being Black.⁵ Woods is currently still playing golf and as of the summer of 2022, is officially a billionaire.⁶

The third athlete chosen was Derek Jeter, a Major League Baseball (MLB) player who spent his entire career with the Yankees. Jeter was drafted in 1992, helping the Yankees to win

²"Scottie Pippen 2022: Bio, Net Worth, and Endorsements." *EssentiallySports*, <https://www.essentiallysports.com/tag/scottie-pippen/>.

³"Together, We Can Make the Future Shine Bright!" *Tiger Woods*, <https://tigerwoods.com/records/>.

⁴July 14, 2022, and 2022 July 07. "Tiger Woods Scandal 10-Year Anniversary of Car Crash." *Golf Channel*,

<https://www.golfchannel.com/media/tiger-woods-scandal-10-year-anniversary-car-crash?slide=7>.

⁵"All-Black H.S. Team's Success Highlights Golf's Problem with Diversity." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/all-black-high-school-team-s-success-highlights-golf-s-n1100021>.

⁶Craig, Matt. "Tiger Woods Officially a Billionaire, No Thanks to the Saudis." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 21 June 2022,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattcraig/2022/06/10/tiger-woods-officially-a-billionaire-no-thanks-to-the-sau-dis/?sh=29196bdcda03>.

five World Series titles, and being inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2020.⁷ Jeter was selected for this study due to being one of the greatest African American baseball players of all time, and being one of the most prominent Black names in baseball with the emergence of sports marketing. Jeter retired from the MLB in 2014, his current net worth standing at \$220 million.⁸

The fourth athlete chosen was Cam Newton, a player from the National Football League (NFL). Newton was drafted in 2011 and became a regular season MVP in 2015.⁹ Despite not having won any titles with his team, Newton's success earned him a spotlight amongst NFL fans and sports media. In addition to this spotlight, I selected Newton for this study due to his position as quarterback, a historically white position within the game of American football.¹⁰ Newton is still playing football, currently with the Carolina Panthers, having a net worth of \$75 million.¹¹

The fifth and final athlete chosen was Giannis Antetokounmpo from the National Basketball Association (NBA). Antetokounmpo was drafted in 2013 by the Milwaukee Bucks, helping the team win a championship in 2021, and being titled both an MVP and All-Star multiple times by the year 2020.¹² I selected Antetokounmpo for this study primarily due to his Greek origin, in an attempt to see how his characterization in the media may compare to the rest

⁷ "Derek Jeter Stats, Fantasy & News." *MLB.com*, <https://www.mlb.com/player/derek-jeter-116539>.

⁸ *Derek Jeter Net Worth 2023: Career Salary Assets Income Cars - Caknowledge*.
<https://caknowledge.com/derek-jeter-net-worth/>.

⁹ Nfl. "2015 MVP: Cam Newton a Unanimous Pick among NFL Media Analysts." *NFL.com*, NFL, 28 Feb. 2023,
<https://www.nfl.com/news/2015-mvp-cam-newton-a-unanimous-pick-among-nfl-media-analysts-0ap3000000630776>.

¹⁰ Stuart, Chase. "The History of Black Quarterbacks in the NFL (2023 Update)." *Test Two Header Image*, 1 Feb. 2023,
<http://www.footballperspective.com/the-history-of-black-quarterbacks-in-the-nfl-2023-update/>.

¹¹ Desk, SK. "Cam Newton Net Worth in 2023, Salary & Endorsements - Sportskeeda." *Sports News*, 30 Jan. 2023, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/nfl/cam-newton-net-worth-and-salary>.

¹² Zatzman, Louis. "The Numbers Don't Lie: Giannis Is MVP." *NBA.com*, NBA, 24 Jan. 2023,
<https://www.nba.com/bucks/news/the-numbers-dont-lie-giannis-is-mvp>.

of the American athletes. Antetokounmpo is currently still playing for the Milwaukee Bucks with a net worth of \$110 million.¹³

The investigative portion of the study consisted of commercial, digital, and print media examples from both the athletes' sports franchises as well as the brands the athletes were endorsed by. The data collection for the five athletes began with the search of each name along with the terms 'commercial,' '[brand] advertisement,' 'digital advertisement,' 'magazine cover' or 'magazine spread.' The different combinations of searches took place on Google, iSpot TV, Youtube and Facebook. The platforms Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok were not included in the collection due to their more recent emergence in the media that would not balance the data amongst the athletes and second, due to the control they allow the athletes to have over what is posted. The year range of media examples gathered started with the drafting year of the athlete all the way to 10 years post their retirement, if applicable.

Once all of the media was collected for each athlete, each piece was observed multiple times to see if a pattern could be identified. Patterns were picked up through dialogue usage, object usage, environments, and character behavior. The patterns identified throughout the data eventually turned into themes. At the beginning of the data collection, there were four hypothesized themes:

- 'Sexualization'
- 'Animalism/Hyper Aggression'
- 'Assimilation'
- 'The American Dream'

¹³Jackson, Stefan. "Giannis Antetokounmpo Net Worth 2023: NBA Salary Career Cars." *CAknowledge*, 13 Dec. 2022, <https://cnowledge.com/giannis-antetokounmpo-net-worth/>.

The definition and recognition of these themes will be addressed later in the study. Further, the theme ‘Sexualization’ was eventually removed, and the three other themes were recategorized in order to efficiently detail and label the occurrence in the media example. Such reconstruction of themes will also be later addressed. The removal and maintenance of themes were determined based upon prevalence both amongst each athlete as an individual as well as the five athletes as a collective. The majority of the themes analyzed contained sub-themes for a better delineation of the occurrence in the advertisement.

