

Race and Narrative in Media Presentations of  
Athlete Autonomy in the National Basketball  
Association, 2010-2016.

James King

Student Number: 14323272

*a thesis submitted to*

***The University of Nottingham***

***School of Culture, Languages and Area Studies***

*for the degree of*

***Master of Research in Cultural Studies***

Supervised by:

Professor Andrew Goffey

Professor Anthony Hutchison

## **Abstract**

Between 2010 and 2016, two seemingly similar events in the NBA – the free agencies of LeBron James and Kevin Durant – received markedly different reactions from ESPN, the largest sports network in the US. This thesis interrogates the reasons for ESPN’s changing presentations of black athletes over this period, which resulted in a less overtly racialised treatment of Durant in 2016. Using elements of narrative theory to provide a framework for analysis of both print and social media content, I argue that the joint forces of social media and public discourse on police brutality and race were the primary catalysts for this change in presentation. I argue that there is evidence, revealed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s useful theory of racial contestation, for the endurance of the racialised sentiments present in 2010, and uncover an intricate relationship between ESPN and social media which allowed for the perpetuation of racialised sentiments in 2016 and beyond.

## **Contents**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....  | 4  |
| 1. LeBron James and <i>The Decision</i> : Race and Narrative in NBA Media ..... | 7  |
| Race in Cleveland, Ohio .....   | 7  |
| LeBron James: Home-town Hero .....  | 10 |
| James' Departure and ESPN's Response .....                                      | 13 |
| Narrative Theory: A Framework of Analysis .....                                 | 16 |
| Racialised Narrative Formation in ESPN's Print Response ....                    | 20 |
| Tension Between ESPN and Athlete Media Empowerment....                          | 25 |
| 2. <i>My Next Chapter</i> : Athlete Empowerment after <i>The Decision</i> ..... | 28 |
| Similarities and Differences Between My Next Chapter and The Decision .....     | 28 |
| The Print Response: A New Attitude Towards Player Empowerment?.....             | 30 |
| My Next Chapter on Twitter .....  | 34 |
| Fan Discourse on Twitter .....  | 36 |
| Media Discourse on Twitter .....  | 39 |
| 3. Understanding the Changing Media Response to Athlete Empowerment .....       | 42 |
| The Racial Contexts of The Decision and My Next Chapter ..                      | 42 |
| The 'Soft' or 'Hardness' of Black Athlete Autonomy: A Journalistic Shift .....  | 45 |
| ESPN as the Driving Force of Twitter Discourse .....                            | 51 |
| Establishing the 'Worldwide Leader in Sports' on Twitter.....                   | 56 |
| The ESPYS: A Meeting Point of Empowerment and Activism                          | 58 |
| Conclusion .....  | 63 |
| Works Cited .....   | 68 |



## **Introduction**

When eleven-time NBA champion Bill Russell passed on 31st July 2022, one unfamiliar with his life could be forgiven for thinking that tributes would focus on his unmatched on-court achievements. They would, however, be surprised to find that his career as the most decorated NBA athlete ever was, to some, entirely secondary. And that, to many, his defining role was as an activist and a symbol of black American struggle in the mid-20th century. Despite his enormous success, he was frequently subjected to racist abuse by fans of his Boston Celtics. While an early symbol of black American meritocratic success, he was also a cautionary tale in the persistence of white America's racism and resentment.

Russell was actively involved in the civil rights movement, alongside other prominent black athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Jim Brown, and together they set an early precedent for athlete activism as some of the most visible black figures in the US. His treatment by fans and the media continued to exhibit terrible racism, and his relationship with both was extremely distrustful and fractious as a result. The FBI famously held a file on Russell describing him as "an arrogant Negro who won't sign autographs for white children" (Moore, 2022). Mindful of the impact of visible black activism, and even visible black bodies, on their white fanbase, the NBA and sports media deployed a suite of methods to combat the black autonomy of Russell and his fellow activist athletes, centring on black erasure and criminalisation, which will be elaborated on in chapter one.

This thesis focuses on two distinct events in recent NBA history: the announcement of LeBron James' 2010 free agency through the TV special *The Decision*, and Kevin Durant's 2016 free agency announced by a web post titled *My Next Chapter*. Though there are moments in the sport's recent history more explicitly linked to race and activism, this thesis takes these two events as highly visible expressions of black athlete autonomy which effectively drew out dominant attitudes towards these influential black athletes across a new period of growing athlete activism. *The Decision* is widely considered the definitive symbol of the NBA's 'player empowerment era', a period of increased athlete

autonomy and influence rooted in the NBA's financial structure which led to increased media and, eventually, activist involvement.

Through comparison of ESPN's print response to these events, this thesis will uncover the impact of the emergence and early growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, as a rough modern analogue of the Civil Rights Movement, on athlete presentations in the media. Implicit in this is the role of social media, as a socio-political force which was similarly thrust into the centre of public life during the period and through which Black Lives Matter was facilitated. The relationship between ESPN, as an established media network, and social media will also be shown to have material impacts on the racialised public discourse around athletes, with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theory of racial contestation providing a framework for the analysis of racialised discourse which translates well to these fields, where racialised sentiments were typically expressed covertly.

Remaining mindful of ESPN's primary objective of entertainment and consistent mission to create "a world in which knowing sports without the contributions of ESPN, the so-called and strategically branded "Worldwide Leader in Sports," is unimaginable" (Malitsky, 2014), this thesis encounters a complex nexus of tension between the network and the athletes and fans newly empowered by social media to participate actively in sports discourse. A framework provided by work in narrative theory explained in chapter one offers an enlightening method of synthesising the necessity for entertainment and engagement, particularly in discussion of social media, and the focus of these free agency events (and this thesis) on presentations of the individual. This narrative approach leads to further observations on the distinct practices of print and social media in racialised sports coverage, while helping to identify defining features of racialised sports discourse such as the endurance of tropes as specific as the black athlete disregarding young white fans which the FBI used to vilify Russell.

With a number of distinct relationships and tensions at play in the fields of race and media, this thesis grounds itself in two case studies on the responses garnered by *The Decision* and *My Next Chapter*. Chapter one focuses on the former, with a detailed, qualitative analysis of ESPN's print response to the event

which assesses the role of both narrativity and race. Chapter two applies the principles used in chapter one to the case of My Next Chapter, extending and adapting them to assess both ESPN's print response and the social media discourse around the event as viewed through a Twitter scrape. Chapter three then presents a comparative discussion of these three distinct bodies of evidence, drawing observations about changes in media practice and society which are expanded upon in a brief discussion of the 2016 ESPYS, an event which neatly gathers and illuminates the themes of the thesis, yielding intriguing conclusions on the intersection of sports, media and race.

## **1. LeBron James and *The Decision*: Race and Narrative in NBA Media**

The media response to *The Decision* offers a clear image of the relationship between ESPN, NBA fans and black athletes in 2010, before the mass use of social media and the related uptick in public discourse on race. I argue that ESPN purposefully leveraged key elements of Cleveland's racial and socio-economic context in 2010 to encourage and exacerbate fans' powerful reactions against LeBron James. Using this technique to vilify James imbued the media coverage produced at the time with a strong emotional quality which drove fan interest both in Cleveland and throughout the US. Importantly, it also narrativized *The Decision* and James such that they became central to NBA discourse, serving as a narrative touchstone on which future news events could be indexed. A qualitative analysis of ESPN articles written at the time, viewed through a framework provided by narrative theory as well as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's useful theory of racial contestation, allows investigation into the methods ESPN deployed to maximise the cultural capital of the event and the engagement they enjoyed as a result. The period is also revealing of the relationship between established media networks and players in 2010 after a period of considerable growth in the profile and earning power of NBA athletes, offering a baseline for analysis of changes in player presentations over the period while also highlighting the methods available to the media in narrativizing, and thus controlling perceptions of, athletes.

### **Race in Cleveland, Ohio**

Bonilla-Silva's theory of racial contestation helps to identify how the media produced in response to *The Decision* covertly evoked race to vilify James. Bonilla-Silva describes racial contestation as "the struggle of racial groups for systemic changes regarding their position at one or more levels" and considers it "the logical outcome of a society with a racial hierarchy" (1997, 473). Racial contestation can manifest as social, political, economic or ideological contestation, which refers to overt racism as an ideology expressing racial struggle. The relative positioning of racial groups in a broader hierarchy generates contestation, and Bonilla-Silva (2019a), citing the work of Marable (1983), highlights that white communities have used their position relative to



black communities as a point of comparison, or 'symbolic index', of their own stature in the socio-political hierarchy.

Bonilla-Silva offers the elections of Ronald Reagan in 1986 and Donald Trump in 2016 as two examples of white responses to a shift in the symbolic index. Both elections came during periods where white communities felt challenged, and one means of response was the election of these conservative presidents in an expression of political contestation. Whether through similar economic success, proximity of racially distinct neighbourhoods or other factors which influence the symbolic index, challenges to white communities generate a desire to re-establish superiority in the symbolic index. This manifests politically as the election of politicians who put forward racially charged policies addressing crime, drugs and other issues framed as products of black and minority communities and by challenging the social and economic status of these perceived rivals.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, divides between working- and middle-class white communities also generates racial contestation. Finding themselves beneath the middle-class in this monoracial symbolic index, working-class communities can perceive this subjugation as a shared experience, and so social or economic proximity, with non-white communities which threatens the white working-class' sense of racial superiority.

Cleveland's economic performance in the late-twentieth century made it highly susceptible to racial contestation. Deindustrialisation hit Cleveland and other rust-belt cities in the 70s and 80s, with strong negative impacts on population size, income growth and home price growth from 1970-2006 (Hartley, 2013). This coincided with the growth of central Cleveland's black population, nearly doubling from 23% to 43% of total population from 1960 to 1980. Most black residents lived in inner-city districts which, by 1990, were far behind the suburban outskirts in median household income (Hankins, 1991; Warf and Holly, 1997). Cleveland's 'white flight', in which white middle-classes left the increasingly diverse inner-city (Galster, 1990), was an expression of social contestation which had economic impacts too, removing much of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bonilla-Silva, "'Racists,'" "Class Anxieties," Hegemonic Racism, and Democracy in Trump's America' (2019b) for a more complete discussion of how racial contestation manifests politically.

capital held in those areas. Those neighbourhoods became less appealing to white elites and house prices, as mentioned above, tumbled during the 90s. Predatory mortgages and fraud exploited inner-city Cleveland's homeowners, disproportionately affecting the now-majority black residents and forcing abandonment of homes and mortgage foreclosures which continued through the early twenty-first century (Keating and Lind, 2012).

Working-class whites found their proud blue-collar identities now estranged from the city without the industry of the mid-late 1900s. Cleveland, despite being a Democrat stronghold in which the first black US mayor was elected and unaffected by large-scale racial conflict since the Hough Riots in 1966, had the necessary attributes identified by Bonilla-Silva to drive racial contestation. Using Bonilla-Silva's categories of racial contestation, it can be argued that Cleveland has historically presented less ideological contestation than most US cities. The utility of racial contestation, however, is that it looks past overt expressions of racism. Its absence does not suggest less racial tension or subjugation of minorities, but that these are more likely to manifest through covert economic, social, and political means.<sup>2</sup> After *The Decision*, media coverage utilised Cleveland's social and political contestation through the production of narratives which tied his departure to these issues, heightening emotional engagement and media revenue.

Linden (2015) offers the following observation accounting for white middle-class interest in Cleveland's sports teams, and, by extension, in James. His argument also applies to low-income white communities whose identities were challenged by the changing face of Cleveland:

Many white suburbanites identify with professional sports teams as symbolic, for whatever reasons, of their own personal identity and as a way to connect with a city that no longer exists. Many come to the

---

<sup>2</sup> Mistaken perceptions of Cleveland as racially progressive, reinforcing the implication of Bonilla-Silva's theory of racial contestation that a lack of overt ideological racism can be a veil for, and so facilitate growth of, alternative manifestations of racial contestation, discussed in Bliss, "Cleveland, OH, 1941–1952," *Cities in American Political History*, ed. Richard Dilworth (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011); and in Suchma, "From the Best of Times to the Worst of Times: Professional Sport and Urban Decline in a Tale of Two Clevelands, 1945–1978" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2005); both in Linden (2015).

downtown area to watch their teams (or to go to restaurants or museums or to see a show) but do not associate with the rest of the city, areas that continue the legacy of Cleveland as a failing town and areas that have high minority populations. Some see the sports team as their sole point of pride in the city. Downtown Cleveland, like many other large U.S. cities, has become a playground for the affluent suburbs, a place where Clevelanders can relive the “blue-collar” experience of historic Cleveland. (353)

The alienation that the suburbanized white middle-class felt affected low-income whites too, for whom the rate of demographic change and the collapse of industry had left Cleveland a radically different city to the one they knew. The investment of communities in the city’s sports teams was also intensified in certain respects by the ‘Cleveland Curse’, a local superstition rooted in the failure of its three major sports franchises to win a championship between 1964–2016. Cleveland was already known as the ‘Mistake on the Lake’, a pejorative born of a number of failings in Cleveland’s history but key among them the 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River, which indicted the city’s industrial legacy and encouraged the deindustrialisation initiatives discussed above. A community literally defined by its failures, Clevelanders held their sports teams as an appropriate proxy for the city at large, identifying with their city through a shared frustration and resentment in sports. White residents were either physically or socially increasingly detached from the inner-city and viewed their sports teams as a primary means of retaining connection. But the shared, negative history of Cleveland and its sports teams made this interest something of a morbid curiosity, where fans and residents defaulted to disappointment.

### **LeBron James: Home-town Hero**

When James was drafted to the Cavaliers, who had missed the playoffs each year since 1998 and not made it past the first round since 1993, he was the most highly-touted rookie to enter the NBA in forty years. The city embraced their home-state hero immediately. Born in Akron, 50km south of Cleveland, James enjoyed a record-breaking high-school career in Ohio, commanding

unprecedented national recognition at his age.<sup>3</sup> The Cavaliers had the league's joint-worst record before James' arrival, but in his second season, aged just 20, he led the Cavaliers to a winning season and was named an NBA All-Star Starter and a Second-Team All-NBA selection, two accolades which suggest he was considered one of the league's ten best players by both fans and media voters. His early achievements were an entirely unsurprising justification of not only the enormous media hype he had commanded, but of the ground-breaking investment Nike made in him aged just 18. They signed him to a seven-year, \$90 million endorsement deal before his first NBA game, and gave him his own national commercial featuring cameos from Hall of Fame NBA players Jerry West and Julius Erving. This deal alone more than doubled James' salary during his first four seasons in the league. As his brand expanded, he accrued more endorsement deals and began his own lucrative business ventures which ensured that his salary remained a minority of his income for his whole career, making him a pioneer in a NBA's 'player empowerment era', which was made possible by legislative changes in the NBA's 1999 Collective Bargaining Agreement, a contract between the league and the player's association which governed contractual and financial matters.<sup>4</sup>

James' brand was designed to harness his status as Cleveland's 'hometown hero'. Commercials present clear and purposeful depictions of brand identity, and James' ties to Ohio are emphasised in two Nike ads, 'The Beginning' (2007) and 'Chalk' (2008), which leveraged blue-collar language and visuals which mirrored the identities of Rust Belt communities. 'The Beginning' presents James as hardworking and humble. He states in the voiceover that "nothing about my game is great yet; I still have work to do", pushing back on

---

<sup>3</sup> See James's 2003 draft profile for a non-exhaustive overview of his on-court achievements prior to the NBA. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130709135603/http://www.nba.com/draft2003/profiles/JamesJames.html>

<sup>4</sup> The 1999 collective bargaining agreement was an important precursor to *The Decision* as it capped player salaries, meaning that top NBA players' income came primarily from endorsements. This reduced their dependence on the league and their individual teams, leading to greater player mobility and autonomy around the league and contributing to the racialised anxieties of white management and ownership, who now had less control over their marketable star athletes.

the dominant 'Chosen One' narratives around his pre-NBA years and instead highlighting hard work and humility, which resonated with Cleveland's identity. 'Chalk' visually reinforces this connection by cutting between footage of James on the court performing his pre-game ritual chalk toss and a barber, baker, and teacher each in their professional settings replicating it. James, the commercial emphasises, is just doing his job and giving his best as every Cleveland native strives to. His return to Cleveland in 2014 spawned several commercials which extended these themes, deepening the connection between these presentations and Cleveland as a city and franchise.<sup>5</sup>

It is also noteworthy that presentations of James pre-2010 effectively constitute an erasure of his black identity in favour of an identity predicated solely – and, to emphasise again, misleadingly – on him as a Cleveland native. Bonilla-Silva's work on colour-blind racism is enlightening here, and his discussion of Barack Obama's appeal carries interesting parallels to consider with regards to James. Bonilla-Silva writes that:

Obama has become a symbol with especially different meanings for people of color and whites. For non-whites, Obama became a symbol of their possibilities in what they hoped would become a more egalitarian America . . . For older generations of blacks desperate to see racial equality before they die, and for many post-Reagan generation blacks and minorities who have seen very little racial progress in their lifetimes, Obama became the new messiah of the civil rights movement (Bonilla-Silva and Ray, 2009).

