

WHEN THE CENTER DOESN'T HOLD ANYMORE:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE JORDAN BRAND

by

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Introduction

On May 17th of 2020, the record for the most expensive pair of sneakers ever sold was broken at the Sotheby's auction house. The shoe that broke the record was a 1985 pair of Air Jordan 1's, autographed by NBA legend Michael Jordan on one of the upper red leather panels. Sneaker collector Jordan Geller is now the owner of this pair after paying \$560,000 at the auction. These shoes originally retailed for \$64.99, and now consumers are willing to pay upwards of a thousand dollars on resale websites to own these highly coveted shoes. The sale of this pair of shoes is symbolic of the iconic status that the Jordan brand has been able to achieve and maintain 17 years after Michael's final retirement from the NBA.

Athletics are a very important part of global culture. Sports and the professionals that play them have the power to captivate nations. Professional Athletes have become celebrities as fans idolize them for their talent and seek to emulate it for themselves. As a result, many professional athletes have been afforded the opportunity to collaborate with various athletic brands to create their own lines and capitalize off of their talent and popularity. Athletes such as Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Cristiano Ronaldo, and LeBron James have collaborated with Nike to become brands themselves. This gives fans who play their respective sports the opportunity not only to wear and use products in support of their idols but also to be like them. In the case of Michael Jordan, who was also given the opportunity to collaborate with Nike, his brand has transcended the realm of sport by becoming a lifestyle brand and capturing the attention of sports fans and consumers on a global scale. As one of the greatest basketball players to ever play in the

NBA, he has now also become one of the most successful brands in the world. Michael Jordan is unique in the fact that while the other athletes have products and collections with brands, his product line experienced exponential demand and rapid growth, ultimately leading to his line being turned into the Jordan brand, a subsidiary of Nike, and going on to become a leader in the sneaker market.

The strategic brand management that the Jordan brand has utilized over the past three decades has enabled it to continue to be successful and maintain relevance and connect to generation after generation of consumers. The brand longevity of the Jordan brand is particularly interesting due to the fact that the focal point of the brand is Michael Jordan, who is not culturally relevant to the target demographic of consumers that the brand wants to engage with. This is due to the fact that Jordan retired from the NBA in 2003 and the current target consumers would not have been old enough to watch his career unfold. In an article from the journal of consumer research, entitled *License to Assemble: Theorizing Brand Longevity*, brand longevity is conceptualized as “relying on an evolutionary approach to assembling the brand, which looks outward from the brand in order to consider the potential of brand elements to prevail in contemporary contexts and to ensure both continuity and change.”¹ For the Jordan brand, this definition holds true as the brand has changed over time in order to adapt to evolving consumer preferences and external market trends while still maintaining a core brand identity that revolves around the qualities that Michael Jordan embodies:

¹ Chloe Preece, Finola Kerrigan, and Daragh O’reilly, “License to Assemble: Theorizing Brand Longevity,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 46, no. 2 (2018): pp. 330-350, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy076>.

determination, perseverance, and excellence. In order to maintain relevance and resonate with consumers who did not witness Michael's career, the brand has had to manage its communications and product decisions accordingly. Brand longevity "requires a delicate balancing act that allows for narrative change, keeping the brand fresh while preserving the fundamental heritage of the brand," which in this case is the spirit of Michael Jordan.²

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the Jordan brand became the \$10 billion-dollar global brand that it is today through its strategic marketing strategies, and how it will continue to succeed moving forward despite Michael Jordan no longer being the center of the brand. Beginning with an explanation of how the brand originated, with the help of its parent company, Nike, will provide historical context for its modern success. An analysis of the advertisements for the brand from its inception to 2020 will serve as the basis for explaining how the identity of the brand was curated through consistent and timely messaging. A discussion of sneaker culture and the product decisions of the brand will contextualize the importance of the brand in the lifestyle of its consumers. I will connect these pieces together through an analysis of current marketing initiatives that leverage the heritage of the brand to forge a relationship with the next generation of consumers through community and social change in order to explicate whether the brand will continue to be a success moving forward.