Analysis

The results of this study produced varying, however, discernible data regarding the manner in which Black male athletes are characterized in media examples. As a reminder, the hypothesized themes were ‘Sexualization,’ ‘Animalism/Hyper Aggression,’ ‘Assimilation,’ and ‘The American Dream.’ The first theme identified was titled ‘Dehumanization’ consisting of the sub-themes ‘Supernaturality’ and ‘Animalism.’ The second theme identified was ‘Sexualization’ and did not contain any sub-themes. The third theme identified was ‘Dummyfying,’ consisting of the sub-themes ‘Lack of Intelligence’ and ‘Lack of Speaking.’ The fourth theme identified was ‘Assimilation,’ consisting of the sub-themes ‘White Companionship,’ ‘White Washing’ and ‘White Music.’ The fifth and final theme identified was ‘The American Dream’ consisting of the sub-themes ‘American Dream’ and ‘Foreignness.’ Some themes had more prevalence amongst the athletes as a collective than others; the table below displays which case studies each theme and sub-theme appeared for.

<i>Dehumanization</i>	Supernaturality	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Derek Jeter Cam Newton Giannis Antetokounmpo
	Animalism	Scottie Pippen Cam Newton
<i>Dummyfying</i>	Lack of Intelligence	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Giannis Antetokounmpo
	Lack of Speaking	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Derek Jeter Cam Newton Giannis Antetokounmpo
<i>Assimilation</i>	White Companionship	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Derek Jeter Cam Newton Giannis Antetokounmpo
	White Washing	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Derek Jeter
	White Music	Scottie Pippen Tiger Woods Derek Jeter
<i>The American Dream</i>	American Dream	Derek Jeter Giannis Antetokounmpo

Several media examples were gathered for each athlete, however, only the advertisements demonstrating an existing theme or presenting a new theme were kept for analysis. The table below displays both the number of media examples gathered as well as media examples analyzed for each athlete.

	<i>Media Examples Gathered</i>	<i>Media Examples Analyzed</i>
Scottie Pippen	16	9

Tiger Woods	22	15
Derek Jeter	34	15
Cam Newton	21	13
Giannis Antetokounpo	18	10

DEHUMANIZATION

One of the strongest themes visible amongst the Black male athletes' advertisements was 'Dehumanization.' Dehumanizing is defined as "the process of depriving a person [...] of human qualities or attributes."¹⁴ In this study, dehumanizing refers to the Black male athlete in the media example being positioned to seem anything other than human. This theme appeared in media examples for all five of the athletes, however, showed up in two different ways. The first sub-theme of 'Dehumanization' is 'Supernaturality,' in which the Black male athlete is characterized or referred to as a supernatural being, whether that be a God, alien, superhero, machine, etc. or, making the subject *seem* supernatural compared to their counterparts in the media example. The second sub-theme of 'Dehumanization' is 'Animalism,' in which the Black male athlete is compared with, referred to as, or is being made to enact the behavior of an animal.

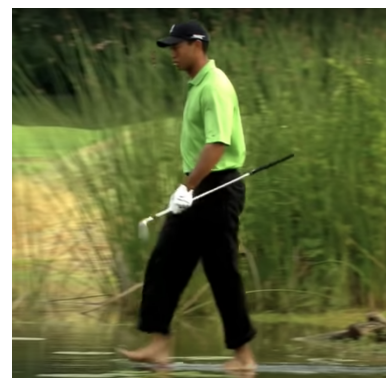
Supernaturality

The sub-theme 'Supernaturality' is apparent in commercials for all five case studies, depicting the athletes as alien, God-like, or superhero characters or proposing the idea through comparison to other human characters or even machines in the media example. The sub-theme 'Supernaturality' is extremely prevalent for Scottie Pippen, as in the majority of his media

¹⁴ "Dehumanization Definition & Meaning." *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/dehumanization>.

examples, the athlete is portrayed as a supernatural character. In a 1996 Ameritech commercial, Pippen is seen getting out of a cab, accidentally leaving his Chicago Bulls jacket in the vehicle before a young white boy and his father enter and drive off. Once Pippen realizes he is missing belongings, he proceeds to chase down the cab, running through the street and dodging moving vehicles, running through a basketball court and dunking, and eventually catching up to the cab and stopping it. Pippen retrieves his phone from the jacket and leaves the Bulls gear as a gift for the young boy. The many actions made in order for Pippen to catch up to the cab and retrieve his belongings are not realistic for a human being. In a 1996 Nike commercial titled “Supernatural,” a compilation of clips are put together of Pippen dunking in a series of games with a soundtrack in the back that can be heard using the word ‘supernatural.’ The title and soundtrack alone speak for themselves, however, the commercial fits further within the sub-theme with the accompaniment of Pippen dunking as the main feature of the ad. The three other media examples were two Nike commercials (1996 and 1997) and a 1992 Coca Cola commercial.