In contrast, the symbolic meaning of Obama to whites was compatible with their belief that America was indeed a color-blind nation. Obama quickly became for whites an Oprah- or Tiger Woods-like figure, a black person who has "transcended" his blackness to become a national hero. (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011, p. 198)

---

<sup>5</sup> For two examples of commercials recentring on these values after James's return see 'Together' (2014) and 'Let's Go To Work' (Samsung, 2015). To see how these presentations are regionally specific to Cleveland, Ohio and Rust Belt blue-collar values, see the following Kobe Bryant commercials for context which primarily emphasise his confidence and Los Angeles' affluent celebrity culture: 'The Black Mamba Film' (2011), 'Kobe vs. Messi' (2012), 'The Conductor' (2016).

As in Obama's appeal at the national level to blacks across generations, James offered a return to glory for older Clevelanders who could recall the sporting successes and thriving industry of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, while providing younger generations with a sincere hope of change. Black and white children wanted his talent and his shoes, and black and white fans had investments in seeing his success. Oprah and Tiger Woods can be grouped here with Michael Jordan, who wilfully allowed the NBA to place his blackness "under erasure to prove that working-class people of color can achieve upward mobility" (García, 2018, p. 109). Jordan was famously apolitical, and so retained his marketability within the previously discussed white economic structure around the NBA. James similarly 'transcended' his blackness by simply not foregrounding it in socio-political discourse or in his brand during his early years, gaining standing with fans and executives in the process.

After *The Decision*, James' blackness was subtly foregrounded in the media response to *The Decision*, as will be explained below, and through an uptick in his engagement with socio-political and racial discourse which will be discussed later in this thesis. The former built into a broader media project to create compelling narrative which aligned with culturally familiar tropes – in this case, a 'fall-from-grace' characterised by betrayal. Cleveland native and journalist Mark Bechtel remarked in *Sports Illustrated* that, upon hearing news of *The Decision*, "the word *Judas* was bandied about liberally" (2020), showing the ease with which this event fit into a broader scheme of narrative tropes. The language characterising the event in the articles discussed, however, binds this fall-from-grace to a reintroduction of James' blackness, not only harnessing racial animosity to generate fan engagement in this context but narrativizing the corruptive effect of blackness such that it was synonymous with villainy.

### **James' Departure and ESPN's Response**

When James left the Cavaliers on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2010, the cultural and social contexts described above all contributed to the response. The Cavaliers, with James as their star, were a successful franchise, drawing crowds and generating revenue for the city. James had been linked to the area through branding leveraging his local upbringing, suggesting to fans that he shared their specific values. Cleveland had subtle, long-standing issues of racial contestation which

were belied by the lack of ideological manifestations. Instead, Cleveland's racial tensions found expression through social and economic contestation which further fuelled racially-charged animosity. The mortgage crisis, for example, had a disproportionate economic effect on Cleveland's black communities, but also contributed to social contestation by generating a sense amongst white residents across the social spectrum that their identities as Clevelanders were being challenged.<sup>6</sup> Cleveland's fortunes had not improved by 2010 (Linden; Keating and Lind), and so the Cavaliers remained a rare point of pride for the city.

Analysis of ESPN articles written in the aftermath of *The Decision*, focusing on racialised narrative and language in their presentations of James and how they utilised Cleveland's social context, is revealing of the media/athlete relationship which existed in 2010. The articles discussed below constitute a subtle but concerted effort by ESPN to harness Cleveland's potential for racial contestation. By driving narrative and engaging fans through racialised vilification of James, these responses clearly defined the position of established media toward athletes at this time. James, as he demonstrated and extended the potential athletes held for independently producing marketable media, foreshadowed a potential shift in the media landscape which the novel form of social media would one day unlock; a shift in which legacy networks would become an unnecessary intermediary between fan and player. Their response therefore carried a racialised resentment which was, I argue, a reaction by the predominantly white media against the increasing influence of these young black athletes.

The articles featured presentations of James as selfish and individualistic and focused on his showmanship in creating an hour-long spectacle out of his free agency. They bolstered these criticisms with a focus on local sports fans who were characterized as the victims of the saga, appealing to previously discussed existing sentiment among white residents and leveraging their sense of victimhood into a collective, and racially charged, frustration. Journalist Jon

---

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting here that the consistent focus of this case study on white residents is due to the NBA and NBA media's established aim of primarily engaging white audiences. The effects of *The Decision* on black communities and their response to it would constitute an interesting discussion for a separate study.

Greenberg brings these feelings to the fore when he describes “a city that's regularly disappointed by its sports teams, its industry and a declining quality of life” (2010). A brief article on the viewing figures garnered by *The Decision* highlighted that “there was twice as much interest in LeBron James' decision on where to play in the city he is leaving than in the city he's going to” (ESPN.com news services, 2010), presenting a subtext which questions why James would leave fans who, according to the viewing figures, are more invested in him than those he has chosen over them. This article is explicitly not an opinion piece – it isn't attributed to a specific ESPN staff writer – and yet is clearly critical of James. It states that Cleveland fans “tuned in to watch James say he was leaving the hometown Cavaliers”, reminding fans of his local background and so hinting at a narrative of betrayal against the city which was furthered in other articles discussed below.

A follow-up article which further discusses *The Decision's* TV ratings throws a parting shot at James' legacy, reminding readers that “James' future can't yet compare to Kobe Bryant's present” (Associated Press, 2010b), a comparison leveraging Bryant's famous career-long (at this time 13-year) commitment to his team, the LA Lakers. This article, attributed to the Associated Press and nominally intended to simply disseminate information about the show's ratings, again features a relatively covert – and entirely unrelated – barb aimed at James. One of the few articles published by ESPN offering neutral or defensive stances on James directly addresses this comparison as an oversimplification which ignores Bryant's own moments of prioritising himself over the franchise (Adande, 2010a).

The opinion pieces published at this time were often made distinct from ESPN as an institution, referencing the organisation directly in discussion of *The Decision's* airing and therefore placing the author's voice as one outside the monolith ESPN. Articles attributed to the Associated Press or ESPN.com news services, however, have no authorial voice separating them from ESPN and so they suggest an institutional bias ESPN shows against James in their presentations of his free agency. James played on his personal ties to Ohio throughout his career and consciously constructed his brand using it through the commercials discussed above. In the context of *The Decision*, however, it was weaponised against him by a reworking of his characterisation and the narrative



role he was cast in. The subtexts hinted at in these presentations are the establishment of that narrative; focus on his role as a *former* hometown hero foregrounded his shift into a traitor.

### **Narrative Theory: A Framework of Analysis**

Here it is appropriate to properly establish the utility of concepts of narrative and narrative theory for this study. Narrative theory plays two roles in this discussion: it allows us to establish the value of narrativity to media producers, and it allows us to identify the processes by which narrative is enhanced. Central to compelling narrativization in this non-fiction context is characterisation, and the portrayal of individuals such that they fit a simple role in a given narrative framework.

The appropriateness of narrative theory in analysis of ESPN's, and, in the next chapter, social media's, response to player autonomy is predicated on the focus exhibited on the individual. The NBA has a unique propensity for generating individual, marketable stars. On the court, players are unobscured by pads or helmets, lends itself to increased fandom and perceived familiarity with players (Criblez, 2015) and play in a team of just five, and on the level of team management, player movement is often conducted by trades within the closed system of the league which amplifies the impact it has on the NBA as a whole. These factors, among others, increase the general importance of an individual athlete in the NBA compared to other team sports.

The visibility of top NBA athletes and their high value to their teams has made them extremely marketable, as evidenced by Forbes' estimate of the 15 athletes with the greatest off-the-field earnings in 2022. Six were NBA athletes, the highest number of any single sport or league (Knight, 2022). They also provided the only black representation on the list outside of tennis, where Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams featured. With entertainment and engagement primary considerations for ESPN, portrayal of the NBA which leveraged the high profiles of the individual athletes was desirable. Casting these individuals in narrative frames which connect to public sensibilities of what constitutes a 'good story' is an opportune means of enhancing the entertainment value the distinct qualities of sports, and particularly the individualism of the NBA.

Acknowledging the reality that athletes are complex and human makes their simple designation as characters difficult, of course, and detracts from their central appeal as superhuman. In order to apply engaging and established narrative tropes, such as the underdog story, the fall-from-grace, or the prodigal son, to real world of sports, presentations of athletes needed to focus on the individual as a character, with simple traits and motivations. Gahan (2014) offers a comparison between presentations of modern athletes and the heroes of Homeric and Virgilian literature which neatly evidences the use of common literary narrative in media coverage of sports, highlighting the benefits it has for fan enjoyment and engagement and, subsequently, for media corporations.

Though narrative theory has not come to a consensus on what necessarily constitutes narrative, Ricoeur (1983) proposes that we understand history itself as being pre-narrative, not taking on an inherent narrative structure of any kind but rather lending itself to narrativization as a harmonisation of distinct aspects of reality. Narrative is a means of synthesising and connecting aspects of reality which are themselves pre-narrative. Carr simplifies this idea as simply meaning that there exists, before a narrative is told and thus constructed, a structure of "elements that lend themselves to narrative configuration" (1986, 119). The reduction of an individual or event to its basic pre-narrative constituents, then, allows for their reconfiguration as a simpler narrative element as outlined above.

Adopting a narrative approach to the media coverage of *The Decision* informed by Ricoeur's work above offers a way of identifying precisely what is being done to instigate the shift between James as a hero to a villain in 2010. Some elements of his history are pre-narrative, such as his upbringing in Ohio and his recognition as a prodigal talent. They are too broadly known and understood and to question them and so they form a central part of James' narrativization as a hero, where he is connected to the area from birth and is using his talent to lead Cleveland to new successes, and as a villain, where he has abandoned his hometown and stolen from them the talents which he had honed on the courts of Ohio. The same applies to his blackness, a pre-narrative feature of his identity which was initially used to promote the NBA as a means of black America to realise the American Dream, but which was negatively narrativized post-*Decision* as the root of his egotism and hence his betrayal.

In the context of this study, the shift from James' characterisation as a hero to that of a villain, or, indeed, the recontextualization of events designated as pre-narrative, can be understood as a narrative process enacted by the media to provide fans with content affirming their emotions. Broader engagement with narrative theory assists an understanding of why this precise narrative formation was so effective with regards to *The Decision*. White (1980) offers another useful element of narrative theory while unpacking Hegel's work establishing a relationship between narrative and morality. Narrative, he asserts, is the product of applying law or some social, moral code to what would otherwise simply be sequential events. White summarises this argument succinctly as follows:

The reality which lends itself to narrative representation is the *conflict* between desire, on the one side, and the law, on the other. Where there is no rule of law, there can be neither a subject nor the kind of event that lends itself to narrative representation. (12-13)

This assertion, White admits, is unfalsifiable, and is certainly not the only explanation of narrative present in scholarship, but it does suggest that narratives are concerned with conflict and with legal or moral transgression in particular. From this definition of narrativity comes another concept central to this thesis: that of the 'villain'. Where a series of events is given meaning by the conflict they display between desire and the law as White describes, it follows that a villain, in whom this transgressive desire manifests, must be necessary. A villain, as a narrative element, is inherently at odds with the law and with morality. Extending the work detailed here, characterisation as a villain can be an incredibly powerful discursive and narrative tool, because interactions with a villain are inherently narrative and garner a moral and emotional response from an audience. This is certainly visible in NBA media, where the most popular content is that which asks the audience to participate in a moral discourse on the right- or wrongness of a player's words or actions, just as in *The Decision*.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Decision* itself is a primary example of this, but discussions around Ben Simmons, Kawhi Leonard and Zion Williamson, all of whom refused to play for their teams at points over the last five seasons, were central in the media for some time and received considerable engagement from fans.

Taking Gahan's work as a precedent for the use of literary theory in analysing sport media, Keen's *Theory of Narrative Empathy* (2006), focused on narrative in literary fiction, can lend useful insight into the role of race in constructing these narrativized media products. It suggests that character identification is necessary to create engaging narrative, highlighting that fullness of character and narrative situation play a key role in engaging a reader or audience. Fullness of character in this media context is a relative term; athletes are real people, and so what matters is the extent to which the audience is familiar with them. Stereotyping with both positive and negative attributes provides established media with an easy set of characteristics with which they can 'fill in the gaps' in their presentation of an individual. When the dominant audience is white – and so predisposed to avoid engaging critically with stereotypes of blackness – this can be an effective way of imparting fullness of character onto a presentation of a black individual such as James. In keeping with Keen's work, this increases engagement with the whole narrative. This also explains the specific appeal of redemptive and fall-from-grace narratives, both of which James has been the subject of. They showcase an individual at their moral high and low-points; the audience sees the fullness of their moral character and therefore feels a greater sense of identification with, and understanding of, them.

As mentioned above, narrative is a concept which has defied clear academic definition. Where this thesis goes on to discuss the idea of narrative control or manipulation, this refers to instances where a distinct idea is being introduced to or amplified within the discourse by use of the narrative techniques detailed here. Frequent reference is also made to 'enhanced' narratives. This refers to the use of narrative techniques to convey a heightened sense of narrativity, expanding on the existing narrative qualities of an event by retracing the links between an individual or event's pre-narrative elements in a more compelling way, often which ties into existing narrative or character tropes familiar to the audience, whether literary or drawn reflexively from NBA history. This method of producing more emotive and engaging media content is seen throughout the material covered in this thesis.

## Racialised Narrative Formation in ESPN's Print Response

Returning to the articles, then, it is now possible to conduct a broader narrative analysis centred on the manner in, and extent to, which content around the pre-narrative was fabricated and to assess how James was characterised as a villain with appropriate fullness of character to drive narrative. The impact of his departure was not a media fabrication – Cleveland's fanbase was profoundly affected by *The Decision* – but the media's selective emphasis on the financial implications of this was a narrative manipulation. One article described the effects of *The Decision* on local business as follows:

Bars teeming with exuberant crowds emptied out quickly. Owners watched anxiously, wondering what the future might hold now that James is gone. His presence has helped them keep going during Cleveland's bitterly cold winter months. (Associated Press, 2010a)

This same article reminds readers of Cleveland's financial problems in the noughties, and here suggests – with special focus on the plight of Clevelanders in their unwelcoming climate – that James, beyond upsetting sports fans, would be responsible for the economic hardship that would follow his transfer to Miami. It evoked the economic issues of an already-struggling city to generate sympathy, or perhaps even pity, for Cleveland, whose economic fate he is implicitly considered liable for. This leverages the pre-narrative element of James' history as Cleveland's primary source of pride and success prior to *The Decision* and recontextualises it as a common narrative structure with particular weight in post-industrial Cleveland: the David-and-Goliath-esque story of a small-business owner barely making ends meet but suffering at the hands of the uncaring and affluent. Rather than being recognised as the source of income for the community, James was framed as the one who took it away. Confirmation of the impact that James's move to Miami and then back to Cleveland in 2014 had on hospitality venues near the stadium has been provided by recent scholarship (Shoag and Veuger, 2017), but this article frames Cleveland as being entitled to James's loyalty. Portraying his impact on business as causative without acknowledging that the security of small business is not the responsibility of an individual athlete indicates a conscious effort to characterise James as uncaring and privileged.

Other opinion pieces often cited his ego as a particular point of issue. One article introduces itself as “The Column on *The Decision*, which was announced by The Egotist, who has lost The Respect of The Columnist . . .” (Wojciechowski, 2010), harping on James’s own self-referencing in the third person during *The Decision* and mocking him – albeit fairly – for his self-importance. Compared to earlier presentations of James’s brand in commercials, this is not only a critique of his character but also a pivot away from blue-collar Cleveland and Rust Belt values. Another classifies this use of the third person as being indicative of the “stereotypical egotist athlete” (Greenberg). This particular presentation is one of a number of racialised criticisms of James, designed to evoke existing stereotypes for the reasons stated above while piquing Cleveland’s specific potential for racial contestation.

A young, local, black man had shunned the city and, in doing so, reminded whites of their own dissatisfactions, as detailed above, towards their social standing in Cleveland. Even in success, where typical stereotyping as drug dealers or gang members couldn’t function, James’ blackness was criminalised. Many of these articles gloss over the fact that *The Decision* was also a fundraising effort which gifted \$2.5million to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Wojciechowski wrote that “James did the Heat, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (with a reported \$2.5 million in donated revenue from the telecast of *The Decision*) and the Lakers a huge favor Thursday night” and O’Connor (2010) suggested that “he would’ve been better off writing [the Boys and Girls Clubs] a check”. Minimising the positive discourse around this element of *The Decision* was important in retaining a characterisation of, and narrative construction around, James that could connect with Cleveland fans’ resentment.