² Preece et. al, 331

Historical Context: Nike & The Birth of the Jordan Brand

After it was originally founded in 1964, Nike, formally known as Blue Ribbon Sports, had incredible success in the running shoe industry. Founded by former University of Oregon track athlete Phil Knight and his coach Bill Bowerman, the company focused on bringing the best product to the market. The original strategy was very direct and product oriented. According to founder Phil Knight, there was no formal marketing done prior to the 80s.³ The company solely focused on getting its shoes on the feet of prominent track athletes such as Steve Prefontaine and Alberto Salazar. When they expanded the brand into other categories of sport, they continued to focus their efforts on the preferences of the high-performance athletes they worked with. This caused them to ignore the 60% of their customers that were not buying their shoes for actual sport.⁴

When the aerobics market boom happened in the 80s, Nike's competitors capitalized on this. Since Nike continued to focus on the functionality of the shoe over the style and the consumer's desires, they could not create a product to rival the competition. In addition, they made the mistake of entering the casual shoe market, since the running shoe market was slowing down, and failed miserably at creating a desirable product. The shoe was functional but had no aesthetic appeal. At this time, Nike lacked a clear understanding of who their consumer was and what their needs were, choosing to cater to market trends rather than their customer base. The original strategy of the company in

³ Willigan, Geraldine E, Hatfield, Tinker, Hamilton, Ian, and Wieden, Dan. "High-performance Marketing: An Interview with Nike's Phil Knight." *Harvard Business Review* 70, no. 4 (1992): 90.

⁴ Ibid

combination with this major misstep in estimation of the market caused sales to decline heavily in 1985 and 1987.

The company was able to rebound when they figured out that they needed to satisfy the consumer, not just the professional athlete. They also established a clear brand identity to create a consistent brand image as “the world’s best sports and fitness company.”⁵ Since then, Nike has become synonymous with sport and the brand has become an international success. This would not have been possible, had it not been for some of the key decisions Nike made in the 80s, namely the signing of rookie basketball player Michael Jordan.

The decision to sign the promising athlete was a risk, as he had yet to play in a game in the NBA. It was impossible for Nike to predict the immense success that Jordan would achieve, not only as an athlete in the NBA, but also for sales for the company. They expected that by the end of the fourth year of Jordan’s contract that they would have made \$3 million in sales from his shoes. In reality, by the end of the first year, they had made \$126 million in sales for the Air Jordan 1s and this was only the beginning.⁶

The immense success that the Air Jordan collection of shoes had in the 80s and 90s was essential for bringing Nike out of its period of decline. In 1999, after Michael’s 2nd retirement from the NBA, but not his last, “some 5% of all Nike revenue, about \$370

⁵ Willigan, 90.

⁶ Garcia, Sandra E. “Michael Jordan's Game-Worn Sneakers Sell for \$560,000.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/sports/air-jordan-sneakers-auction-record.html>.

million, [came] from Mr. Jordan's line of basketball shoes and apparel."⁷ As of 2019, this percentage has grown to 8% of company's revenue with a growth rate faster than Nike's own.⁸ In addition, Jordan brand has control of over half of the U.S basketball shoe market with a strong global presence as well.⁹ Now, in 2021, the Jordan brand remains an industry leader, dominating the basketball shoe market and the secondary resell market that was started after the sale of the Air Jordan 1s.

In a 1992 interview with Phil Knight in the Harvard Business Review, when discussing the success of the company Knight said that "A brand is something that has a clear-cut identity among consumers, which a company creates by sending out a clear, consistent message over a period of years until it achieves a critical mass of marketing."¹⁰ A critical mass of marketing in this case, is a body of work that has been used to establish a brand identity so that the brand no longer has to continue to build its image in order to resonate with consumers. With regard to the Jordan brand's incredible success and billion-dollar valuation, it was achieved due to a multitude of factors including the design of the shoes, the man behind the brand, and the marketing efforts from Nike and the brand itself. The critical mass of marketing serves as a basis for the identity of the brand, its heritage, that it can use to resonate with consumers in new ways moving forward.

Henrik Ugglå's article entitled *The brand association base: a conceptual model for strategically leveraging partner brand equity* discusses the complexities of the

⁷ Friedman, Wayne. "JORDAN THE STAR ATHLETE RETIRES, JORDAN THE BRAND COMES TO LIFE." *Advertising Age* 70, no. 3 (1999): 3.

⁸ Badenhause, Kurt. "Michael Jordan Has Made Over \$1 Billion From Nike - The Biggest Endorsement Bargain In Sports." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, May 3, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhause/2020/05/03/michael-jordans-1-billion-nike-endorsement-is-the-biggest-bargain-in-sports/>.

⁹ "Air Jordan Grounded?" *Advertising Age* 84, no. 3, January 21, 2013.

¹⁰ Willigan, 90.

relationship between Nike and Jordan brand. As mentioned in the article, Jordan as a partner brand has been able to contribute brand equity to its leader brand, Nike. The article introduces the idea of asymmetrical collaboration, which in some cases can lead to a partner brand becoming “a natural part of the overarching brand structure of the leader brand,” and ultimately become its own leader brand which Jordan brand has done through its relationship with Nike.¹¹ Efforts to differentiate the brand from its parent company have been successful in helping the Jordan brand adopt its own distinct brand image as a leader brand. These efforts include both its 1997 transition into a subsidiary of Nike, and the removal of the Nike swoosh from Jordan products.