Many media examples fitting of the theme ‘Supernaturality’ were picked up in media examples for Tiger Woods. In 1997, Nike released a series of commercials in a campaign titled, ‘Golf’s Not Hard.’ In the first commercial, Woods hits a tee (in a move referred to as a ‘slice’) perfectly between a gallery full of women and children to his left and right, before having a white male character do the same with a cardboard gallery. The white male counterpart fails to do so as he knocks off two of the cardboard heads. In the second commercial, Woods refers to the tee height before hitting the tee, and hitting it so far that the ball flies for 23 seconds and does not land by the end of the commercial. Similar to this advertisement, in 2009 EA Sports released the commercial, ‘Walk on Water.’ The commercial



begins with a raw clip from a fan demonstrating a “glitch” in the new (at the time) 2008 PGA Tour video game due to an animated version of Woods hitting a golf ball from the middle of a pond. This clip had been posted on Youtube and was titled “Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08 Jesus Shot.” The raw clip is then followed by a long subtitle reading, “[user], You seem to think your Jesus Shot video was a glitch in the game,” before demonstrating a video of the real Woods taking off his shoes, rolling up his pants and walking across a pond in order to hit a golf ball off of a lily pad. Woods, after making the hole-in-one, then walks back across the pond to dry land before subtitles appear again, this time reading, “It’s not a glitch. He’s just that good.” The two other media examples were a 2008 Gatorade commercial and a 2009 Nike commercial.

The sub-theme ‘Supernaturality’ had less of a presence for the media examples of athlete Derek Jeter, however, still appeared in notable ways in three of them. In the 2006 Gatorade commercial “Visitors”, Jeter is seen walking through an abandoned building, where he is approached by a giant, flying, flame-throwing monster. Jeter bats the items thrown at him by the monster—including a ball of fire—before defeating the monster, taking a sip of his gatorade, and being approached by another monster—this time double headed. In the 2011 Ford commercial, “Jeter Power,” the athlete can be seen batting and heard saying, “it’s not just about power, hitting it 500 feet. It’s where to place it, how to convert it. That’s power, with efficiency.” A 2011 Ford Explorer is then displayed in comparison, a narrator then referring to the car’s “best in class horsepower.” The direct transition from Jeter to the vehicle through both the visuals and audio demonstrate the brand comparing Jeter’s power to that of a car.

The sub-theme ‘Supernaturality’ is present in three media examples for Cam Newton as well, however, all of them being magazine spreads. The first media example was released in 2016 by GQ Magazine, and features Newton wearing a superman shirt in three of the eight

photos included. The spread includes a quote by Newton in which he says, “And I’ve always been called Superman. Or Super Cam” before then referring to him as “Bigger, stronger, faster [...] there’s never really been anyone like him.” The two other magazines follow in similar fashion, as in 2011, NFL Play 60 features Newton on the cover referring to him in a subtitle as “The Amazing Super Cam” and a 2015 Sports Illustrated cover quotes “Cam Newton ‘he loves superheroes, and in certain ways he is one.’”

For Giannis Antetokounmpo, the sub-theme ‘Supernaturality’ was picked up for only a couple of his media examples. In 2019, Slam Magazine released a cover featuring the athlete posing above what looks like a Greek city with the subtitle “Giannis God Level” written largely across the page. In 2022, Fortnite released a commercial called “Crazy Dream,” starring Giannis dreaming of various different versions of himself falling and floating through the sky. One version of Giannis is dressed as a Greek God, the other representing the athlete’s Nigerian culture.

Through both depictions and comparisons to non-human figures or objects, the many media examples described above, the sub-theme ‘Supernaturality’ characterizes the Black male athlete as anything other than fully human. The narrative suggests that the abilities of the Black male body are not due to talent or skill, but rather, a non-human entity. The recognition of this sub-theme is important, as it demonstrates the process of exploiting the abilities and success of the Black male athlete while simultaneously degrading the humanness of that same athlete.

Animalism

The second sub-theme, ‘Animalism,’ was present only in media examples including Scottie Pippen and Cam Newton, and absent in media examples with Tiger Woods, Derek Jeter,

and Giannis Antetokounmpo. ‘Animalism’ did not appear in many media examples with Scottie Pippen, however, the few occurrences in which it did were more than applicable to the theme. In a 2012/2013 Splash Magazine issue, Pippen is displayed with his Middle Eastern-American (now ex) wife with the large subtitle, “Beauty and the Bull.” Despite Pippen’s presence on the Chicago Bulls’ basketball team, the subtitle reworks the title ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ characterizing him as the beast in this situation. In the 1997 Nike commercial “Silent Assassin,” Pippen can be seen walking across a high wire with crows flying around him before viewers witness what seems to be shoe theft by a white male character. A series of clips then continuously switch back and forth; one of Pippen dunking the second of a cheetah running. The clips conclude with a loud growl from the cheetah. The alternating clips are the striking parts of the commercial, as viewers witness the incredible abilities of both Scottie Pippen and a cheetah, somewhat simultaneously—as though they are the same.

The sub-theme ‘Animalism’ appeared in only one media example for Cam Newton, however, did so in an extremely pronounced manner. In 2016, Under Armour released a commercial featuring Newton standing in the middle of a large grass plot before taking off to run through the woods. As Newton sprints, it appears as though he is being chased and there are sounds of growling animals playing in the background. Newton then runs through two tree trunks before completing his run and making it back to a road. In this commercial, Newton is portrayed to be as strong as an animal, breaking tree trunks as he runs, as well as faster than an animal, as he ultimately outran whatever was chasing him through the forest.



While the sub-theme ‘Animalism’ did not appear in many media examples, its mere representation symbolizes the Black male body being related to that of wild animals and credits the success of the Black male athlete to such association. Both ‘Supernaturality’ and ‘Animalism’ in conjunction display dehumanization as a mechanism of attributing the abilities of Black male athletes to the ideology of Black bodies not being fully human, ‘normal,’ or ‘like the rest.’ Not only does this reproduce the stereotypical image of Black bodies being related to that of animals or non-human entities, but further, it discredits the hard work and effort of Black male athletes in illustrating their skills as ‘natural’ to them.