He had taken everything and given nothing in return; he had become ‘too good’ for Cleveland and left for greener pastures just as Cleveland’s industry and middle-class had before him, affirming their undesirability to a national audience. As mentioned in the comparison to Obama, James’ characterisation prior to 2010 synthesised rust-belt values with an American Dream narrative. The implication was that he had made something of himself, but not without the lessons he learned from Cleveland, Ohio and his real hometown of Akron. Where else but America could a young black man achieve such success? And shouldn’t Cleveland be proud for raising him? Here, the narrativization of James’ career

toys with the pre-narrative element of his childhood struggle and poverty. Prior to 2010, LeBron had managed to overcome adversity thanks to the opportunities afforded him by Cleveland, which raised and taught him and then gave him a professional career with which to support his family. After 2010, James' humble beginnings were instead characterised as the beginning of a moral decline characterised by egotism and greed. O'Connor's assertion that James ought to have donated the money himself rather than via *The Decision's* fundraising carries with it a subtext in which Cleveland is entitled to James' wealth, showing the insidious side of white investment in black successes which can be claimed by white communities. This manifests in O'Connor's article as economic contestation, decrying black affluence as necessarily selfish, and in earlier presentations of James as social contestation, as the city of Cleveland was implicitly credited for James' social mobility. The evocation of Cleveland's repeated narrative of abandonment and (particularly sporting) embarrassment whet white Cleveland's appetite for racial contestation to retaliate against the weakening of their economic and cultural position without James, and ESPN tapped into this appetite effectively.

The stereotypical athlete is not a homogenous construction, and the NBA's relationship with race in particular has informed very distinct archetypes for the black and white basketball player. The league has featured predominantly black athletes – but with predominantly white management and ownership – since the 1970s (Lapchick, 2020; Smith, 2011), and the spectacle of whites as a relative minority on the court has driven racially-charged narratives intended to re-establish some superiority of whiteness. Smith details the racial tensions that pervaded the NBA in the 80s, and how Larry Bird gained status as the NBA's 'white saviour', giving the NBA access to sponsorships and revenue that would have otherwise been withheld on account of the league's majority of black players. Stereotypes which have plagued black communities for decades, centering on egotism, laziness and lack of intelligence (Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman, 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz, 2002; Welch and Sigelman, 2011), are no less apparent in sports where black athletes have often been characterised by the media, front office staff and fans in similar terms.

Smith's comprehensive analysis of characterisations of Larry Bird details the celebration of him as a blue-collar country boy who embodied Boston's

values – values forged in industry and so assaulted by deindustrialisation in a manner similar to Cleveland (though with more overt, ideological racial contestation as a result). This set him in clear opposition to even the best black athletes in the sport at that time. Julius Erving and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar – two all-time greats – were each subjected to criticisms of their work ethic and desire through direct comparison to white counterparts who had to “outwork and outsmart” (Smith, p.3) them due to the supposed athletic advantage black athletes held. The bleeding of these dominant cultural stereotypes into NBA discourse and the perpetuation of the impression that black athletes have inherent athletic advantages necessitated a reestablishment of white superiority which manifested through exaggerations of white work ethic, resourcefulness and tenacity – all values with which white America identified.<sup>8</sup> As such, the stereotypical white player was (and still is) well-drilled, fundamentally sound, and above all a hard worker who embodies the meritocratic American dream by achieving success in a league where the odds are stacked against them.

There is a strong body of evidence for this in scouting reports written about young players entering the NBA Draft. NBADraft.net, a leading scouting website, grades players across categories including “intangibles”. This is an amorphous umbrella term in NBA discourse which generally covers the mental skill and strength of a player, with particular focus on their “team-first” mentality, resilience in high-pressure situations and work ethic. NBADraft.net published reports for all but one of the 60 players drafted in 2010. 43 of these players were black North Americans and five of them white N. Americans.<sup>9</sup> The average Intangibles of black athletes registered at 7.44/10, while the average of the five white athletes came in at 8.20. This is, admittedly, a fairly small sample, but expanding the parameters for white draftees to include those drafted in 2009

---

<sup>8</sup> The superiority of black genetics in certain sports has been thoroughly discussed and ultimately debunked in recent years despite perpetuation by black and white athletes and sports journalists, but regardless of the truthfulness or otherwise of these claims it remains a functional element of the discourse around basketball and race used to celebrate white athletes and diminish the achievements of black athletes.

<sup>9</sup> Only North American athletes have been included in this brief analysis as there are long-established stereotypes about European and African players which would confound the following results.



and 2011 further demonstrates the presence of stereotypes in sports media. Including these years gives a sample of 15 white athletes, and an average Intangibles score of 8.33, with no white athletes scoring below 8 on NBADraft.net's ranking across the three years while 26 of the 43 black athletes drafted in 2010 scored 7 or lower. This is suggestive of a predisposition toward considering white players, through constructed and misrepresented ideas about their superior "mentality", to be somehow greater than the sum of their skills and talents while black players often amount to something lesser than theirs.

When Greenberg categorises James as the 'stereotypical egotist athlete', then, this means that James is the stereotypical *black* egotist athlete, because the stereotypical white athlete is not considered an egotist at all. The disdain shown for the spectacle of *The Decision* throughout these articles can be traced back to the NBA's historical criminalisation of black athletes, a feature of the black athlete's experience which has been well discussed in scholarship (García, 2018; Craig, 2016). Related work by Cunningham (2009) has considered that current ideas of sportsmanship, and what subsequently constitutes the proper athlete, are heavily influenced by British antiquity and an approach to sports which championed cultural values prioritised by white elites: namely humility, respecting opponents, and an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual. Cunningham goes on to suggest that black athletics run in opposition to this hegemonic white sportsmanship, with emphasis on individuality, entertainment, and competition. García adds that it is the clash between white hegemony and black sporting values which has resulted in a criminalisation of black athletes. This is characterised by the reduction of their sports culture and performance to the traits constituting the 'stereotypical egotist athlete'. This famously manifested through the NBA's introduction of a dress code in the early 2000s, when hip-hop aesthetics were seen as driving down the marketability of the NBA to white audiences.

This was, and always had been, a key concern for NBA executives and owners; former Cavaliers owner Ted Stepien was famously quoted as saying that "blacks don't buy many tickets and they don't buy many of the products advertised on TV . . . running an NBA team is like running any other business and those kind of factors have to be considered." (Fink, 1980). The commercial aspect of the NBA drove an emphasis on white values which, in a reflection of

Marable's symbolic index, necessitated this devaluation and ultimate criminalisation of black culture, sporting values and aesthetics. Characterising James as an egotist fit into the white-centric marketing which the NBA had established and also contributed toward the establishment of a dominant narrative in which James was a villain.

### **Tension Between ESPN and Athlete Media Empowerment**

ESPN's articles also had to reflexively address its own role as a corporation in their articles, and the narrativization of James as villain through racialised language can be seen as an important manoeuvre in the long-term media landscape. One ESPN article complains about the "manufactured spectacle" of *The Decision* and simultaneously claims that it "isn't so much the contrived nature of the announcement, but that James was such a willing participant -- if not the creator -- of the spectacle" (Wojchiechowski) that made him deserving of their criticism, while another concludes that "ESPN isn't to blame here. The network is in the business of providing programming that sports fans want to watch . . . [and] sports fans sure as hell want to watch this programming." (O'Connor). The spectacle is at once a repulsive token of James's rampant ego and villainy but is also considered great entertainment by the network and viewers.

Recent reports have attributed the origins of *The Decision* to a fan, who contacted American sports pundit Bill Simmons with the idea before the latter took it James's camp for consideration (Van Natta, 2020). Attacks on James for creating a spectacle ignore this: that the spectacle is precisely what fans and media want, specifically from stars like James. The mix of disdain and pleasure that media voices and fans took from *The Decision* was not attributed to the two key figures in its production – James and ESPN – equally. James was reduced to the established stereotype of the black athlete; his actions were described by Greenberg as "low-rent and immature" (as opposed to the cerebral, hardworking white athlete) and O'Connor wrote that he was concerned only with "chasing the kind of fame and stature attained by no American athlete before him, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali included" (as opposed to embodying white sportsmanship values of team-orientation and humility – note that the other superstar athletes referenced here are all black). These articulations of

James's motivations and character ensured that the objectionable elements of his free agency were laid solely at his feet, not ESPN's, and were subtly framed as a product of his egotistical blackness.

This had the effect of establishing a relationship in which ESPN was a disapproving facilitator of James' actions, but in which it was simply performing its role as a broadcaster. It can, of course, be argued that James himself was also simply performing his role; as a professional athlete, he had a less clearly defined role merging on-court success, entertainment, generation of league and team revenue as an employee of those institutions and, increasingly through the player empowerment era, external business obligations and brand development. But, by deliberately ignoring these subtleties of James' role and reducing it to the simple and specific task of playing basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers, ESPN presented James as mercenary, untrustworthy and ungrateful. ESPN, rather than hypocritical, was presented as a trustworthy, reflective and balancing force which fulfilled its role by both showing the true nature of the athlete in *The Decision* but also challenging the spectacle afterward. In the context of sports media as an increasingly contested narrative space, the combination of James' characterisation by literary techniques and these critiques levelled at his credibility set up a distinction between ESPN and James as a reliable and unreliable narrator respectively. As a proxy for media-empowered athletes, this aspect of James' characterisation set a precedent which would serve to limit the incursion athletes would have on ESPN's potential for narrative enhancement and control as they developed their 'first-person' voices on social media.

With the interest garnered by *The Decision* and by James specifically, it was clear at this time that athletes had enormous potential to drive media production. Social media was a present and growing force which had already demonstrated its power for mass political engagement by 2010 (Shirky, 2011) and it was an inevitability that this would bleed into the world of sports discourse too. By characterising James as above, ESPN prepared for this development by presenting the empowered athlete – and particularly the young, black and self-determined man – as an inherently negative construct. It is indelibly linked, these articles suggest, to existing negative stereotypes and to the resentment of white America toward black success, which is here considered the product of

egotism and ignorance toward the opportunities granted to black people by white communities.

The few ESPN articles which voiced a more balanced take on *The Decision*, such as the Adande article mentioned previously, were by black journalists (Adande, 2010a; Adande, 2010b; Bryant, 2010; Broussard, 2010), reinforcing the sense that the highly critical opinions ESPN produced at that time were heavily informed by racialised perceptions of James. James could not be trusted, and the implication of this was that, even as athletes would develop more direct rapport with fans over the coming years, there was only so much trust that fans could place in these egotistical and mercenary athletes. The mediating force of ESPN would always be necessary to advocate for disillusioned fans and to echo their sentiments on a national scale, combating the emerging voices of “unreliable narrator” athletes who were less able to effectively push back on media-generated narrative enhancements and embellishments due to their decreased credibility.

*The Decision* signalled a shift in the established structure of NBA media and discourse. Players had, for many years, been almost exclusively subjects. Their contributions, when made, were generally processed through the framework of established media. Similarly, fans were left on the fringes of the discourse, able to contribute only by the consumption and regurgitation of media narratives between themselves in the barbershop or by the water cooler. *The Decision*, while still ultimately an ESPN product, was a warning to established media networks that their media monopoly, and their ability to manipulate and contort narrativity to exercise its full potential for profit, was under threat. Player empowerment had given James a pathway to participate autonomously in the media space, and social media loomed, ready to offer that same opportunity to all athletes and fans. ESPN’s response to *The Decision*, viewed through the lens provided by narrative theory, expressed a clear institutional anxiety about this potential and showed the lengths the network was willing to go to in combatting it.

## **2. My Next Chapter: Athlete Empowerment after The Decision**

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, just under six years after *The Decision*, the NBA was rocked once again by a free agency move. Kevin Durant, voted Most Valuable Player of the league in 2014 and universally acknowledged as an exceptional basketball talent, moved from the competitive Oklahoma City Thunder to the Golden State Warriors. He announced his decision through a brief piece, titled *My Next Chapter*, published on The Players' Tribune, a website founded as an outlet for athlete-produced media content. The Warriors, anchored by point guard Stephen Curry (who had claimed the two MVP awards since Durant had won his), had knocked Durant's Thunder out of the playoffs a little over a month prior. They went on to feature in the 2016 NBA Finals where they lost to LeBron James and a revitalised Cleveland Cavaliers franchise to which he had returned, in what was widely portrayed as a 'prodigal son' narrative arc mentioned in the last chapter.

### **Similarities and Differences Between My Next Chapter and The Decision**

The move garnered comparisons with *The Decision* within established media and fan discourse, but several key differences shaped the response Durant received relative to that of James. James had also teamed up with other top players in an attempt to win a championship, but Durant had joined a ready-made championship contender fresh from a record-breaking 73-win regular season. Though James was criticised for his perceived lack of competitive spirit, the criticism that shaped the discourse around him was centred on his treatment of the city and people of Cleveland and Ohio – a distinctly racialised criticism built on white proprietary entitlement as discussed in chapter one. Durant had no affiliation with Oklahoma City outside of his basketball career, diminishing the sense of proprietary entitlement amongst Oklahomans for whom the Thunder was still a relative novelty, with the franchise only relocating to the city in 2008 after a long tenure in Seattle as the Seattle SuperSonics. Durant played a year in Seattle before the team was uprooted in highly contentious fashion following a series of legal disputes.

Though his early success with the team rapidly grew Oklahoma's fanbase, neither the franchise nor Durant himself were elements of OKC's identity in the same way that the Cavaliers and home-town hero James were Cleveland's. The state of Oklahoma had never previously been home to a permanent franchise in the four major US sports leagues (the NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL) and so Durant's immediately obvious talent gave them their first taste of major sporting success and they quickly cast him as their singular sports hero. Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett called him "our Ernie Banks and Michael Jordan" (Katz, 2016) and journalist Royce Young described him as being Oklahoma's "Tom Brady, Larry Bird and Ted Williams all wrapped into one" (2016). Despite the contextual differences between Durant and James and the greater symbolic quality James accrued as a Cleveland native, Durant's importance to the city and the magnitude of *My Next Chapter* approximates *The Decision* closely enough to warrant comparative research into the responses each received, while remaining mindful of their distinctions.

This chapter takes Durant's free agency as an event through which to compare the media landscape and attitudes toward player empowerment in 2016 relative to 2010. Considering the impact of two key developments over that six-year period – the emergence of Twitter as a forum for news dissemination and discourse, and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement and athlete activism – on the discourse surrounding player empowerment, both racial contestation theory and the narrative theory framework applied previously are used here in both a print and social media context. Player empowerment had taken on a socio-political dimension as athletes harnessed the platforms granted to them by the financial and media empowerment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, building on the precedent set by James in *The Decision*. Black Lives Matter triggered growth in public discourse on racialised police brutality and brought a greater focus on media presentations of black autonomy which barred ESPN from leveraging the racialised narrativity seen after *The Decision*. It also encouraged black athletes in the NBA and beyond to utilise their platforms to protest racial injustice. At the same time, though, social media's qualities relative to print, which will be discussed later, made it an avenue for ESPN to continue generate highly-engaging, negatively-narrativized content mirroring the print articles published after *The Decision* which still

utilised covert racialised sentiments which will be uncovered through the continued application of a narrative theory framework.

### **The Print Response: A New Attitude Towards Player Empowerment?**

A qualitative analysis of ESPN web articles published within a month of *My Next Chapter* using the same parameters applied to the articles selected in discussion of *The Decision* (reference to player, team left or joined in article title and reference to the free agency move in article body) yielded 49 articles discussing Durant. Of these, 19 were assessed to contain some value judgment about Durant's free agency, and these 19 articles were then sorted heuristically into overtly positive, overtly negative and mixed responses. There were three positive, seven negative and nine mixed judgments evident in the articles.

This would suggest a strongly negative overall judgment in ESPN articles following *My Next Chapter*, just as there was after *The Decision*. Treated at face value, however, the numbers are misleading. Of the seven articles offering negative value judgments, six report reactions of other media members, executives, fans and players. Only one article presents a negative judgement made by the authorial voice of the text, doing so by the following quote:

The Golden State Warriors are technically playing by the rules, though it doesn't exactly feel like it. Painful playoff losses are supposed to bring about an offseason of wallowing . . . the unchastened Warriors evaded the natural heartbreak process by promptly wooing Kevin Durant . . .  
(Strauss, 2016)

Here, the negative sentiment is concerned with parity within the league – a common theme throughout the articles reporting the negative responses of others. The Warriors circumventing the 'natural' chastening they were due is presented here as unfair, but legal, actively declining to enhance the narrative quality of the article by characterising the Warriors as transgressive 'villains'. There is no criticism of Durant's character in this article and certainly nothing as strong as the language used about James six years prior, with no evidence of attempts to leverage racial contestation amongst fan communities. Most of the articles do not make value judgements on Durant's character at all. Three articles included reference to negative fan reactions – leaving negative reviews

on Durant's restaurant (Rovell, 2016a), burning his jersey (ESPN.com, 2016) and statements directed at Durant himself in an article discussing a discount on replica Durant jerseys in Oklahoma City (Rovell, 2016b) – which were indicative of negative character judgements of Durant. These were still much lesser in magnitude than the character judgements levelled at James by fans in 2010, and ESPN's article featuring the burning of Durant's jersey also included evidence of fan sympathy with Durant and so was categorized as showing a mixed value judgement.

