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Mocarski

Takeaways

Even at the Division III level, we can see how controlling Nike is of its athletes. For a one-in-a-million athlete like LeBron James, we really shouldn't be surprised that his brand has been meticulously sculpted, scripted and crafted even to deny him of his physiological traits. Mocarski writes, "In James's case, each time he steps on the court, speaks in an interview, adds a tattoo, or participates in a commercial, his brand is subject to public scrutiny." Everything LeBron does is calculated and rehearsed.

A tattoo is one of the most personal adornments a person can "wear," and Nike seems to have been capitalizing on LeBron's tattoos. This demonstrates great power over its branded athletes. James's "Chosen 1" and "King James" tattoos make us wonder if Nike's branding strategies were results of the tattoos or if the tattoos were results of Nike's branding strategies. (And that tattooing is a literal form of branding just underlines this question.) For Nike to so embrace James's tattoos seems to contradict its attempts (and successful ones) to strip James of his black or racial identity. The black stereotypes Nike is combating include those relating to tattoos and corn rows, but it is at the same time using James's tattoos to mold his white-ish image even more.

Mocarski's main point is the manufacture of a Messiah in LeBron James, but I argue that Nike's advertising actually offer two different images of James: Messiah, yes, but also a "normal" human with exceptional talents. The consumer can choose his or her interpretation, or choose them both (human AND divine!). Despite the divine basketball skills James has, his four identities in Nike's campaign let viewers know that he is human. The four identities give insight into how LeBron faces multiple voices in his head, each bearing its own share of criticisms. We see the wise old man, the kid, the businessman, and the athlete, and we think we can relate to LeBron James.

A relationship is built between LeBron and his fans through the Messiah myth by using what people already understand about LeBron, but coupled with his proven, demonstrated athletic dedication and success. None of this works unless he is successful, unless he wins and performs. It is at this point that Mocarski says athletes transcend into fans' meaning systems, thus giving them the option to see James as Christ-like. There are many parallels between Nike's branding of James and Jesus as Messiah, but these parallels depend on the consumer to choose to see LeBron as a being higher, sent from the heavens, called or commissioned, and at the same time be able to relate and see him as just a talented equal. Sound familiar? Can I get a witness?

Residual Questions

1. Mocarski says, "The goal of a product or celebrity brand is to make its collectively constructed and understood personality align with consumer expectations so that those consumers will *buy*." How sure can we, the consumers, be that the people and companies that we buy into are telling the truth through their branding? What is "the truth" in this context? We want to trust our brands, but if a brand is purely synthetic and constructed, how do we know that the company stands for what it claims to represent?

2. Even with contractual stipulations, there must be a limit to which Nike can control LeBron James or anyone else. In my opinion, taking away his black identity crosses that line or goes beyond that limit. Is LeBron (and the black community) okay with this? Is there anything Nike and LeBron could have done to defy the stereotypes while staying true to his identity?