DUMMYFYING

The theme ‘Dummyfying’ refers to the Black male athlete being positioned in media examples as a body without a brain. The Urban Dictionary defines ‘dummyfied’ as the act of “making something into a dummy,” or to “cheapen intellectually.” ‘Dummifying’ appeared in two different ways; the first sub-theme, ‘Lack of Intelligence,’ appeared as the subject of the media example being made to seem unintelligent or less intelligent than their white counterpart. The second sub-theme, ‘Lack of Speaking,’ appeared when the subject of a commercial media example would not speak the entirety of the time.

Lack of Intelligence

The sub-theme, ‘Lack of Intelligence,’ was present for Scottie Pippen, Tiger Woods and Giannis Antetokounmpo, however, was not present for media examples with Derek Jeter or Cam Newton. Only one of Tiger Woods’ media examples displayed the sub-theme, yet, did so in various ways throughout a two minute commercial. The commercial was released in 2004 by American Express, featuring the athlete in a two minute parody titled ‘Caddyshack.’ The plot follows Woods trying to capture a gopher in his backyard which happens to be a golf course; Woods can be found diving into holes in the ground, setting explosives through the course’s holes, playing with a clay version of the gopher and a predator, and in the end having animal control solve the problem for him (paying through his American Express card). Throughout the



narrative, Woods is the only Black character amongst white golfers, white swimmers, white bystanders, the white male animal control, and one Asian golfer. Woods is, furthermore, given an Irish accent, and acts as a child throughout the parody, creating destruction amongst the course, playing with toy figures, and ultimately being unable to capture the small animal.

The sub-theme ‘Lack of Intelligence’ appeared in only one of Cam Newton’s media examples (similar to Woods). In 2012, ESPN released a commercial titled ‘Office Jokes’ featuring Newton. The athlete is shown in his full uniform at a cubicle in a business office when another character places a trophy on his desk amongst many others. A coworker asks Newton, ‘what did you win now?,’ to which his response is, “Golden Water Cooler. Got a fourth joke I told in the break room.” Despite being in a business office, this



commercial characterizes Newton as ‘just’ a football player, further cheapening his intellect by making any other accreditation won through making a joke.

Similar to Woods and Jeter, the sub-theme ‘Lack of Intelligence’ appeared in only one of Giannis Antetokounpo’s media examples. In 2018, the investment banking company BMO Harris Bank released the commercial, “Ultimate Souvenir,” in which the athlete is attempting to prove his identity through his jersey, socks with his face on them, a human-sized card print of himself, a bobblehead of himself and a book with him on the cover. The female character playing the bank representative then asks, “you bring your book but not your ID?” Here, viewers are made to find satire in the fact that Giannis cannot prove his identity outside of his sport.

The sub-theme ‘Lack of intelligence’ being apparent in media examples featuring Black male athletes is important as it acknowledges America’s comfort with the Black male athlete *only* when they do not pose a threat to the intelligence of America’s dominant society. It represents the Black male athlete as a physical prize for their athletic capabilities and limits their value in academic or intellectual capabilities. The sub-theme is a tactic used to degrade the Black male athlete, similar to that of the theme ‘Dehumanization,’ highlighting the physical capabilities of the Black male athlete, however, only due to the exception of their lack of intelligence.

Lack of Speaking

The sub-theme, ‘Lack of Speaking,’ was picked up only in commercial advertisements, and was noted when the Black male athlete did not speak, however, other characters did, when a narrator spoke, however, the subject of the commercial did not, or when the subject is the only character in the commercial and still did not speak. Commercials in which a narrator spoke,

however, all other characters in the commercial (assuming the subject is not alone) do not speak were not included. The sub-theme showed up for four of the case studies.

In two of Pippen's commercials he did not speak; both of these commercials included a narrator speaking but not Pippen. In seven of Woods' commercials he did not speak; five of these commercials included a narrator and two featured Woods with no narrator or other characters, but he did not speak. In only one of Jeter's commercials he didn't speak; that one included a narrator. Lastly, in two of Newton's commercials he did not speak; one of those commercials included other characters speaking, however, not Newton, and one commercial included a narrator.

Similar to the sub-theme, 'Lack of Intelligence,' 'Lack of Speaking' prizes the Black male athletes for their physical presence and abilities while simultaneously depriving the Black male athlete of any association with intelligence. The theme, 'Dummyfying,' as a whole applies characterizing the Black male athlete as dumb as well as not giving the Black male athlete a chance to *seem* smart. This tool tokenizes the body of the Black male athlete while still maintaining inferiority to their white counterpart. 'Dummyfying' capitalizes on the Black male athlete by using their presence simply as a body either for their fame, for their diversity, or both.

ASSIMILATION

Assimilation can be understood as the process of absorbing information; in a cultural context, it can be understood as the process of absorbing the information or behaviors of a dominant culture. In this study, I refer to the pattern of assimilation as the subject of a media example, in this case being the Black male athlete, being set in environments, engaging in activities, and behaving in manners that have historically been associated with white society. The theme 'Assimilation' appeared in three different ways: the first being 'White Companionship,'

where the subject of the media example is the only Black person featured. Media examples containing multiple other people of color (but not Black) were excluded from this sub-theme, however, media examples containing only one other person of color (not Black) and for an extremely limited amount of time were included. The second sub-theme differentiated is ‘White Washing,’ in which the subject of the media examples is stripped of any semblance of Black culture and instead presents themselves with attributes of white society. This can show up in the actions of the subject, the clothes of the subject, or the dialogue of the subject. The third and final sub-theme is ‘White Music,’ represented simply in the presence of the background music in a commercial being a violin, symphony, or genre known as ‘sunshine pop’¹⁵ (originally known as ‘soft pop’).