The four remaining articles exhibiting negative judgement all centre on comments made by individuals outside of ESPN. None of the articles featured value judgements made by the author of the piece. One of the NBA's most popular players-turned-pundits, Charles Barkley, criticised Durant's move as a threat to the parity of the league. He voiced his disappointment that "[Durant]'s gonna kind of gravy train on a terrific Warriors team", evoking the accusations of anti-competitive spirit which were levelled at James but softening his comments with an affirmation of Durant as "a good kid" (ESPN.com news services, 2016). League commissioner Adam Silver was quoted as saying that the move wasn't "ideal from the league standpoint" but acknowledged the validity of the move (MacMahon, 2016) and didn't pass any character judgement of Durant. The remaining two articles featured quotes attributed to Jae Crowder, a player for the Boston Celtics who was an active member of their failed efforts to recruit Durant, and Mayor Cornett. Crowder voiced his approval of Celtics fans booing mention of Durant at a press conference and called Durant's move elsewhere a "slap in the face" (Forsberg, 2016), and Cornett was quoted as follows:

We've been spurned by someone we cared deeply about. That's the emotional aspect of it . . . His image has changed drastically than it was last week because of his decision . . . (Katz, 2016)

These are perhaps the two most clearly critical articles ESPN published, and yet neither offer the opinions of ESPN staff writers and, in contrast to some of the discourse around James, seem an expression of upset rather than dislike. The statement that Durant's image had changed is implicitly negative but is not a specific, direct attack on his character– a far cry from the presentations of James offered by ESPN's own writers in 2010.



Articles from ESPN senior writers J.A. Adande and Tom Haberstroh were even vocally defensive of Durant's decision and challenged his detractors. Adande, who was also supportive of James in 2010, titled his article 'Durant taking the easy road? Not so fast' (2016), offering a direct rhetorical challenge to the dominant criticism of the move as lazy or anti-competitive. In the previous chapter's more impressionistic analysis of articles published after *The Decision*, three opinion pieces featuring clear character criticisms of James were identified and discussed. That only three opinion pieces featuring positive or negative presentations of Durant were identified in total, and that the single negative article by Strauss referenced above was much milder in tone than those concerning James, is demonstrative of two key changes: ESPN was less concerned with presenting moralistic judgements on expressions of player empowerment overall, and when it did, objections to player empowerment were no longer married to character-critical sentiments.

There were a number of factors that softened the response Durant received. James was placed in opposition to a particular set of predominantly white Cleveland sports fans through the construction of a 'betrayal' narrative predicated on the racialised sentiment that Cleveland was entitled to his loyalty and talent. Durant's transgression was, on the few occasions it was framed as one at all, against the integrity of the sport itself. No single fanbase or collective besides Oklahoma, whose upset was of a much lesser magnitude than Cleveland's, felt personally slighted. The language used to define his relationship to Oklahoma naturally lacked the sense of entitlement which Cleveland showed toward James due to Durant's lack of history there, though his importance was emphasised in some articles through similar techniques to those used in the aftermath of *The Decision*. Royce Young wrote one of the few articles published by ESPN at this time which focussed on the character of both Durant and Oklahoma's fans and the human qualities of the event, exhibiting some elements of a 'soft-news' framing – a qualification which will be explained in the next chapter. He makes the subjective claim that "Durant shared the values of Oklahoma" (2016), echoing attempts by journalists reporting on *The Decision* to impart to fans a sense of the athlete's character and evoking Keen's 'narrative empathy' and thus heightening readers' emotional engagement with Durant.

This article also aligns Durant's career with the broader ebb and flow of OKC's economy in a parallel with the reports on *The Decision*:

Durant gave Oklahoma City a new identity. As he grew, so did the infrastructure. As the oil and gas industry boomed, so did Durant and the Thunder . . .

The oil and gas industry has sagged in the past year, with layoffs hitting all the major companies. And now Kevin Durant is gone. (Young, 2016)

Young narrowly, and perhaps knowingly, avoids portraying this as causation. The image of fearful bartenders discussed in the previous chapter which was used by ESPN after *The Decision* strongly implied responsibility on James' part, but Young describes a correlative relationship here as opposed to the causative one which fed a broader narrative structure of betrayal after *The Decision*. Tonally and emotionally, this article leans more toward sorrow for the city of Oklahoma than anger or resentment as in *The Decision*. Young references an upset young fan, confused about Durant's decision and "embarrassed about his tears" to capture this, echoing techniques used to bind James to the emotional state of the city and hold him accountable for Cleveland's upset. Young softens this, though, by proceeding to sensitively discuss Durant's individual motivations and answer the child's question as to why he left.

Within ESPN's print coverage of the two free agencies there seems, even considering the contextual differences and reporting similarities between the two, a clear movement away from the vilification of the athlete and the racialised characterisation and narrativization endured by James. As suggested at the close of the previous chapter, ESPN appeared to understand the potential of *The Decision* to be a precedent and narrative touchpoint for future reporting on free agency and player empowerment in a similar way to how articles on *The Decision* had cited literary narrative tropes. As expected, *The Decision* was referenced often in ESPN's articles discussed above, but, crucially, it was often as a contrast to *My Next Chapter*. Rather than indexing on *The Decision* as a point of reference for emotive, engaging journalism, ESPN regularly distanced the two events in print, only referencing *The Decision* briefly and infrequently and declining to use this narrative precedent laid in 2010. ESPN's presentation of Durant was defined by neutral or positive contextualisations of his decision and

regular reference to his good character. Where ESPN and its writers' authorial perspectives were foregrounded, discussion of Durant as an individual never featured personal barbs or insults and was generally supportive of his right to autonomy in free agency. This raises the question of why Durant's free agency was treated favourably in ESPN's print media rather than indexing on the more engaging, negatively-narrativized framework provided by *The Decision*.

### My Next Chapter on Twitter

By 2016, ESPN's online reach was greatest not on its website, but through social media. ESPN's Twitter account grew slowly after its creation in March 2007 but, as Twitter became more popular by the end of the decade, ESPN's following on the platform grew to over 840,000 by December 2010.<sup>10</sup> *The Decision* drew an estimated 13 million viewers earlier that year, suggesting that Twitter, though growing quickly, was yet to become a primary avenue for ESPN's media. By the end of 2012, ESPN's most-liked tweet was a nod to retiring baseball player Chipper Jones; at time of writing, it still has only 1300 likes.



Figure 1

<sup>10</sup> Figures for ESPN's Twitter following in 2010 and 2016 taken from Wayback Machine. See:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20101229175722/http://twitter.com//espn>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160706020939/twitter.com//espn>

When news of Durant's move first broke in July 2016, ESPN's Twitter following had grown to 29 million. In just over five and a half years, their following had grown by approximately 28 million. At the time of writing, just over six years on from that point, that number has grown to just over 41 million – roughly a 41% increase over six years compared to a 3300% increase in the prior period. For ESPN, and the media at large, the six years from 2010-2016 were evidently pivotal in the establishment of social media as a primary means of mass communication. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, ESPN's Twitter account posted the image below (fig. 1) of an old tweet by Kevin Durant. It was posted twice, and the more-liked of the two was the most-liked ESPN tweet of July 2016, amassing 18,000 likes at time of writing and dwarfing the engagement ESPN's Twitter presence garnered in 2010.

Durant was criticising, as many athletes were, James and *The Decision* on the grounds that it was anti-competitive. This tweet was also referenced briefly in the Royce Young article mentioned previously. In that article, this tweet was linked at the end of the following passage as part of a list of actions presented as affirmations that Durant had made to Oklahoma:

There's confusion in Oklahoma in the aftermath, because Durant wasn't the guy who would leave.

He was the guy who talked often about love and loyalty.

He was the guy who asked for teammates to join him on magazine covers.

He was the guy who played video games with neighborhood kids.

He was the guy who randomly showed up in Stillwater to play some flag football. He was the guy who signed a full five-year extension, leaving out a player option to pledge loyalty and stabilize the franchise.

He was the guy who donated \$1 million not even 24 hours after tornadoes shredded the OKC metro area in 2013.

He was the guy who tweeted this six years ago. (Young, 2016)

The article contextualises this tweet as part of a group of Durant's positive actions and traits. Categorised as a mixed-judgement article in the analysis discussed previously, this article explains the conflict between Durant's free agency and the examples of his positive relationship to Oklahoma listed above

as a product of change. Though Durant himself rejected the idea that he had changed, Young's presentation is sympathetic; change is the simplest reconciliation of the event with the pre-narrative elements of his career and history which does not vilify Durant.

ESPN's two tweets containing the image of Durant's old tweet were captioned "Plan B" and "Kevin Durant, six years ago:". Without any attempt to contextualise or explain the tweets like Young had, the latter, which was the more-liked of the two, seems a clear – and fair – suggestion of hypocrisy. Though not directly critical, ESPN's framing suggested that Durant is deserving of criticism; the two tweets are best considered inflammatory, designed to evoke and justify criticism of Durant on the grounds of his hypocrisy. The replies both received subsequently contained a much higher proportion of negative and character-critical sentiments than was observed in the broader Twitter scrape discussed below. ESPN's careful avoidance of character-criticism in web articles, which included an aversion to direct comparisons to *The Decision*, and the sensitive tone of Young's article clearly had not translated to social media. ESPN's tweets certainly suggested comparison with *The Decision* by their accusation of hypocrisy. Though not encouraging the proprietary entitlement felt towards James, the suggestion was that Durant owed fans continuity across the six years elapsed between his criticism of *The Decision* and his own free agency and that, by not adhering to that, he was no better than James himself. Given the racial qualities of the discourse around James, the comparison evoked the racialised criticisms of *The Decision* in the undercurrent of the Twitter discourse on Durant. The disconnect between ESPN's presentations in print and on Twitter points to an obvious but important aspect of social media platforms; the necessity of public engagement. Analysing fan tweets offers insight into not only their opinions of *My Next Chapter*, but into the effectiveness of ESPN's attempts to generate engagement in the novel media landscape.

## **Fan Discourse on Twitter**

Using search parameters limiting results to tweets mentioning 'Durant' posted from July 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> with a minimum of ten likes, tweets were skimmed and approximately 30 tweets considered notable and representative were used in further analysis. Due to the ten-like parameter, a large portion of these tweets

were by accounts with some media affiliation. Tweet authors were designated as fans or media by assessment of their profiles and the extent of their active and professional engagement in sports media. This was largely determined by the language in the account profile itself, affiliated accounts linked in the profile and the size of the account's following. Though these are imperfect measures, they offer a passable framework by which to categorise tweet authorship and uncover distinctions between media and fan discourse on the platform. To prevent a skew towards high engagement, media-produced content, the search was conducted using 'latest' rather than 'top' tweets on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> (though this may have had an unaccounted-for impact on the geography of the tweets selected due to time zones) which were then skimmed for a general sense of Twitter discourse.

Fan tweets displayed mixed sentiments towards the move and generally fell into three categories: positive/supportive, negative/critical, and negative/non-critical. Interestingly, the 'mixed' category used in earlier discussion of journalistic presentations of *My Next Chapter* did not translate well to the Twitter discourse included in this analysis. This seemed to be a function of both the brevity of tweets, as they were limited to 140 characters at the time, and of the highly adversarial nature of Twitter discourse to which this thesis will return. Unlike journalistic presentations discussed prior, positive sentiments were generally unconcerned with Durant's character. There was no evocation of his good nature in his defence, with support driven by two key principles: his right to autonomy and disdain for those who opposed his decision.

Positive and supportive tweets often expressed their support through character-criticism of Durant's detractors rather than through discussion of Durant directly. Critics of Durant were referred to as 'overnight NBA analysts', questioning the validity of their opinion by mocking their lack of credentials. This criticism of Durant's detractors was common, as were humour and mockery more broadly. Another prominent sentiment considered Durant's free agency as akin to anyone else changing job, emphasising Durant's personhood and promoting a sense of identification with him and his situation. Importantly, identification here leveraged humanity and complexity as traits shared by Durant, as opposed to the attempts in 2010 to garner a sense of James' character by casting him in narrative tropes and utilising racialised stereotypes.

Some tweets were overtly oppositional, with direct address to 'you' – the whole body of Durant critics – while another broadened this to address 'when *twitter* criticizes durant like any of them have ever competed on an elite level' [my italics]. Though there were some tweets expressing positive sentiments about Durant himself, these were a minority and were sometimes still accompanied by adversarial sentiments. One example expressed hope that 'we [Oklahomans] never stoop to the level of Seattle' before stating that Durant had made the city and franchise proud.

The smallest body of fan tweets were those in the negative but non-critical category. These tended to eschew any focus on Durant's personality, similarly to the majority of tweets defending him, but focused on the emotions of the individual fan who authored the post. The emotional component of these tweets focused on sadness instead of anger or disdain. These tweets expressing sadness were relatively rare, but tweets expressing frustration over the likelihood of the Golden State Warriors dominating the following season without any direct criticism of Durant were numerous.

Tweets featuring direct criticism of Durant were diverse in tone and in the specific elements of the situation they evoked. Some focussed on Durant's supposed disloyalty in a manner similar to the response of fans to James after *The Decision*, and negatively referenced how Durant 'treated' the city, suggesting duty beyond his contractual obligations which belies some sense of proprietary entitlement in the tweet author. Others declined to explain or justify their sentiments or tweeted insults, though these insults were not generally driven by racialised stereotypes. Interestingly, there was a notable focus on gendered language in critical fan discourse mixed in amongst more generally negative language. Durant was called a 'spineless pussy' and the Warriors' 'side piece' in two tweets, tying gendered sentiments to accusations of cowardice and anti-competitiveness.

There were some notable differences between the 'fan' tweets discussed above and 'media' tweets, but both groups exhibited a distinct lack of neutral sentiments. The few which did typically expressed surprise as their central emotional component without any moral judgments on Durant or his decision. That these tweets with little emotional content were in the background of the

discourse aligns with scholarship which, through observational analysis of social media (Kenny, 2022) and evolutionary game modelling (Antoci et al., 2016), has demonstrated that strong emotive content, particularly that with negative messaging, proliferates on social media. Milder emotional content does not exercise such a strong effect on engagement, the currency on which Twitter is predicated, and so it is pushed to the periphery of the discourse as observed in this Twitter scrape.

### Media Discourse on Twitter

Media tweets also tended towards an oppositional approach in positive presentations of Durant. As with fan tweets, this manifested as a defence against critics rather than discussion of Durant, foregrounding conflict as a means of expressing and enhancing their own opinion. This was achieved with less direct and critical language than that of fans, and a number of tweets implied the existence of their opponents in the discourse by tweeting instructive and commanding messages, telling critics to not blame Durant nor forget the disloyalty shown by owners and management towards players. Others featured explicit acknowledgement of those critics but remained tonally less argumentative than fan tweets, replacing mockery and the confrontational direct address of 'you' with more measured language and a tendency to combat criticism with positive messaging as captured by the tweet below (fig. 2). Here, criticism is loosely referenced as the 'national perspective', and this is countered with a positive commentary regarding the interest and excitement the Golden State Warriors would provide.

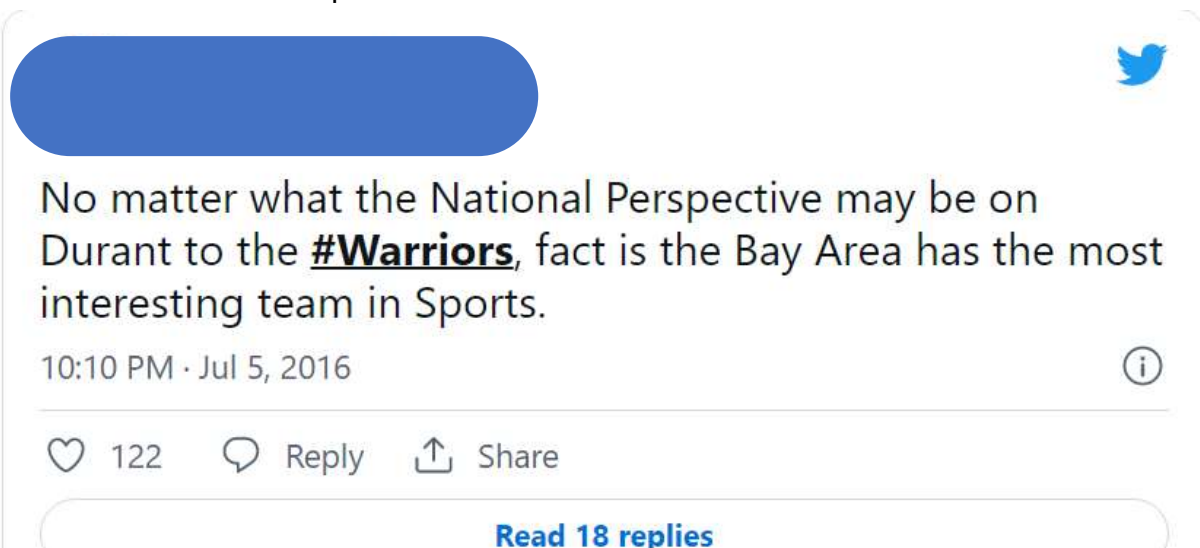


Figure 2



Compared to the near-parity in volume of fans criticism and defence of Durant, there was a clear majority defending him in media tweets. There were pockets of criticism, but some approached the topic with humour rather than character attacks or overt negative emotion; one self-deprecating media member referred to themselves as one of his 'stalking exes'. Humour, as seen previously, was a primary alternative to combative or critical language in the discourse, but some of the highest engagement responses to *My Next Chapter* were videos intended as humour which married it to overt negative emotion. Two examples of this were highly dramatized videos produced by teenagers with considerable social media presence and following, neither of whom fit neatly into designation as exclusively fans or media. Both directly addressed the camera with clearly exaggerated emotional responses to the event which attempted to appeal to other younger fans through their farcical emotional exaggeration, and both performed well in terms of engagement. One response by an affiliate of the popular and controversial Barstool Sports media group was the only one in the scrape to feature overtly racialised sentiments, posting a meme alongside a link to a blog article which joked that Durant had abandoned OKC's children without paying child support. The language here purposefully evoked popular stereotypes about black fatherhood but was a noticeable outlier in tone amongst media tweets. It is notable that these three were the only overtly character-critical media tweets and all used visual media to present those criticisms.

Within the Twitter discourse as described here, ESPN fills a slight void. As mentioned previously, ESPN's Twitter response to *My Next Chapter* was subtly inflammatory and suggestively character-critical. There were no other tweets by media accounts which shared this subtly inflammatory framing and none garnered the same character-critical discourse in its replies besides the racist response comparing Durant to a deadbeat father. The three mentioned above which were overtly inflammatory were a considerable minority, and all were relatively unconstrained by expectations of professionalism given their lack of affiliation with any major network and the youth of the two video-responders. ESPN did not overtly engage with humour in its response despite the high-engagement it accrued in the above examples, although they could be interpreted as a slight mockery of Durant, reflecting its professional status and responsibilities. It was therefore unique by virtue of being both critical and not

overtly humorous, whether at Durant's expense as above or in a self-deprecating manner as seen previously.

Comparing ESPN's Twitter response to *My Next Chapter* to the wider Twitter discourse reveals the network's opportunism. The mixed response of fans brought demand for representative media voices on both sides of the discourse. As many media figures took a sympathetic view of Durant, and the popular online voices who did not were targeted toward younger fans or had strongly racialised content, ESPN's subtler criticism appealed to a large body of fans who wanted to see Durant criticised without association with that infantile, racialised content. Even so, ESPN's Twitter criticism did carry, by virtue of its reference to *The Decision*, some racialised undertones of James' characterisation in 2010. Unpacking the contextual differences between 2010 and 2016 is further revealing of the enduring legacy of ESPN's racialised response to player empowerment in 2010, and how it endured through the changes represented by Black Lives Matter on mass social media.

### **3. Understanding the Changing Media Response to Athlete Empowerment**

#### **The Racial Contexts of The Decision and My Next Chapter**

To assess the differences observed between the responses to *The Decision* and *My Next Chapter*, it is necessary to understand changes in public racial discourse and in the media landscape across those six years. *The Decision* was indicative of the gradual but substantial power shift initiated by the 1999 Collective Bargaining Agreement towards athlete autonomy and their financial independence from the league. This, in turn, made the predominantly financial methods of control the NBA had exerted over black athletes to exercise erasure and control decreasingly effective, and reopened an avenue toward player activism as an expression of their black autonomy.

As referenced in the introduction, NBA athletes had a rich legacy of activism, but they had historically been limited by the platforms through which they could communicate. Activism was typically conducted by either symbolic or physical signs of protest, such as Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf refusing to stand for the anthem in 1996, and depended on established media coverage to disseminate its message. These instances of athlete racial activism in US sports had been met with a mix of negative social and professional repercussions intended to limit the potential for athlete dissent. Abdul-Rauf was briefly suspended from the league, Bill Russell was subject to numerous instances of racist abuse and, beyond the NBA, Muhammad Ali famously had his boxing license revoked amongst other retributory actions (Uitti, 2022; Associated Press, 2022; Calamur, 2016). Notably, these reactions manifested through the full range of Bonilla-Silva's means of contestation. These attacks on employment had, as expressed above, long been a means of control over black dissent and to maintain the subjugation of blackness in the symbolic index of sports and beyond (Towler, Crawford and Bennett, 2020).

The emergence of social media, as a space beyond the immediate jurisdiction of the NBA's owners and management and largely independent from established networks such as ESPN, made it an outlet well-placed to support the

social dimension of athlete empowerment and, as a result, athlete activism.<sup>11</sup> Twitter's retweet and reply features, which promote rapid and wide dissemination of content, make it particularly adept at supporting this purpose. Twitter represented an opportunity for activism which largely protected athletes from the methods of retributory contestation which had prevented their socio-political empowerment, but it also opened athletes to a greater degree of direct ideological and social contestation by providing fans and critics with online access to athletes.

The aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 was perhaps the first realisation of athletes' fresh potential for public socio-political engagement. Dunne provides analysis of James' use of Twitter to share an image of his team, the Miami Heat, wearing hoodies in a statement against the stereotyping of black men. Describing it as "a rare moment to seize control of a communication process that is normally controlled by league commentators and other members of sports media" (2017, p. 932), Dunne concurs that social media provided a uniquely-suited space for activism. James' Twitter post, as well as being a tribute to Trayvon Martin and a protest against his murder, "disrupted the NBA's meticulously tailored narratives of black masculinity" (p. 933) by integrating the discourse unfolding around Martin's murder with the longstanding awareness of stereotyping and racism within the NBA.

Extending Dunne's argument, the visual cues of the image sought to present James' and his teammates' experience as young black men as a shared pre-narrative element between themselves and Martin. Dunne also cites the use of hashtags to facilitate this by actively bringing the image into the virtual space in which Martin's death was being discussed, leveraging the specific utility of social media as a tool of discursive control and engagement. If ESPN's narratives intended to center the network itself in sports discourse, James' tweet could be

---

<sup>11</sup> It is worth acknowledging that the NBA, as in the case of NBA General Manager Daryl Morey and his comments on China/Hong Kong, has exercised some control over the activism of affiliated individuals in the past and that platforms such as Twitter itself still serve as an intermediary in themselves, but player autonomy in social activism has undoubtedly improved relative to the pre-social media era.

viewed similarly, as a refocusing of narrative, through the image's evocation of shared pre-narrative with Trayvon, on himself and black NBA athletes.

James' response to Trayvon Martin's murder, however, served a wholly different purpose to these examples of ESPN exercising narrative control, as Dunne goes on to explain:

LeBron brought together a series of visual and written elements to challenge the implications found throughout the NBA brand. The aftermath of Trayvon's shooting therefore provided a trace of the beliefs that the NBA's narratives are based upon, and temporarily allowed reactions to these narratives to surface. The exposure of the deadly consequences of the mass criminalization of young black males provided an opportunity for James and the Miami Heat to illuminate the racial ideologies present within the NBA brand without any serious pushback from the league or other commentators. (Dunne, p. 933)

Whereas ESPN, in pursuit of emotive content and high public engagement, narrativized through both overt racial stereotyping in 2010 and inflammatory character-criticism in 2016, James sought to broaden the discourse to acknowledge the full scope of the issue and to address precisely the kind of treatment he was subjected to by ESPN itself in 2010. The deployment of narrative techniques, as James used here through visual cues conveying identification and shared pre-narrative with Martin, is clearly not necessarily negative. Social media provided athletes the opportunity to engage with these narrative elements for the purpose of activism, as opposed to ESPN's inflammatory and enhanced narratives which exhibited attempts to undermine the characters of James and Durant.

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had killed Trayvon Martin, in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged. Initially a Twitter hashtag, the movement became increasingly organised in supporting grassroots activism in response to instances of police brutality through such events as gathering 600 activists in Ferguson and St. Louis after the murder of Michael Brown (Arnold, 2017). With the growing public discourse on race came an expectation on visible black athletes. In 2016, LeBron James was criticised by the family of Tamir Rice, a black boy from Cleveland who was shot by a police

officer in 2014, for not speaking on the matter after the officers responsible were acquitted (Wright, 2016). By this time, driven further by the fractious political atmosphere of the US leading up to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Black Lives Matter was widely recognised. Though its online presence had made it an amorphous, decentralised movement on which critics and proponents could attach distinct and sometimes contradictory values and goals (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017), it had continued to highlight police brutality and structural racism in public discourse, as well as less evident forms of racism such as stereotyping. In the parlance of racial contestation, this meant an expansion of the discourse to include contestation beyond the overt and ideological.

The profession of journalism was, of course, attuned to this shift in the discourse. The growing public awareness of subtle forms of contestation and racial subjugation meant that media portrayals of blackness and black autonomy were under considerably more scrutiny than previously. The subsequent shift in reporting practices was, this paper contends, a key point of difference not only between the print presentations of *My Next Chapter* and *The Decision*, but also between the discourse seen around *My Next Chapter* in print and on Twitter.

### **The 'Soft' or 'Hardness' of Black Athlete Autonomy: A Journalistic Shift**

Existing scholarship offers a useful framework through which to assess the distinction between ESPN's print presentations in 2010 and 2016 and its Twitter presentation of *My Next Chapter*. Moon and Hadley (2014) show a tendency for Twitter usage as a source in the presentation of 'soft' news – a category defined by a focus on the personal and emotional (Slattery, Doremus and Marcus, 2001) – more than 'hard' economic or political news. Moon and Hadley consider that journalism centred on entertainment, such as celebrity or, importantly, sports news, falls into the soft news category. Their research on Twitter usage also builds on and reaffirms existing work describing connections between TV and soft news and, more importantly in this discussion, print and hard news (Patterson, 2000; McManus, 1994).

Machill, Köhler and Waldhauser (2007) conducted a study which revealed the heightened information comprehension and retention of audiences who watched TV news which employed narrative devices, reinforcing the idea that

narrativized content garners greater engagement and interest if we take comprehension and retention as two rough indicators of this. They go on to succinctly highlight the potentially troublesome aspects of increased narrativity in news content in the following:

However, when discussing [the improvements in comprehension and retention enabled by narrative devices], the risks of increasing narrativity should not be ignored. These include:

1. An oversimplification (personalization and emotionalization) at the level of the individual contribution;
2. A thematic imbalance (more 'soft news' with 'a human touch' to the disadvantage of socially relevant topics);
3. A tendency to exaggerate and to be self-referential, and therefore a displacement of other types of journalistic communication (reporting, commentary, advice, etc.) to the disadvantage of the variety necessary in a democracy; (p. 186)

Despite focusing on television news, the relationship mapped out here aligns well with the findings of this thesis thus far. An enhanced sense of narrativity is beneficial for audience engagement, but requires a focus on the human and emotional components of an event as it is these relational elements of a narrative, and the audience's sense of character identification, which makes it compelling.

Many newsworthy topics, of course, are not exclusively hard or soft news and can be framed as either or both. The 'thematic imbalance' referred to by Machill et. al. can manifest in two ways. The pursuit of narrativity may require the foregrounding of stories predisposed to softer presentation or, alternatively, the emphasis of the softer elements within a story otherwise concerned with serious, socio-political content. This justifies the enhancement of its narrative qualities by synthesising an event's pre-narrative elements so as to focus on those which can support enhanced narrativity, while diminishing those which would render it inappropriate.

These warnings also raise the important concern of professionalism. The risks of heightened narrativity which they outline are primarily associated with

misrepresentation through simplification and exaggeration, which are required to mould individuals into simple characters and an event into a familiar narrative trope. In the discussion of more socio-politically important topics, this is cause for concern and has implications on the credibility of the reporting network. In matters of entertainment, rather than their importance, however, the implications of such infractions on the truthfulness of the reporting are lesser. ESPN were therefore inclined to disregard and actively discredit those elements which may have signified complexity or socio-political importance, as clearly seen in the networks dismissive and infrequent acknowledgements of the charitable donations facilitated by *The Decision*. ESPN's print response erased the more implicit, 'harder' elements of the event as a moment of public black autonomy, instead simplifying it to fit a familiar and engaging narrative of James' moral downfall and betrayal.

In another clear example of Machill et. al.'s warnings in practice, James' ties to Cleveland were exaggerated throughout his career and in ESPN's response to *The Decision*, where the consistent aim was to produce a narrative of betrayal. His supposed character flaws were exaggerated as a career-altering and permanent detriment to his credentials as a player and competitor and his charitable contribution to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America was frequently downplayed.<sup>12</sup> Although comments on his character were subjective and so do not constitute alterations of pre-narrative, the presentation of James' relationship with Cleveland and of the donations made after *The Decision* both align with the warnings on narrativity listed above.

---

<sup>12</sup> A stark exaggeration given that he was, by 2014, considered the most popular male athlete in the US in a Harris Poll and considered the second greatest player ever in a fan poll run by Ranker with over 200,000 participants as well as in articles by ESPN and Complex Sports (all below respectively). The ESPN article specifically credits his 'will to win', directly contradicting claims made by ESPN writers in 2010 that his credentials as a competitor would be damaged by *The Decision*. See:

[https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/11228655/harris-poll-lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-most-popular-male-athlete](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/11228655/harris-poll-lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-most-popular-male-athlete)

<https://www.ranker.com/crowdranked-list/the-top-nba-players-of-all-time>

[https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/29105801/ranking-top-74-nba-players-all-nos-10-1](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29105801/ranking-top-74-nba-players-all-nos-10-1)

<https://www.complex.com/sports/best-nba-players-of-all-time-ranked>



There were exceptions, however, as referenced at the close of the previous chapter. The few ESPN articles by black journalists which acknowledged the topical 'hardness' of *The Decision* also presented James himself as complex, referencing his age and the uniqueness of his situation, and were largely unemotive in their language relative to other, more critical articles. Importantly, none stated that what he did was correct, and there was an appreciation by some that *The Decision* was an "unnecessarily dramatic and harsh" way for James – and ESPN – to announce his free agency plans (Broussard, 2010). These articles presented the case for acceptance of James' actions, rather than celebration or vilification, and were sympathetic to the anger of fans, eschewing moralistic judgements altogether and denying the reader an identifiable villain. There is little evidence, using Machill et. al.'s warnings, that these articles aim for heightened narrativity, but nor do they reject the softer elements of the story. Rather, they acknowledge that *The Decision* was not exclusively a soft news story, but a subtly important socio-political event warranting journalistic treatment that straddled the binary of soft or hard treatment.

By 2016, the growth of discourse on black autonomy and an increased public awareness of the fatal consequences of stereotyping young black men had changed media practices. Through actions such as LeBron James' tweet protesting Trayvon Martin's murder, and internal matters such as the revelations of former LA Clippers owner Donald Sterling's racism, the NBA had often featured in the discourse on race. The importance of athletes as visible symbols of black autonomy, emphasised by their engagement in visible online activism, was no longer a fringe sentiment felt only by ESPN's black journalists. The 'hardness' of news pertaining to black athlete empowerment was therefore indisputable without denying the specific racialised struggle of black athletes in the US which Beamon and Messer (2014) demonstrate, though with a primary focus on American Football athletes. ESPN, conscious of a new public disapproval of the racialised techniques it had used to heighten the narrativity of *The Decision* and of the need to recognise the importance of black athlete autonomy, showed a significant shift away from enhanced narrativity. When narrative techniques were leveraged at all, as in Young's article, they were balanced with a focus on complexity and authorial restraint, declining to foreground the narrative voice of the writer. There were narrative elements, to be sure, but no

attempt was made to simplify the event into a palatable, recognisable narrative trope or to establish a contrived connectivity between pre-narrative elements of the event.