White Companionship

The first sub-theme, ‘White Companionship,’ was present in media examples for all five of the case studies. ‘White Companionship’ showed up in only one of Scottie Pippen’s media examples, being a 1992 Nike commercial titled, “Nike Air Flight,” in which Pippen is surrounded by white coaches, a white referee, white female cheerleaders, white fans and white basketball players. The narrator in the commercial is Black, however, is only shown briefly at the very beginning and end of the commercial.

This sub-theme was the most prevalent for media examples with Tiger Woods, as it showed up in half of his



pieces. In the famous 1999 Nike commercial “Driving Range,” Woods is featured at a driving

¹⁵Defined by <https://www.yourdictionary.com/sunshine-pop> as “a pop music genre originating in the United States in the mid-1960s as an offshoot of the California Sound , and characterized by a cheerful attitude, warm sounds, prominent vocal harmonies, and sophisticated production.

range in which every other golfer at the range—female and male— is white. In the 2013 Rolex campaign “It Tells History,” Woods is featured walking through a hallway with the pictures of other famous golfers before arriving at his own picture. Similar to the previous commercial, the other golfers featured are both female and male, however, they all are white. The seven other media examples are two American Express commercials, three other Nike commercials and two other Rolex commercials.

‘White Companionship’ was present in a third of Derek Jeter’s media examples. One prominent example of the sub-theme is a 2008 Ford commercial featuring Jeter as a car sales representative attempting to sell a car to a white family. In a 2002 and 2011 commercial released by Fleet Bank, Jeter is featured with two other men, both being white and one being a fellow baseball player. The two other media examples presenting this sub-theme are a Gatorade commercial and one other Ford commercial.

The sub-theme ‘White Companionship’ showed up in only one of Cam Newton’s media examples. In 2012, NFL Play 60 released the commercial “Your Mom’s Favorite Player,” in which Newton is having a conversation with a young white child. This conversation lasts the entirety of the commercial and the two are the only featured characters.

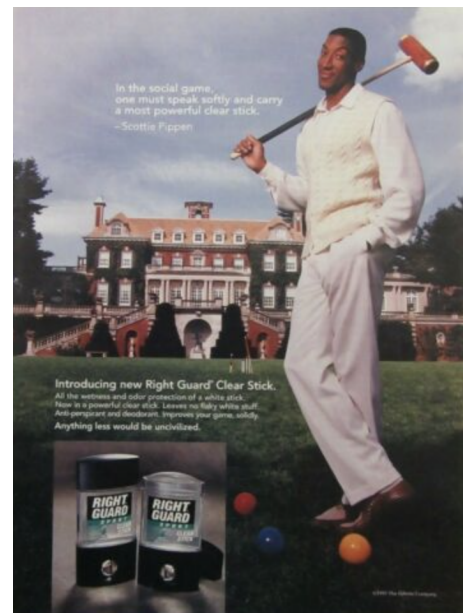
Similar to Newton, the sub-theme ‘White Companionship’ was only present in one of Giannis Antetokounmpo’s media examples. In 2019, T-Mobile released an advertisement featuring Giannis in conversation with a white male on the bleachers of a basketball gym before dunking and exiting the frame.

The sub-theme, ‘White Companionship,’ was not consistent in frequency amongst the five case studies, however, did make an appearance in at least one advertisement for each athlete. In using ‘White Companionship’ in media examples and surrounding the subject with only white

characters, the Black male athlete then represents a token figure or character. The presence of the Black male athlete becomes special as he is the only representation of something different in the advertisement, and that ‘something different’ ultimately represents more than just his race (i.e. his athletic abilities).

White Washing

The second sub-theme, ‘White Washing,’ was present in media examples including Scottie Pippen, Tiger Woods, and Derek Jeter, however, was not present in media examples with Cam Newton or Giannis Antetokounmpo. ‘White Washing’ appeared in two of Scottie Pippen’s advertisements, both being released by Right Guard. In 1990, Right Guard released a deodorant commercial featuring Pippen in an all-cream outfit playing polo. Pippen uses the words ‘musn’t,’ ‘thus,’ ‘hasn’t’ and towards the end of the commercial states, “anything less would be *uncivilized*.” In a 1997 Right Guard magazine advertisement, Pippen is featured again with the cream outfit and the polo stick with the subtitle “in the social game, one must speak softly and carry a most powerful clear stick.” The quote is supposedly from Pippen as his name is dashed below.



The sub-theme ‘White Washing’ appeared in one commercial featuring both Tiger Woods and Derek Jeter. In 2009, Procter & Gamble released a Gillette commercial in which Jeter is walking down the street to the ‘sunshine/soft pop’ song ‘Stayin Alive’ before passing a white woman in a flirtatious manner. The camera then turns to Woods walking and wearing the same

outfit. Jeter and Woods then walk down the street together before noticing Roger Federer (a white tennis player) across the street wearing the same outfit, however, with high platform shoes. A subtitle then read, “Here’s to confidence.” This commercial brings together the three sub-themes in their song selection, choice of who Jeter shows romantic interest in, and who is elected for both Jeter and Woods’ confidence levels to be compared to.

‘White Washing’ was a sub-theme that showed up infrequently, however, remarkably. Within the theme ‘Assimilation’ as a whole, ‘White Washing’ most notably strips the Black male athlete, presenting them in a historically uncommon fashion. Further, the sub-theme somewhat mocks the Black male athlete, portraying a narrative of shame or neglect between the subject and their own race.