An interesting example crystallising this journalistic shift between *The Decision* and *My Next Chapter* comes, in fact, from Young himself, who was a writer for CBS at the time of *The Decision*. In September 2010 he penned an article discussing comments made by James stating that he believed race was a factor in the negative response he received after *The Decision*. Young adds to those comments polling statistics which showed his popularity had dropped dramatically among non-blacks but had remained steady amongst black fans, offering tentative support to James' claims despite going on to say that he doesn't "even want to really take a guess as to why" the statistics appeared as they did. He describes James as having "whipped out that big shiny race card, dropped it on the table and walked away" (Young, 2010) due to his lack of elaboration in his statement. This shows an awareness of, but indifference towards, the significance of *The Decision* as a statement of black empowerment and autonomy. Young shows a significant change between the two free agencies in not only his engagement with negatively racialised language, namely through mention of the 'race card' in this 2010 article, but also tonally as he utilises sarcasm in the 2010 piece but is sensitive throughout in the 2016 piece.

Rather than using racially-coded language and incendiary vilification as simple but effective shortcuts to harness engagement as many journalists did in 2010, Young deployed narrativity by more considerate and careful means in 2016. In the case of ESPN's print responses to the two free agencies, a shift in public discourse on race and an increase in player activism triggered a response in the media which manifested as a shift toward harder reporting on matters of player agency and autonomy. This meant a decreased focus on personalities and emotions, giving the journalists less material suitable for enhanced narrativization. This was by no means unilateral, and articles still retained many aspects of soft reporting in some form, but the change is overwhelmingly apparent in the body of articles assessed in this research. The subsequent effect of this on the narrative quality of ESPN's articles, now restricted in their ability to embellish and enhance narrative due to the requirements of harder reporting, is highly apparent in the articles discussed in chapter two.

Treatment as a soft or hard news item, then, has material impacts on the way an event is configured and presented in print and the degree of narrativity which can be conferred onto it. The degree to which a story is treated as soft, hard or a hybrid of the two by its writer and publishers is, itself, a product of both the social context of the content reported and the extent to which the producer of the text wants to enhance the narrative quality of the event – a choice generally influenced by the financial incentive of higher interest and engagement. It is evident that there is no neat binary between soft and hard treatment, and an emphasis on an otherwise socio-politically important event's 'softness' is not an inherently negative thing. As mentioned previously, facilitating an enhanced narrative presentation of an event by these means can improve information retention, and make the dissemination of important content more successful. However, when enhanced narrativity is prioritised over that important content, rather than serving as a vehicle for it, to drive engagement as a financial aim, misrepresentation can follow. This manifests through the warnings above and, specifically, through a disproportionate focus on soft elements of the event at the expense of the hard.

Observations on the presentation of an event as soft or hard, and the degree to which this is done to support an enhanced sense narrative, serves as an indicator of the importance and seriousness conferred to an event by the media, but, crucially, does not indicate whether this is by its own volition or because of external societal pressure. ESPN clearly wished to present as acknowledging the implicit importance of *My Next Chapter*, and this required sacrificing the methods of enhanced narrativity deployed in *The Decision*, particularly the racialised stereotyping and narrative casting which leveraged Cleveland's latent racial contestation. But, as mentioned before, the shift detailed here did not apply unilaterally to ESPN's full catalogue of media.

On Twitter and on television, the network delivered media critical of Durant which, however subtly, did not exhibit the same balanced journalistic approach it had moved towards in print, and instead offered presumptions of Durant's character and simpler presentations of the event.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that

---

<sup>13</sup> ESPN's television presence was, as mentioned briefly with regards to Stephen A. Smith, extremely overt in its attempts at enhanced narrativity and made use

the observations made above were, rather than representative of an internal desire at ESPN to treat player autonomy with a balanced journalistic focus, an appeasement of an external watchfulness on presentations of black autonomy. Observing exclusively print media, it is tempting to conclude that ESPN had acknowledged and internalised the developments in public discourse on race over those six years and had pivoted away from the treatment of black athlete autonomy as a soft news item as in *The Decision*. This thesis considers that, rather than ESPN acknowledging and internalising the socio-political importance of such events, the network's Twitter content after *My Next Chapter* demonstrates a calculated understanding of the relationship between the mediums which could facilitate its unwillingness to fully abandon a more lucrative treatment of player empowerment which centred on enhanced narrativity.

### **ESPN as the Driving Force of Twitter Discourse**

Denied the opportunity to produce such high-engagement, highly-narrativized print articles as they were able to after *The Decision*, *My Next Chapter* saw ESPN turn to social media and specifically, for the purposes of this research, Twitter, as a more suitable avenue through which to drive engagement. On social media, the network could profit from enhanced narrativity while protecting its journalistic integrity in print against new public sensibilities.

Although Moon and Hadley established the relationship between Twitter and softer journalism by focusing on Twitter as a source, scholarship has observed the maintenance of this relationship as Twitter has grown into a site of news dissemination and consumption in its own right. Calfano, Blevins and Straka (2022) found 81% of Twitter accounts defining themselves as 'storytellers' were those of journalists (and that 82% of these 'storyteller' journalists had some affiliation with TV news). Importantly, their recent research also acknowledges Twitter as a site for the consumption of news by the masses and highlights the aptitude of 'storyteller' self-presentation branding for entertainment and human interest news content as opposed to political or

---

of televisions propensity for softer journalistic presentation to centre the discourse squarely on Durant's character.

economic news, directly aligning the 'storyteller' designation, and so Twitter journalism at large, with the practice of softer journalism.

Geiger and Lampinen (2014) offer a reminder of a key pitfall in contemporary social media research. They warn against approaching novel media forms as entirely distinct from the old, emphasising the evolutionary quality of developing media forms and the ideological exchange between newer and older media forms which incorporate and build upon the practices of the other. With this in mind, it is important to take a holistic view of ESPN in 2016 which acknowledges the interplay of its social media and established print presences. Twitter requires engagement from users to generate and propel interest, and so an emotional component is important in driving discourse in that digital space. As journalists leant into softer journalistic technique and self-presentation to extend their reach on a platform where visibility is contingent on engagement, so ESPN understood that the harder and more complex journalistic treatment of player autonomy now required in print would not be necessary, nor translate effectively, to Twitter, where interest must be courted quickly and succinctly to not be simply scrolled past by users. Research has found immediacy to be a factor in the popular use of social media as an accompaniment to sport viewing (Gantz, Fingerhut and Nadorff, 2012; Cunningham and Eastin, 2015), suggesting that careful and thorough journalistic practice holds less value to media consumers on social media, where discourse can be conducted between individuals without the intermediary of a network or journalist, than in print.

Faced with the challenge of generating engagement on a Twitter platform which valued the type of simple, highly and readily engaging reporting ESPN had now moved away from in print, the network recycled the suite of narrative techniques seen after *The Decision* to capitalise on the platform's facilitation and expectation of softer journalism. They were, however, employed with far more subtlety and concision. This is due to both the form of tweets, as short-form text posts with the ability to include visual accompaniments, and the cultural shift away from explicit attacks on black athlete empowerment which ESPN was mindful of. Although social media supported soft journalism, and so a focus on the characters of Durant and fans and the emotive aspect of the event, better than print, the social expectations on presentations of black autonomy remained.

The narrative techniques of vilification and character identification therefore required subtler conveyance, without the accompanying racialised language used in 2010, but were nonetheless still present in ESPN's 'Kevin Durant, six years ago' tweet despite its brevity. It delivers on these narrative touchpoints by vilifying Durant as a hypocrite through his old quote, suggesting that his tweet imparts evidence of his character and exaggerating the event as a fall-from-grace narrative arc where the tweet is taken as evidence of Durant's former morality and current decline. Compared to the 'Plan B' tweet, which received far less engagement and opts for slight sarcastic mockery rather than character-based accusatory undertones, the two provide clear evidence for the heightened engagement character-critical and enhanced narrativity could generate.

Though the tweets were subtle, their suggestive criticism served to validate and enable the expression of negative fan sentiments through character-critical tweets. The replies the two tweets received exhibited a higher proportion of negative sentiments regarding his character, rather than his decision to join Golden State, than was observed in the wider scrape discussed previously. Many made direct reference to Durant as a hypocrite despite ESPN's tweets not using the term or any other explicitly negative language. The replies were not exclusively negative regarding Durant, and a significant minority referenced the time elapsed since Durant's tweet and his right to change during that time, directly echoing Young's article and the dominant stance of ESPN's few print articles casting judgement on Durant's decision. A smaller portion again directly criticised ESPN for using the tweet to generate negative sentiments against Durant. As observed in the full scrape, however, even tweets expressing positive or neutral assessments of Durant or his decision often framed their stance as oppositional and included negative sentiments toward Durant's critics or ESPN.

The discourse ESPN generated in its replies on Twitter, then, was overwhelmingly defined by the negative sentiments of Durant's supporters and critics alike. This mirrors the oppositional discourse seen in the full Twitter scrape, but with the important caveat that these replies skewed more towards concurrence with ESPN's subtly negative presentations of Durant and frequently extended this to overt character-criticism. These tweets, and a more overtly negative tweet quoting pundit Stephen A. Smith's thoughts on Durant which

ESPN also posted on July 4<sup>th</sup> and which is discussed later in this chapter, massively outperformed any other Twitter content ESPN posted during that month.

Although a review by Schreiner, Fischer and Riedl (2019) found no evidence in existing literature to substantiate the claim that online content containing negative sentiments is inherently more engaging than positive content, they acknowledged research by Yu (2014) establishing that online branded content which elicited positive and/or arousing emotional responses were positively related to the likes and shares a post would receive, but had no effect on the volume of comments. Though further research into this relationship is required, this suggests that negative responses to social media content tend to manifest as text responses. This marries well with the observations made thus far on the oppositional nature of social media discourse. At the very least it shows that commenters, or repliers in the case of Twitter where the reply function approximates the ability to comment on other platforms, can be as easily provoked into action by negative or neutral content as by positive content.

I would contend that the responses to ESPN's tweets serve as evidence that even mildly negative media stimuli can generate a high degree of engagement in online discourse by establishing an ideological divide between two groups in the same online space. By collecting Durant's supporters and detractors around the digital space of these highly visible ESPN tweets, they were incentivised to respond not only to the original tweet but also to their now-opposition in the discourse. This reflects research on vitriol in digital media spaces which highlights how collaboration between traditional media presences on those platforms and the public drives discourse and can validate and encourage negative sentiments (Trottier, Huang and Gabdulhakov, 2020; Roese, 2018). There has also been researching outlining a positive relationship between what Chung calls media-generated news coverage, meaning articles which are "not based on the real event or incidents, but on issues generated or made by media" (2018, p. 220) and public engagement through comments on web articles.

Though distinguishing between what constitutes discussion of a real event and what is media-generated is contentious, media-generated coverage clearly

bears some resemblance to the idea of media which reconfigures pre-narrative to enhance narrativity. It also suggests that media networks can drive up engagement through content which centralises themselves as a focal point of new issues into the discourse. This generates a fresh avenue of debate and discussion for the public which includes discourse around the network itself, hence the relationship Chung observes between media-generated news and increased commenting. Though this research focused on journalistic websites, this relationship maps neatly onto the observations regarding ESPN's Twitter presence above. By bringing the debate as to whether Durant was a hypocrite – a relatively peripheral consideration in the broader Twitter scrape, where fan discourse focused on designation as a coward or traitor – to the fore the network instigated enormous engagement by introducing this new media-generated topic which effectively generated opposition between its followers. Chung points out that this high engagement then incentivises media producers to continue with similar tactics in a positive feedback loop, and in the context of social media this proves beneficial to both the media site on which the discourse occurs (such as Twitter) and the traditional media outlet which gains visibility through the platform.

Remaining mindful of Bonilla-Silva's warning to not assume that an absence of overt racism can be taken as an absence of racism altogether, the negative narrativization of these tweets do not carry the same racialised quality as that which James was subject to in 2010. They do, however, clearly evoke *The Decision*, given that the accusations of hypocrisy centred on Durant's tweet directly referencing it. As such, the replies also regularly mentioned James as a point of comparison for *My Next Chapter*, generating further debates amongst repliers as to which athlete and decision was the more egregious, and regarding the overall validity of the comparison. The negative sentiments about James displayed here and in the replies to other ESPN tweets posted in the immediate aftermath of *My Next Chapter* were frequently reminiscent of those ESPN had levelled at him and justified with racialised narrativization in its 2010 print coverage. One such ESPN tweet – which was the most replied-to and second most-liked tweet ESPN posted in July 2016 after 'Kevin Durant, six years ago' – quoted the network's most prominent TV pundit, Stephen A. Smith, calling it "the weakest move I've ever seen from a superstar" and included a link to a



video clip on ESPN's website of the TV segment in which he claimed this. The tweet's inclusion of this claim clearly, but again indirectly (despite Smith going on to state in the full video that he considers Durant's move far more egregious) invites comparisons to James which ESPN's followers readily debated in the replies.

By consistently and implicitly creating discourse centred on this comparison, ESPN reignited a discussion about James' character which was imbued with sentiments built on the network's negatively racialised presentations of him in 2010. This element of the Twitter discourse, along with all those discussed above, was only possible due to the medium's aptitude for soft news content, which allowed a consistent focus on emotive and character-driven elements of the discourse. Compounded with subtle narrative enhancements by the evocation of similar character and narrative tropes to those seen in *The Decision*, ESPN leveraged the specific qualities of Twitter to produce a degree of engagement and narrative they could no longer attain in print.

### **Establishing the 'Worldwide Leader in Sports' on Twitter**

Despite carefully separating the two in print, ESPN successfully leveraged the strong emotional precedent set by *The Decision* in its Twitter content by providing its audience with limited but leading narrative content and allowing the Twitter medium to facilitate and encourage further engagement. The success ESPN had with overall engagement on these tweets evidences the effectiveness of even slight negative narrativization in validating and driving Twitter discourse. The network's provision of inflammatory presentations of Durant to fuel this certainly appears deliberate. The similarities in narrative framing between ESPN's Twitter content and *The Decision*, though heavily adapted to the Twitter medium, and their evocation of *The Decision* as a means of fuelling the discourse suggest that the network was still knowingly using the contentious, and racialised, topic of athlete empowerment to generate emotionally engaging, negatively-narrativized content.

Having determined in the previous chapter that the response to *The Decision* was a proactive attempt to cement ESPN's position at the heart of sports discourse, a similar purpose can be discerned in ESPN's response to *My*

*Next Chapter.* Work on second-screen viewing which follows on from the brief discussion of immediacy offered earlier considers the concept of social TV, in which second screens are used during live television viewing for the purpose of socialising (Ji and Raney, 2015), and applies this to sports. Second-screen viewing has been found to increase enjoyment of live sports (Smith, Pegoraro and Cruikshank, 2019) and Gantz (2013) connects this enjoyment back to the validating and community-building potential of social TV. Though this work focuses on live sport viewing, it is reasonable to assume that this explanation for social media use translates to situations such as free agency, where immediacy remains important to media consumers and producers. These studies focus on social TV as conducted between fans, but the large volume of independent media tweets encountered in the Twitter scrape is indicative of the breadth of content available to fans through social media. Alongside independent journalists, fans could follow and engage with current and former players and coaches in a more meaningful sense than networks such as ESPN could facilitate (Frederick et al., 2012) and could also access information too specific for the broad focus of ESPN through smaller team or player-specific communities. With the potential for fans to engage with sports so fully and readily on social media, ESPN's position with fans depended on a high-engagement, distinctive social media presence in an increasingly saturated Twitter landscape.

It is possible to read the tandem of ESPN's Twitter and print responses as being in intentional, fabricated opposition. As with James, whom ESPN granted a platform and then vilified for making a spectacle, ESPN incited fan frustration with Durant on Twitter and then presented their print medium as offering a balanced, nuanced approach to the saga. Many of the articles echo what was seen in supportive fan and media tweets in that they read as a defence against some 'other' who incorrectly criticised or characterised Durant, either explicitly referring to 'people', 'everybody' or 'you' who fall into that category or implicitly involving them by framing the article as a rebuttal of a dominant, critical view of Durant. This reframing of ESPN's print presence relative to 2010 retains the network's importance by positioning its print media as being above the Twitter furore. Pivoting away from attempts to heighten and indulge the emotive response of fans after *The Decision*, ESPN now sought to defend player empowerment in print while criticising Durant on Twitter, assuming a role of its own making as a necessary mediator of the discourse which it had perpetuated.

## The ESPYS: A Meeting Point of Empowerment and Activism

With social media at their fingertips, black athletes were regular participants in socio-political discourse, particularly following matters instances of racialised police brutality. Ten days after *My Next Chapter*, LeBron James was joined by three more veteran stars – Dwyane Wade, Carmelo Anthony and Chris Paul, the presiding NBPA (National Basketball Player’s Association) President – in a rare opportunity to take their activism off social media. They delivered an opening speech at the ESPYS, an annual sporting awards show affiliated with ESPN and its parent broadcaster ABC,<sup>14</sup> calling for action on police brutality and gun violence in the US.