White Music

The sub-theme ‘White Music’ was present in commercials with Scottie Pippen, Tiger Woods, and Derek Jeter, however, absent in commercials with Cam Newton or Giannis Antetokounpo. One of Pippen’s commercials was a 1990 Right Guard commercial, which has a symphony playing in the background. Six of Woods’ commercials presented ‘White Music’; three (released in 2014 & 2013 by Rolex and 1999 by Nike) playing a symphony in the background; one 2006 Nike commercial playing the violin; two commercials (released in 1999 and 2009 by Nike) playing songs from the ‘sunshine pop’ genre. Two of Jeter’s 15 commercials can be heard playing a symphony in the background (released in 2010 by Drug Free America and 2022 by Jeep).

The use of music that is historically popular amongst white society is an attempt to soften the historically hip-hop and rap representation of Black male athletes. It does so through a

channel in which white society will be attracted to. The methods within the sub-themes ‘White Washing’ and ‘White Music’ are used to make media examples more appealing to white audiences by allowing them to relate to the content published. The collective theme ‘Assimilation’ attempts to appeal to white audiences by displaying the showcased comfort of the token Black male athletes in white environments, further associating the success of the Black male athletes with white society and all of the attributes that come with it.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The theme ‘The American Dream’ is used in reference to media examples symbolizing the subject as an example of the prosperity that America holds. It follows the American ideology that if you work hard enough, anyone can be successful in the country. This theme displayed itself through the discussion of ‘dreams’ or ‘hard work’ by the athletes, or the reference to one’s foreignness. ‘The American Dream’ was apparent in advertisements for only two of the athletes, Derek Jeter and Giannis Antetokounmpo, but did not present itself for Scottie Pippen, Tiger Woods, or Cam Newton.

Many of the media examples that fell under this theme were those of Derek Jeter. In 2010, Drug-Free America released a commercial in which Jeter tells the story of practicing baseball with his parents; how they told him to “practice, and never give up” and using this lesson as a metaphor for the subtitle at the end of the commercial that reads, “Helping your kids find a dream can help keep them off drugs.” In a 2022 Jeep commercial, the narrator begins with “ever wonder why they call it the American Dream? And not the American goal or the American plan? Maybe it’s because in dreams, you can do anything. You can be reborn in Motor City, and rise up in the city that never sleeps. You can turn time inside out.” As the monologue goes on, photos of Jeter as a child are displayed as well as clips of Jeter walking through New York,

driving in a Jeep Grand Wagoneer with his wife and kids, walking across a baseball field with his daughter, and ending at a lake with his family with the subtitle “Live a grand dream.” The four other advertisements presenting this sub-theme were a 2006 Gatorade digital advertisement, a 2014 MLB commercial, and two American Family Insurance commercials (2019 & 2022).

‘The American Dream’ was present in many media examples for Giannis Antetokounmpo as well. In 2019, a five part Nike series was released titled ‘I Am Giannis.’ Each episode was around four to five minutes, and told the story of Giannis growing up in Greece to ‘Coming to America,’ as episode three is titled. The first episode is the most noteworthy, as we are brought back to Giannis’ hometown in Athens, Greece. We are told the story of “the guy from nothing [who] became everything.” This episode specifically highlights the athlete’s parents, Charles and Veronica, and the family’s economic status as the couple “emigrated from Nigeria in search of work” and in trying to make a means to an end, had “Giannis and his brothers [...] join their parents selling goods in the street.” Another 2019 Nike Commercial brings us viewers to the



top of Mount Olympus in Greece, where we see a basketball hoop with a backboard that reads, “Fate can start you at the bottom. Dreams can take you to the top.” In the background, you can hear a chant repeat the name “Giannis.” The two other media examples were an NBA commercial preceding the playoffs and a 2022 JBL commercial. A 2018 ESPN commercial and 2022 JBL commercial similarly reference the athlete’s foreignness.

Within these media examples, the Black male athlete is used as a symbol of the living proof that the American dream does work, and the success of these young Black men can be

credited to it. The theme hyper fixates on the idea of coming from nothing and becoming something, intentionally noting the hometowns of the athletes in their childhood before then displaying the success of the subjects now. This theme uses the unprivileged upbringings of the athletes as well as their current success in an attempt to credit America for athletic success.

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With media examples for just five athletes of four different sports, multiple themes were observed in prominent ways, displaying a pattern amongst America's entertainment industry. Themes that did not show up as frequently among the advertisements of the athletes were unmistakably observed in the few of which they did. Overall, these four themes point to ideas of *The Racial Contract* that will be explored in the next part of this study, the discussion section.

Discussion

The basis of this study was grounded on Charles W. Mills' theory of *The Racial Contract*, an unwritten and nonconsensual compliance modifying and governing the behavior of Black figures for the welfare of America's dominant society. This foundation of information was translated into a framework between the American entertainment industry and its control over the image of Black male athletes in effort to appease mainstream audiences.

From both this understanding as well as stereotypes perpetuated throughout the media of Black men in general, four patterns were hypothesized to emerge and act as themes through media surrounding the five case studies. The first pattern hypothesized was 'Sexualization,' defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the act of sexualizing someone or something." In this study, the term was hypothesized to refer to the body of the subject in the piece, in this case the Black male athletes', being valued for their physical appearance. The theme was expected to

show up through dialogue, the subject of the advertisements interactions with other characters, or what they are dressed in. ‘Sexualization’ revealed itself to not be a common pattern amongst media with the five case studies; the lack of data thus limiting the ability to analyze it or even qualify the idea as a theme.

The second pattern hypothesized was ‘Hyper-aggression/Animalism,’ referring to the Black male athlete acting extremely aggressive, destructive, or resembling that of an animal. This pattern did show up, however, differently than expected, holding less of a presence of hyper-aggressive behavior and more predominantly with comparisons to wild animals. Further, this pattern ultimately landed as a subcategory for an overall theme of ‘Dehumanization,’ in which the Black male athletes were characterized as non-humans (‘Supernaturality’) or compared to animals (‘Animalism’) in media pieces.

‘Dehumanization’ as a theme works in the context of *The Racial Contract* by engaging an audience with the Black male athlete while simultaneously demeaning them as human beings. Through both the sub-themes ‘Supernaturality’ and ‘Animalism,’ the Black male athletes are portrayed with non-human entities, attracting viewers with the reminder that their skills and abilities are not that of hard work or dedication, but rather, unnatural circumstances. This narrative allows for white viewers to be captivated by the Black male athlete without their own success or abilities being threatened, even allowing those not as athletic to relate. Thus, the entertainment industry is able to profit off of the enchantment of the Black male body as a fascinating unnatural creature while concurrently demeaning the Black male athlete as a human.

The third pattern hypothesized was ‘Assimilation,’ referring to the Black male athletes being fashioned to ‘fit in’ with the perception of white society’s eliteness, elegance, sophistication, and polish. This assumption was demonstrated, however, ‘Assimilation’ as a

pattern developed into a grander theme, acting as the common-ground for three sub-themes. The hypothesized version of ‘Assimilation’ was refined into a sub-theme labeled ‘White Washing,’ alongside the two unassumed sub-themes, ‘White Companionship’ and ‘White Music.’ The two newly developed sub-themes came as a surprise to my analysis, as they were subtle tactics utilized to incorporate the Black male athlete into white society.

‘Assimilation’ as a theme fits within the context of *The Racial Contract* by using content that white audiences feel as though they may relate to while concurrently tokenizing the Black male athlete within it. Here, the Black male athlete is positioned within spaces and environments that are comfortable or common for white individuals. This mechanism does three things: first, the physical placement of Black male athletes in such spaces symbolizes success as the inclusion into white environments; second, the mere presence of the Black male athlete in a white environment works to accredit white society for being inclusive and diverse; lastly, the sole presence of the Black male athlete furthers the notion of the Black male being ‘different’ or ‘unique’ from the rest of society. These three tactics strive to enamour a white audience, intriguing them with the presence of the Black male athlete before truly captivating the audience with commendation and a pat on the back. All while doing so, the Black male athlete’s body is used simply as a physical presence.

The fourth and final pattern hypothesized was ‘The American Dream,’ pointing to the idea of the Black male athlete being symbolized as a representation of the opportunities America provides for those disadvantaged. This pattern revealed itself as I presupposed it would, with the use of the word ‘dream’ and the narrative of the athlete’s less fortunate upbringing. The presupposition of this pattern was accurate, as two of the case studies contained media examples

in which ‘The American Dream’ showed up, specifically for international athlete, Giannis Antetokounmpo.

The theme ‘The American Dream’ fits within the framework of *The Racial Contract* by using the Black male athlete as a symbol of American opportunity. Media examples engage the narrative of ‘rags to riches,’ exploiting a disadvantaged upbringing in an attempt to credit America for the Black male athlete’s eventual success. The background of the Black male athlete is capitalized to give America its acclamations, being an example for what other Black individuals *could* achieve if they worked hard enough. Similar to the narrative produced through the theme, ‘Assimilation,’ the success of the Black male athlete is used as a badge of honor for America to wear as a representation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The theme ‘Dummyfying’ was the only set of patterns not presumed before analyzing the media pieces. The theme held two sub-themes, ‘Lack of Intelligence’ and ‘Lack of Speaking,’ two very different approaches in treating the Black male athlete as a body without a brain. ‘Dummyfying’ fits within the framework of *The Racial Contract* by, again, tokenizing the body and presence of the Black male athlete while simultaneously demeaning their intellect. Similar to the theme ‘Dehumanization,’ this tactic attempts to satisfy the comfort of a white audience, degrading the Black male athlete as a less capable or different being. Such satisfaction and comfort is produced as the idea of an intellectually able Black individual is quickly dismissed. This theme is yet another of many examples of the glorification of white society through the belittlement of the Black male athlete.

In trying to decipher the meaning of the themes presented, I decided to further code them into two categories: ‘Black Stereotypes’ and ‘Black Tokenism.’ The category ‘Black

Stereotypes' focuses on the themes that center around misperceptions of Black culture. The two themes 'Dehumanization' and 'Dummifying' both fall under the category of 'Black Stereotypes' as the media examples associated use common and historical stereotypes of Black males and the Black culture collectively. As discussed in the literature review, different points in the racial history of America display the ways in which the Black male body can be both obsessed over as well as villainized. The emergence of the pair is what produced stereotypes, and studies such as this display the way in which the duality is still practiced to perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes.

The category 'Black Tokenism' focuses on the themes that utilize the Black male athlete as a Black body. The two themes 'Assimilation' and 'The American Dream' both fall under the category of 'Black Tokenism' as the media examples associated include the Black male athletes in an effort to symbolize their past upbringings and current success as evidence for the diversity, prosperity, and opportunities America provides.

The two named categories guide the application of the study results to *The Racial Contract*. A connection can be made between 'Black Stereotypes' and the history of Black representation in sports, as media examples display the manners of operating around sentiments of fear, fascination, and long-standing illustrations of Black masculinity. Additionally, a connection can be made between 'Black Tokenism' and the American archetype, as media examples in the study display the stripping of the Black male athlete's race in conjunction with the accreditation to America's opportunities. Connections back to elements of the literature review demonstrate how historical components of American sports and Black representation still manifest within them today.