Figure 4



Figure 4

ESPN’s Twitter post featuring a link to a clip of the speech was the third most-liked, second most-retweeted and most replied to tweet ESPN put out during the event (despite being a text only post, which typically appeared to perform worse with regards to Twitter engagement throughout the course of this study). Twitter replies to this post and to three more posts referencing the same speech from ESPN’s main and NBA-specific account (@ESPNNBA) were extremely mixed, with strongly positive and negative reactions both evident in the direct replies.<sup>15</sup> A notable proportion of negative responses centred on a

---

<sup>14</sup> The ESPYS were broadcast on ESPN from their inception until 2015, when parent company ABC broadcast the show nationwide to encourage greater viewership while retaining its affiliation with ESPN.

<sup>15</sup> All four Twitter posts linked below:  
<https://twitter.com/espn/status/753382170840948737>

perceived distance between the players and the communities affected by police brutality and gun violence, referencing the affluence of these four players and highlighting this as a means of undermining the sincerity and validity of their opinions on the matter (figs. 3 and 4).<sup>16</sup> Discussion of their right to self-determination, even within the context of free agency given the focus of many commenters on their affluence, was now a much more visible forum in which negatively racialised discourse would be highlighted as a socio-political statement against the right of black men to self-determination. This would be highlighted overtly later in the summer of 2016, when NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick made international headlines for sitting and kneeling during the national anthem.

The ESPYS were also covered in two ESPN web articles in the days following the event. One lead with the statement that “the ESPYS, a longtime stage to celebrate athletes' achievement and perseverance, became a platform for athlete activism this week thanks to four of the most prominent players in the NBA.” (McMenamin and Begley, 2016), foregrounding the event itself and ESPN’s role in granting the athletes an opportunity to speak out. Though, as mentioned above, ESPN certainly succeeded in promoting the visibility of the discussion, the network’s self-presentation here is notably inconsistent with the aftermath of *The Decision*, where ESPN’s role was downplayed and excused, and is revealing of ESPN’s consistent ulterior motive of positively centring itself in discourse as the self-branded ‘World Leader in Sports’.

---

<https://twitter.com/espn/status/753450234458419202>  
<https://twitter.com/ESPNNBA/status/753602120046284801>  
<https://twitter.com/ESPNNBA/status/753299984330661890>

<sup>16</sup> There is ample evidence showing that athletes are not immune to racism. Notable contemporary examples of racism against players include that endured by Russell Westbrook in Utah in 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/mar/15/russell-westbrook-fan-abuse-utah-jazz-racist>) and the racist graffitiing of LeBron James’ home in 2017 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/31/sport/lebron-james-racist-graffiti-incident/index.html>).

These responses to the ESPYS speech offer illuminating comparisons to *My Next Chapter* and *The Decision*. Where Durant's free agency shows some growth in the network's approach to player empowerment, albeit one undermined by its Twitter content, the ESPYS shows a regression to the sentiments of *The Decision*; both showed black men in positions of cultural and socio-political influence at the forefront of an established media platform, not in the controlled context of an interview or a commercial, autonomously using the platform for their own aims. ESPN had instilled in fans a sense that empowered black athletes were a problem in 2010 and, though its print response to the Durant case was revealing of a positive cultural shift in presentations of athlete empowerment, the network's Twitter presence belied their superficiality. ESPN showed an institutional willingness to negatively narrativize player empowerment for greater online engagement, and by leveraging *The Decision* as a highly contentious point of comparison it continued to profit off of the racialised reporting and evocation of racial contestation it had seemingly moved on from in print.

ESPN had certainly shaken off the heavily racialised brand of soft journalism which prevailed after *The Decision* by 2016, but the legacy of their treatment of James remained evident. The use of a tweet posted by Durant about *The Decision* to suggest his hypocrisy constituted a comparison of the two



Figure 6



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 6

situations which the print articles consistently deem inappropriate, and ESPN's Twitter presence proved their unwillingness to fully discard what they knew, and had constructed, to be an extremely powerful point of narrative comparison. When the time then came to fully support and acknowledge athlete autonomy for the greater purpose of opposing racialised police brutality and gun violence, ESPN reaped what it had sown. Its vilification of James had leveraged and exacerbated the suspicion in sports fans that empowered black athletes were ungrateful and entitled and a threat to their beloved sports and even their local identity. His community work had been downplayed and his potential negative impact on the local economy foregrounded. James' characterisation was designed to simplify his character through stereotypes and racialised narrative tropes and so rendered him unsympathetic with only an illusory fullness of character. Fans responded to his appearance alongside his peers at the ESPYS with disdain for their positions as wealthy black men and incredulity at the idea of being lectured on racial hardship by the abundantly wealthy, disregarding the difficult upbringings endured by James and Wade in particular which ought have been acknowledged as important pre-narrative context.<sup>17</sup> Such pronounced, negative focus on the athletes' financial success and social influence in these expressions of ideological and social contestation online certainly suggests that the ESPYS represented a visual shift in the symbolic index of racial power.

Many of the criticisms after *The Decision* centred on the spectacle of the broadcast and based judgements on James' character on his willingness to produce and participate in it. The ESPYS was met with similar criticism; player autonomy in media, and particularly the ability to express it on a nationally televised platform, was hypocritically determined by ESPN's articles a unique privilege which James abused in 2010. The distaste ESPN generated for what they presented as an unnecessary flexing of James' celebrity status in 2010 resurfaced in the response to the ESPYS, manifesting in tweets which expressed

---

<sup>17</sup> In 2016 Wade lost his cousin to gun violence in his hometown Chicago (<https://twitter.com/DwyaneWade/status/769350076162383872>), adding to the evidence against the idea that star athletes are unaffected by racial struggle. For accounts of Wade and James' childhoods see below:

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bulls/ct-dwyane-wade-chicago-spt-0708-20160707-story.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2003/mar/02/ussport>

anger at the inclusion of athlete-driven socio-political discourse in their sports broadcast viewing (figs. 5 and 6) and a belief that the speech was far more indulgent spectacle than real action (figs. 7-9). The comments were frequently racialised, either through explicit reference to them being black men or through baseless stereotypes such as them having facial tattoos, showing that the presence of autonomous black men at the forefront of media was still as troubling to white American viewers as it had been in 2010 even without the active encouragement ESPN provided after *The Decision*.

After ESPN had tapped into Cleveland's burgeoning and multifaceted racial contestation in 2010 and subtly introduced a sense of social contestation into the Twitter discourse in 2016, the response garnered by the ESPYS on Twitter constituted expressions of direct ideological contestation. The concerns of fans who responded as such mirrored the concerns of fans who responded to *My Next Chapter* on Twitter by decrying how autonomous athletes such as Durant had ruined the spirit of the sport and expressing resentment for his contractual and financial ability to do so. Though the implicit racism of 2010 had faded, it lingered in the background of *My Next Chapter* through comparisons to James and hints of proprietary entitlement. When player empowerment directly confronted the socio-political topic of police brutality at the ESPYS, ESPN's characterisations of empowered black athletes became fuel for the expressly racist response it received as the network's years of overt and covert criticisms of athletes came to the fore.

## **Conclusion**

Tracing a relationship between media presentations of *The Decision* and *My Next Chapter* has yielded an interesting body of evidence for qualitative analysis. An analysis of the print responses to the two showed distinct changes in the racialised and narrative qualities of the articles, driving a discussion of the contextual changes across the period which centred on social media and racial discourse. An analysis of tweets by ESPN and fans responding to *My Next Chapter* demonstrated the distinct qualities of the social media space, particularly its propensity for supporting softer journalistic presentations of events, which made it a suitable space for ESPN to enhance the narrativity of the event. This was achieved through similar, but subtler, techniques to those seen in ESPN's print response to *The Decision*, leveraging literary tropes and fabricated senses of character identification. The Twitter response to the ESPYS showed that, though ESPN had not actively endorsed or presented racialised narratives in print or on Twitter in 2016, their effectiveness in 2010 had resulted in an enduring legacy of racialised resentment towards black athlete empowerment among a body of NBA fans for which ESPN was, on some level, responsible.

The research presented in this thesis is revealing of significant changes in sports discourse between 2010 and 2016 and offers a number of explanations for those changes. Applying a novel, but appropriate, framework provided by existing work in narrative theory has led to an interesting set of observations on the relationship between print and social media, and between ESPN as an established media network and the NBA's players and fans. Viewed with reference to Bonilla-Silva's theory of racial contestation, it becomes apparent that the contentious media relationships forged between by social media provided fuel for, and gave purpose to, covert expressions of racism. Rather than broadening the discourse and creating a more inclusive media space which could counter the racialised discourse seen in ESPN's print output in 2010, social media proved to be an opportune space for ESPN to continue producing negatively-narrativized content away from the evolving and tighter constraints governing its print media. Through Twitter, ESPN could also, consciously or not,



refer back to and extract value from the racialised sentiments it had instilled in NBA fans after *The Decision*.

This research is, however, informed heavily by the highly specific situation of ESPN as a media network. ESPN is solely a sports network, and its success is entirely dependent on its position as the self-branded 'Worldwide Leader in Sports'. Although there is great potential for sports to be a site of analysis in which social, political and economic factors coalesce (Gift and Miner, 2007), analysis of ESPN does not translate easily to a discussion of mass media in other contexts due to its consistent focus on self-centralising and protecting against obsolescence. Although this purpose is, perhaps, relatively unique, I suspect that the narrative processes highlighted in this thesis may be identifiable elsewhere in the increasingly engagement- and advertising-driven media landscape.

Perhaps the most interesting findings of this research relate to the impact of social media on existing media corporations such as ESPN. The impact of social media as an external force has been discussed at considerable length in existing literature, but this research led to the key observation that social media facilitated the continued, though far subtler, production of negatively-narrativized content pertaining to Kevin Durant after *My Next Chapter*. As the platform on which Black Lives Matter originated and which was largely responsible for the growth in public discourse on race and police brutality, Twitter played a key role in changing the media landscape by 2016 such that ESPN was unable to produce the simple, narratively-enhanced print content which it had peddled in 2010. And yet, ironically, it was the same platform which gave ESPN an avenue through which to bypass these new restrictions. The manner in which ESPN used its print and Twitter presences almost in opposition to each other, generating vitriolic discourse through the latter while presenting itself as a moral arbitrator through the former, allowed the network to satisfy two aims seemingly at odds with each other. On social media, ESPN enjoyed the high engagement becoming of negatively-narrativized content while its print media kept step with a growing public desire to see black autonomy treated with careful journalism rather than as purely entertainment.

The ESPYS serve as an indicator of how ESPN had, however inadvertently, instilled in fans an enduring resentment of black success which found room for expression on Twitter. The themes which defined ESPN's response to *The*

*Decision* and which were present in the undertones of its response to *My Next Chapter* on Twitter had not been dispelled by the network's change of tone in print. This is not to suggest that ESPN had intentionally stoked the racialised response James, Wade and company received after the ESPYS in 2016, but that the network's vilification of James in 2010 and then of Durant on Twitter in 2016 was, at the very least, irresponsible, and a considerable factor in generating and enabling the examples of ideological racial contestation seen in the response to the ESPYS. ESPN had continued to leverage economic and social contestation to garner high engagement and provoke emotive responses to *The Decision* and, though it was more subtle and achieved largely through evocation of the tropes of *The Decision*, *My Next Chapter*. That the network's attempt to provide a platform for athlete activism at the ESPYS was met with more overt contestation from fans unbound by professionalism or the threat of consequences was, in light of this research, an unsurprising product of ESPN's actions up to that point. Further research into the divergence of media corporations' print and social media presences could yield interesting conclusions, particularly with regards to the impact of professionalism on mass communications and the extent to which social media has affected perceptions of professionalism in different media settings. Furthermore, ESPN's use of racialised tropes to secure a position at the heart of sports discourse contributed to the negative racialised sentiments of fans and identifying the means by which ESPN continues to centralise itself in the discourse has some importance in ensuring that further endorsements, intentional or otherwise, of racism amongst fans are avoided.

A fuller assessment of television media, which is a central part of ESPN's network, warrants inclusion in any work beyond this thesis. Research taking television as a point of comparison for ESPN's print and social media output could glean a greater sense of the connectivity of all three and ESPN's use of the different mediums to drive both engaging discourse and protect its brand. The features of narrative theory deployed throughout this thesis may prove particularly applicable in discussion of television, as ESPN has rooted its screen presence in highly-constructed, character-driven talk shows which leverage narrative tropes and stereotypes to drive viewership and spawn further social media engagement. Similarly, the popularisation of new mediums such as YouTube and podcasting has allowed more athletes and fans to achieve media

empowerment beyond Twitter, narrowing the divide between the media producers and consumers. ESPN's response to these new mediums could reveal a broader suite of techniques by which discursive control can be exercised in an ever-changing media landscape.

This research presents evidence for there being a subtly contentious attitude from ESPN toward athletes as their opportunities for empowerment grew alongside social media, and the lenses of narrative theory and racial contestation together highlight the methods deployed by the network to foster negative perceptions of athlete empowerment in fans. It hopefully provides a demonstration of how narrative theory could serve as a tool for future study on representation in media, particularly with regards to identity and presentations of the individual which leverage the characterisation techniques discussed throughout this study. This could have some transferable insights in discussion of politics in the media, where a narrative theory framework as used here which focuses on distinguishing between that which is pre-narrative and that which could be embellished, exaggerated or simplified in the production of an enhanced narrative. Highlighting instances of this could serve as a quick and clear means of identifying biases and disingenuity in political discourse. Research to determine the appropriateness of this could provide an interesting and productive avenue of study.

Recent developments in the NBA, particularly as many athletes themselves have become vocal critics of sports media, exhibit the tensions highlighted throughout this thesis. NBA athlete Kyrie Irving's anti-semitism scandal in early November 2022, in which he shared a film containing anti-semitic tropes to his Twitter followers, has generated a new wave of discourse on established media's treatment of black athletes. This event is, as of writing, still unfolding, but the reactionary responses of many fans who believe he is being misrepresented due to his race has already clearly generated enormous tension between black and Jewish communities. The importance of accuracy and accountability in the media's past treatment of black athletes is important so that the frustrations felt by athletes and fans can be acknowledged, rather than festering and generating more vitriol as has been seen in this recent anti-semitic discourse. Analysis of this event on Twitter and in print would constitute an interesting line of inquiry in future work.



## **Works Cited**

Adande, J. A. (2010a). 'King and Co. guilty only of dreaming big'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=adande\\_ja&page=lebron-issue-100711](https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=adande_ja&page=lebron-issue-100711) [Accessed 29 June 2022]

Adande, J. A. (2010b). 'Gilbert's letter signals wider backlash'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=adande\\_ja&page=jalebron-100709](https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=adande_ja&page=jalebron-100709) [Accessed 26 June 2022]

Adande, J. A. (2016). 'Durant taking the easy road? Not so fast'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/16764416/kevin-durant-taking-easy-road-not-fast](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16764416/kevin-durant-taking-easy-road-not-fast) [Accessed 19 August 2022]

Antoci, A., Delfino A., Paglieri F., Panebianco F. and Sabatini F. (2016). 'Civility vs. Incivility in Online Social Interactions: An Evolutionary Approach', *PLoS ONE* 11(11): 1-17.

Arnold, E. K. (2017) 'The BLM Effect: Hashtags, History and Race', *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 21(2): 8-15.

Associated Press. (2010a). 'Cavs fans upset with decision'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.espn.com/nba/news/story?id=5365516> [Accessed 11 May 2022]

Associated Press. (2010b). ''Decision' watched by nearly 10 million'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.espn.com/nba/news/story?id=5371061> [Accessed 10 May 2022]

Associated Press. (2022). 'Bill Russell, NBA superstar and civil rights activist, dies aged 88'. *The Guardian*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/jul/31/bill-russell-dead-boston-celtics-obituary> [accessed 13 February 2022]

Beamon, K. and Messer, C. (2014). 'Professional Sports Experiences as Contested Racial Terrain', *Journal of African American Studies* 18(2): 181-191.

Bechtel, M. (2020). 'Looking Back at LeBron's Decision 10 Years Later'. *Sports Illustrated*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.si.com/nba/2020/07/08/lebron-james-miami-heat-decision-10-years-later> [Accessed 13 June 2022]

Bliss, A. (2011). 'Cleveland, OH, 1941–1952', In R. Dilworth (ed.) *Cities in American Political History*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 527-533.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). 'Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation', *American Sociological Review* 62(3): 465-480.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2019). "'Racists,'" "Class Anxieties," Hegemonic Racism, and Democracy in Trump's America', *Social Currents* 6(1): 14-31.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2019). 'Feeling Race', *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 1-25.

Bonilla-Silva, E. and Dietrich, D. (2011). 'The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634: 190-206.

Bostdorff, D. M. and O'Rourke, D. J. (2018). 'Religion, Sport, and the Return of the Prodigal Son: The Postsecular Rhetoric of LeBron James's 2014 "I'm Coming Home" Open Letter', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21(1): 1-38.

Broussard, C. (2010). 'Time for Cavs owner to act his age'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=broussard\\_chris&page=gilbertlbj-100709](https://www.espn.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=broussard_chris&page=gilbertlbj-100709) [Accessed 4 September 2022]

Bryant, H. (2010). 'LeBron James: Businessman first'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.espn.com/espn/commentary/news/story?id=5401981> [Accessed 4 September 2022]

Calamur, K. (2016). 'Muhammad Ali and Vietnam'. *The Atlantic*, [online].

Available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/muhammad-ali-vietnam/485717/> [accessed 21 September 2022]

Calfano, B., Blevins, J. L. and Straka, A. (2022). 'Bad Impressions: How Journalists as "Storytellers" Diminish Public Confidence in Media', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 66(1): 176-199.

Caparell, A., Olojede, Z., Diaz, A. and Frydenlund, Z. (2022). 'The 30 Best NBA Players of All Time, Ranked'. *Complex*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.complex.com/sports/best-nba-players-of-all-time-ranked> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Carr, D. (1986). 'Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity', *History and Theory* 25(2): 117-131.

Chung, I. J. (2018). 'Dynamics of media hype: Interactivity of the media and the public' in Vasterman, P. (ed.) *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 211-227.

Craig, R. (2016). 'Malice in the Palace: The Incident', *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 4(2): 21-41.

Criblez, A. J. (2015). 'White Men Playing a Black Man's Game: Basketball's "Great White Hopes" of the 1970s', *Journal of Sport History* 42(3): 371-381.

Cunningham, N. R., and Eastin, M. S. (2015). 'Second screen and sports: A structural investigation into team identification and efficacy', *Communication & Sport* 5(3): 288-310.

Cunningham, P. L. (2009). 'Please Don't Fine Me Again!!!!': Black Athletic Defiance in the NBA and NFL.', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 33(1): 39-58.

Donegan, L. (2003). 'America's most wanted'. *The Observer*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2003/mar/02/ussport> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Dunne, S. (2017). '#WeAreTrayvonMartin: the racially packaged NBA commodity and the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin', *Sport in Society* 20(7): 924-937.

ESPN.com news services (2016a). 'Charles Barkley not high on Kevin Durant going to superteam'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/16825851/charles-barkley-thinks-stars-kevin-durant-cheating-get-title](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16825851/charles-barkley-thinks-stars-kevin-durant-cheating-get-title) [Accessed 10 August 2022]

ESPN.com news services (2016b). 'Fans burn Kevin Durant's jersey after he leaves Thunder'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/16766160/fans-react-kevin-durant-departure-oklahoma-city-thunder-burning-jersey](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16766160/fans-react-kevin-durant-departure-oklahoma-city-thunder-burning-jersey) [Accessed 10 August 2022]

ESPN.com news services. (2010). 'Cleveland watches 'Decision' in droves'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.espn.com/nba/news/story?id=5366624> [Accessed 1 April 2022]

ESPN.com news services. (2020). 'Ranking the top 74 NBA players of all time: Nos. 10-1'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/29105801/ranking-top-74-nba-players-all-nos-10-1](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29105801/ranking-top-74-nba-players-all-nos-10-1) [accessed 12 September 2022]

Fink, D. (1980). 'Stepien intends to operate the Cavs his way . . . or else!'. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, [online]. Available at: <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19801224&id=K59RAAAIIBAJ&sjid=yW0DAAAIAIBAJ&pg=3027,4646167> [Accessed 14 April 2022]

Forsberg, C. (2016). 'Jae Crowder: Durant going to Warriors 'like a slap in the face'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17120491/jae-crowder-says-boston-celtics-gave-too-many-secrets-recruitment-kevin-durant](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17120491/jae-crowder-says-boston-celtics-gave-too-many-secrets-recruitment-kevin-durant) [Accessed 2 September 2022]

Frederick, E. L., Lim, C. H., Clavio, G., and Walsh, P. (2012). 'Why we follow: An examination of parasocial interaction and fan motivations for following



athlete archetypes on Twitter', *International Journal of Sport Communication* 5(4): 481–502.

Gahan, C. M. (2014). 'The Highlight with a Thousand Faces: Sports and Our Yearning for Hero and Myth', *The English Journal* 104(1): 37- 41.

Galster, G. C. (1990). 'White Flight from Racially Integrated Neighbourhoods in the 1970s: the Cleveland Experience', *Urban Studies* 27(3): 385-399.

Gantz, W. (2013). 'Reflections on communication and sport: On fanship and social relationships', *Communication & Sport* 1(1-2): 176–187.

Gantz, W., Fingerhut, D., and Nadorff, G. (2012). 'The social dimension of sport fanship'. In A. C. Earnheardt, P. M. Haridakis, and B. S. Hugenberg (eds.) *Sports fans, identity, and socialization: Exploring the fandemonium*. Toronto, ON: Lexington, pp. 65–77.

García, F. (2018). 'Inside the NBA: Black Dandyism and the Racial Regime', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 51(2): 103-136.

Geiger, R. S., and Lampinen, A. (2014). 'Old Against New, or a Coming of Age? Broadcasting in an Era of Electronic Media', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58(3): 333-341.

Gift, T. and Miner. A. (2017). "'DROPPING THE BALL" The Understudied Nexus of Sports and Politics', *World Affairs* 180(1): 127-161.

Gillborn, D. (2010). 'The White Working-Class, Racism and Respectability: Victims, Degenerates and Interest-Convergence', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58(1): 3-24.

Greenberg, J. (2010). 'Exiting via the low road'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.espn.com/chicago/nba/columns/story?id=5365985> [Accessed 22 March 2022]

Haberstroh, T. (2016). 'Kevin Durant is chasing a ring, and that's exactly the right move'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://insider.espn.com/nba/insider/story/\\_/id/16763862/will-kevin-durant-help-legacy-golden-state-warriors-nba](https://insider.espn.com/nba/insider/story/_/id/16763862/will-kevin-durant-help-legacy-golden-state-warriors-nba) [Accessed 20 August 2022]

- Hankins, F. M. (1991). 'The Spatial Determinants of Neighborhood Structure: Cleveland, Ohio, 1930-1980', *Sociological Focus* 24(1): 29-44.
- Hartley, D. (2013). 'Urban Decline in Rust-Belt Cities', *Economic Commentary* 6.
- Ince, J., Rojas, F and Davis, C. A. (2017) 'The Social Media Response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter Users Interact with Black Lives Matter Through Hashtag Use.', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(11): 1814–1830.
- Ji, Q., and Raney, A. A. (2015). 'Morally judging entertainment: A case study of live tweeting during Downton Abbey', *Media Psychology* 18(2): 221–242.
- Joseph, A. (2009). '2009 NBA Draft Grades'. *NBADraft.net*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.nbadraft.net/2009-nba-draft-grades/> [Accessed 26 May 2022]
- Joseph, A. (2010). '2010 NBA Draft Grades'. *NBADraft.net*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.nbadraft.net/2010-nba-draft-grades/> [Accessed 26 May 2022]
- Katz, A. (2016). 'OKC mayor on Kevin Durant's exit: 'We've been spurned''. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/16831387/oklahoma-city-mayor-stunned-departure-kevin-durant](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16831387/oklahoma-city-mayor-stunned-departure-kevin-durant) [Accessed 15 August 2022]
- Keating, W. D. and Lind, K. J. (2012), 'Responding to the Mortgage Crisis: Three Cleveland Examples', *The Urban Lawyer* 44(1): 1-35.
- Keen, S. (2006). 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative* 14(3): 207-236.
- Kenny, M. (2022). 'Coarse and effect: Normalised anger online as an essential precondition to violence'. In S. Leitch and P. Pickering (eds.) *Rethinking Social Media and Extremism*. Canberra: ANU Press, pp. 125-141.
- Knight, B. (2022). 'Highest Paid Athletes'. *Forbes*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/athletes/> [accessed 22 October 2022]

Koeske, Z., Kuc, C. and Skrbina, P. (2016). 'Dwyane Wade's hometown prepares to welcome him back'. *Chicago Tribune*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bulls/ct-dwyane-wade-chicago-spt-0708-20160707-story.html> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Lapchick, R. E. (2020). 'The 2020 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Basketball Association', *The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport*.

Linden, A. D. (2015). 'Blue-Collar Identity and the "Culture of Losing": Cleveland and the "Save Our Browns" Campaign', *Journal of Sport History* 42(3): 340-360.

Machill, M., Köhler, S. and Waldhauser M. (2007). 'The Use of Narrative Structures in Television News: An Experiment in Innovative Forms of Journalistic Presentation', *European Journal of Communication* 22(2): 185-205.

MacMahon, T. (2016). 'Adam Silver: Warriors' signing of Kevin Durant shows CBA needs change'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17032907/adam-silver-says-kevin-durant-signing-golden-state-warriors-shows-need-change-league-cba](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17032907/adam-silver-says-kevin-durant-signing-golden-state-warriors-shows-need-change-league-cba) [Accessed 15 August 2022]

Malitsky, J. (2014). 'Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary', *Journal of Sport History* 41(2): 205-214.

Marable, M. (1983). *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. (Boston: South End Press).

McKirby, E. (2017). 'Racial slur sprayed on LeBron's house: 'It's tough being black in America''. *CNN*, [online]. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/31/sport/lebron-james-racist-graffiti-incident/index.html> [accessed 12 September 2022]

McManus, J. H. (1994). *Market driven journalism: Let the citizen beware?*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McMenamin, D. and Begley, I. (2016). 'How NBA stars made it to the ESPYS stage'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at:

[https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17082886/how-carmelo-anthony-chris-paul-dwyane-wade-lebron-james-made-espys-stage](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17082886/how-carmelo-anthony-chris-paul-dwyane-wade-lebron-james-made-espys-stage) [Accessed 8 September 2022]

Misek, M. (2011). '2011 NBA Draft Grades'. *NBADraft.net*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.nbadraft.net/2011-nba-draft-grades/> [Accessed 26 May 2022]

Moon, S. J. and Hadley, P. (2014). 'Routinizing a New Technology in the Newsroom: Twitter as a News Source in Mainstream Media', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58(2): 289-305.

Nike (2007). *The Beginning*. [TV advert]. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyQ7uohieoE> [Accessed 29 May 2022]

Nike (2008). *Chalk*. [TV advert] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6y0Q4gHNcM> [Accessed 29 May 2022]

Nike (2011). *The Black Mamba Film*. [TV advert] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0pOORUnGqU> [Accessed 30 May 2022]

Nike (2014). *Together*. [TV advert] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8yOG3qYk08> [Accessed 30 May 2022]

Nike (2016). *The Conductor*. [TV advert] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB7P7OqCpqq> [Accessed 30 May 2022]

O'Connor, I. (2010). 'LeBron needs to look in the mirror'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/new-york/nba/columns/story?columnist=oconnor\\_ian&id=5361165](https://www.espn.com/new-york/nba/columns/story?columnist=oconnor_ian&id=5361165) [Accessed 2 March 2022]

Patterson, T. E. (2000). *Doing well and doing good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the news audience and weakening democracy-and what news outlets can do about it*. Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Peffley, H. and Hurwitz, J. (2002). 'The Racial Components of "Race-Neutral" Crime Policy Attitudes', *Political Psychology* 23(1): 59-75.

Peffley, H., Hurwitz, J. and Sniderman, P. M. (1997). 'Racial Stereotypes and Whites' Political Views of Blacks in the Context of Welfare and Crime', *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1): 30-60.

Ranker. (2022). 'The Top NBA Players Of All Time'. [online]. Available at: <https://www.ranker.com/crowdranked-list/the-top-nba-players-of-all-time> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Ricoeur, P. (1983). *Temps et recit Tome 1*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil).

Roese, V. (2018). 'You won't believe how co-dependent they are Or: Media hype and the interaction of news media, social media, and the user'. In P. Vasterman (ed.) *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 313-332.

Rovell, D. (2014). 'Poll: LeBron voted most popular'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/11228655/harris-poll-lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-most-popular-male-athlete](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/11228655/harris-poll-lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-most-popular-male-athlete) [accessed 17 August 2022]

Rovell, D. (2016a). 'Kevin Durant OKC-based restaurant shuts down for name change'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17141205/kevin-durant-okc-based-restaurant-shuts-name-change](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17141205/kevin-durant-okc-based-restaurant-shuts-name-change) [Accessed 15 August 2022]

Rovell, D. (2016b). 'Oklahoma store sells Kevin Durant Thunder jerseys for 48 cents'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17126265/oklahoma-city-store-sells-kevin-durant-thunder-jerseys-48-cents](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17126265/oklahoma-city-store-sells-kevin-durant-thunder-jerseys-48-cents) [Accessed 22 August 2022]

Samsung (2015). *Let's Go To Work*. [TV advert] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qi8g3jWTkaA> [Accessed 14 May 2022]

- Schreiner, M., Fischer, T. and Riedl, R. (2021). 'Impact of content characteristics and emotion on behavioral engagement in social media: literature review and research agenda', *Electronic Commerce Research* 21:329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-019-09353-8>
- Shirky, C. (2011). 'The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change', *Foreign Affairs* 90(1): 28-41.
- Shoag, D. and Veuger, S. (2017). 'Taking My Talents to South Beach (and Back): Evidence on Local Externalities from a Superstar Athlete', *AEI Economics Working Paper Series* (8).
- Slattery, K., Doremus, M., and Marcus, L. (2001). 'Shifts in public affairs reporting on the network evening news: A move toward the sensational', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45: 290–302.
- Smith, J.M. (2011). "'Gifts That God Didn't Give": White Hopes, Basketball, and the Legend of Larry Bird', *Massachusetts Historical Review* 13: 1-30.
- Smith, L. R., Pegoraro, A. and Cruikshank, S. A. (2019). 'Tweet, Retweet, Favorite: The Impact of Twitter Use on Enjoyment and Sports Viewing', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 63(1): 94-110.
- Strauss, E. S. (2016). 'Warriors owner Lacob dismisses Silver's competition concern'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/17035200/warriors-owner-responds-commish](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/17035200/warriors-owner-responds-commish) [Accessed 28 July 2022]
- Suchma, P. C. (2005). *From the Best of Times to the Worst of Times: Professional Sport and Urban Decline in a Tale of Two Clevelands, 1945–1978*. Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University.
- Thomas, E. (2019). 'When it comes to racially abusive fans, the NBA has a Utah problem'. *The Guardian*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/mar/15/russell-westbrook-fan-abuse-utah-jazz-racist> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Towler, C., Crawford, N. and Bennett, R. (2020). 'Shut Up and Play: Black Athletes, Protest Politics, and Black Political Action', *Perspectives on Politics* 18(1): 111-127.

Trottier, D., Huang, Q. and Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). 'Mediated Visibility as Making Vitriol Meaningful'. In S. Polak and D. Trottier (eds.) *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 25-45.

Turkish Airlines (2012). *Kobe vs. Messi*. [TV advert] Available on: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WIZ\\_DGF9aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WIZ_DGF9aQ) [Accessed 14 June 2022]

Uitti, J. (2022). 'Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf: 'I lost millions because I couldn't keep my mouth shut''. *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/oct/15/mahmoud-abdul-rauf-nba-protest-national-anthem> [accessed 21 September 2022]

Van Natta Jr., D. (2020). 'ESPN show confirms The Decision was fan's idea, not LeBron James'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/29375906/espn-show-confirms-decision-was-fan-idea-not-lebron-james](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29375906/espn-show-confirms-decision-was-fan-idea-not-lebron-james) [Accessed 27 February 2022]

Warf, B. and Holly, B. (1997). 'The Rise and Fall and Rise of Cleveland', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 551: 208-221.

Welch, S. and Sigelman, L. (2011). 'The "Obama Effect" and White Racial Attitudes', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634: 207-220.

White, H. (1980). 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* 7(1): 5-27.

Wojciechowski, G. (2010). 'LeBron's unsavory 'Decision' spectacle'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/espn/columns/story?columnist=wojciechowski\\_gene&sportCat=nba&page=wojciechowski/100708](https://www.espn.com/espn/columns/story?columnist=wojciechowski_gene&sportCat=nba&page=wojciechowski/100708) [Accessed 3 February 2022]

Wright, J. (2016). 'Be Like Mike?: The Black Athlete's Dilemma', *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 4(2): 1-19.

Young R. (2010). 'LeBron: "Decision" Backlash Had "A Race Factor"'. *CBS*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lebron-decision-backlash-had-a-race-factor/> [Accessed 19 August 2022]

Young, R. (2016). 'The changes that led to Kevin Durant's OKC departure'. *ESPN*, [online]. Available at: [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/16791990/nba-changes-led-kevin-durant-departure-oklahoma-city-thunder](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/16791990/nba-changes-led-kevin-durant-departure-oklahoma-city-thunder) [Accessed 24 July 2022]

Yu, J. (2014). 'We look for social, not promotion: Brand post strategy, consumer emotions, and engagement—A case study of the Facebook brand pages', *GSTF Journal on Media & Communications* 1(2): 32-41.