Media examples pertaining to five extremely successful Black male athletes exhibit the groundings of *The Racial Contract*: maintaining racial dominance while exploiting non-white

bodies and resources. The case studies substantiate that no matter the success or abilities of a Black male athlete, one of the many mechanisms identified above attempts to credit either white society or the inhumaneness of the Black body.

Limitations & Future Research

One limitation of this study was the number of case studies. Had there been an expanded selection of Black male athletes, the analysis of the media examples could have held a greater magnitude. Further, a greater number of case studies per sport could have contributed to how characterizations amongst Black male athletes may contrast across the sports industry.

A second limitation was the exclusion of Black male athletes who were not professionally signed. The pre-existent height of college athletes within their own campus as well as the recent emergence of NIL deals have brought a new level of wealth and attention to both high school and college athletes. This has meant the incorporation of high school and college athletes within commercials and advertisements. The inclusion of non-professional Black male athletes could demonstrate the original characterization created for the figure when first being publicized by the media. Moreover, it would expose the young age to which Black male athletes are used for American profit.

The third and final limitation of this study was the exclusion of Black female athletes. As previously mentioned, the depth of this type of study would require much more time and research. That being said, its inclusion could expand our understanding of the methods of characterizations across both Black male and female professional athletes. Moreover, it would provide insight on the characterization *differences* between Black male and Black female

professional athletes, in consideration with the gender treatment and pay differences within the sports industry.

Looking forward, further research may analyze the characterization of Black male athletes within the press. This research would include more platforms of social media, containing more insight into the response of fans to such characterizations. While this study highlighted mechanisms used in order to appeal to American audiences, the new research proposed could analyze public reaction and awareness to such actions.

An additional aspect of this study that could be further examined is the brands who are making these advertisements and media publications. Such analysis could include which brands have led such characterizations of Black male athletes and which brands have become the most successful in doing so. This proposed research could offer awareness on the intentions of brands we may still consume from today.

Further research may also address how the characterization of Black male athletes has changed over the past three decades, with the modernization of media and the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. Addressing such topics could cater our understanding of how the entertainment industry modifies and adjusts to appeal to American audiences. This conversation is extremely important in appreciating the authenticity of certain organizations and brands with the shift of sports politics. Additionally, it may further highlight the use of Black male athletes as pawns in creating a certain identity for those organizations and brands. The past decade has seen warm up jerseys, pins, promotional videos, and more used within the sports industry in acts of protest. How has the use of sports as a platform for producing awareness modified the way in which the American sports and entertainment industry portrays Black male athletes?

Conclusion

Charles W. Mills developed *The Racial Contract* in 1997. It originated from historical structures built in 1619, and still applies to the societal structures of modern times. Racist and oppressive systems in America's structure take on a variety of functions impacting minority communities' class status, education, job opportunities, profiling, and survival. This system withstands due to what society is exposed to and chooses to believe, making any misconception released to the world a threat. Thus, perpetuation is a root in the racial discrimination and injustice that some may witness and others may endure today.

Both systematic and structural racism persist when masked with spaces fabricating racial harmony, equal opportunity, and national identity. The world of sports permits such deceit, imitating the role of an equalizer in which races come together to enjoy the show, and in doing so, grant Black athletes with the success and opportunities the country has always guaranteed. The thrill, excitement, and joy that spread amongst different demographics at sporting events are what America wants their racial relations to be reflected as. The unity in the country's figment of imagination is idealized to the extent of utilizing international players to symbolize international desire to be part of such kinship. The entanglement arises, however, in attempting to maintain the content amongst all parties. As *The Racial Contract* goes, America's dominant race must be assured in their racial superiority, both emotionally and materialistically. Compensation is made to the inferior, subordinate, however, ever so necessary body of Black athletes, in exchange for their contribution to the physical and fantastical provisions to a market of admirers.

The way we think about the intersection between race and sports can provide a deeper understanding of how we think about race and American culture. The patterns identified through this study are not only founded in perpetuating stereotypes of Black males as an inferior

demographic, but they further reinforce them. The gravity of these media examples may not seem significant when perceiving the media examples as clips of limited time lengths being played between content. These clips, however, are a reflection of the American sports and media industry as a whole. Who they are trying to appeal to, who they are trying to profit off of, and how those two demographics interplay to maintain a destructive cycle. The influence of these media examples is not only on non-Black audiences with little to no exposure to Black culture, but further, the Black youth who are looking up to Black male athletes as role models. Moreover, while we tend to forget it due to their participation, such media examples hold an influence over the Black male athletes themselves, as they attempt to internalize what seems to be their blueprint for success.

A large conversation within the Black community revolves around the idea of ‘making it.’ Being successful enough to live comfortably, to give back to your family and community, and to do it all without engaging in the illegal activity the government expects from us. Professional sports—or ‘making it to the league’-- is a large component of that conversation, heightening the importance of this conversation. Here, I question not whether these athletes have truly ‘made it,’ but rather, how these media examples look to redefine their success. I hope this examination demonstrates the importance of sports within the conversation of race.

This research addresses only a portion of the racial imbalances within the American sports and entertainment industries. It does, however, reveal microaggressions that the sports and entertainment industries use for the purpose of their own profitable gain. How it is done is so subtle that it is not always easy to pick up in the short span of a commercial, or flipping through a magazine. Once done, however, it can point to the disregard of a Black male athlete as a human being, with rights, feelings, and an identity outside of the one the media attempts to render.

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