Becoming a subsidiary: Jordan differentiates itself from Nike

In 1997, after over a decade of sales and eleven different iterations of the Air Jordan shoe, the Jordan brand became a subsidiary of Nike and assumed a separate brand identity. While the brand continued to be wholly owned by its parent company, this move enabled the expansion of the brand beyond a shoe line into “a complete collection of performance and lifestyle products for both men and women.”¹² These sales only continued to increase after the brand gained its own separate identity from Nike.

¹¹ Uggla, Henrik. "The Brand Association Base: A Conceptual Model for Strategically Leveraging Partner Brand Equity." *The Journal of Brand Management* 12, no. 2 (2004): 105-23.

¹² Inside Access: An Evolving Jordan Brand Continues to Inspire the Next Generation.” Nike News, July 24, 2014. <https://news.nike.com/news/inside-access-an-evolving-jordan-brand-continues-to-inspire-the-next-generation>.

A key part of the Jordan brand's ability to differentiate itself from its parent company was the early evolution of the brand's logo. The Air Jordan Wings logo was the original logo for the Air Jordan line of shoes. It was only featured for the first two shoes in the collection, the Air Jordan I and II, while the third iteration got rid of this logo all together and replaced it with the Jumpman logo. The Jumpman logo became the permanent Jordan brand logo at this point, modeled after the iconic LIFE magazine photo of Michael performing the ballet move, the grand jeté. More significantly however was the decision to remove the Nike logo from the shoes, beginning with the Air Jordan 2.

All other athletes who have had sold lines in partnership with Nike have had the swoosh featured on their products, making its replacement with the Jumpman logo all the more distinctive and impactful. In an ESPN interview, conducted with designer Tinker Hatfield, Hatfield explains that this decision was based on the fact they he “‘recognized early on that MJ, especially with his Jumpman, [could] survive and even flourish without a Swoosh,’ and that ‘it was part of the strategy of [Hatfield’s] to sort of create a Brand Jordan before there ever was one.”¹³ This was a bold move on the part of Hatfield and functioned to differentiate the identity of the Jordan brand from the parent company even prior to it becoming a subsidiary. This was a unique occurrence and indicative of the fact that it was clear early on, at least from an internal perspective, that the Jordan brand would expand beyond its parent company. Michael Jordan’s persona

¹³ DePaula, Nick. “The Iconic Sneakers That Defined Michael Jordan's Title Runs.” ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, May 3, 2020. https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29104287/the-iconic-sneakers-defined-michael-jordan-title-runs.

as “Jumpman,” had the power to be a success without the direct association with Nike due to his standalone skills and charisma.

While the Jordan brand has differentiated itself from its parent company in many ways, Nike’s marketing efforts on behalf of the brand in the early years established the critical mass of marketing that sustains the brands success today. The brand longevity it has achieved, and its domination of the sneaker resell market, and the community that it has built, are all indications of this occurrence. After acknowledging the ways in which the Jordan brand was built, the question that is drawn is how the Jordan brand has been able to sustain its success even after Michael Jordan’s departure from the NBA.

Jordan's Strategy: Leveraging Brand Heritage and Classic Shoe

Models

One of the primary ways in which the Jordan brand has been able to maintain relevancy throughout the years is the vast number of retro re-releases and limited-edition collaborations with other designers and brands. As ESPN senior writer, Scoop Jackson wrote “by hitting the game from two ends -- on the court with its newest and on the streets with the retros -- the Jordan Brand has positioned itself in a can't-lose "Catch-23" in which Jordan's are coveted both for their technical superiority and relevance for urban streetwear fashion.¹⁴ Among the original collection, there have been thirty-five different iterations of the Air Jordan shoe. Each of these shoes now has numerous different colorways and retro variations, which amount to hundreds of pairs of Jordans. In 2019 alone, eighty different colorways of the Air Jordan 1 were released, making it to the most released retro for the brand.¹⁵ This aspect of the Jordan brand has been so successful due to the principles of supply scarcity: the brand produces a limited quantity to generate more value for the shoes.

Amongst the principles of persuasion, scarcity is employed as a means to generate demand due to the fact that people tend to want what they can't have. By intentionally making Jordan products difficult to acquire, they appear more valuable to

¹⁴ Jackson, Scoop. “Impact of Jordan Brand Reaches Far beyond Basketball.” ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, February 12, 2016. https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/14760324/cultural-impact-jordan-sneakers-goes-far-basketball.

¹⁵ Sayles, Justin. “How the Air Jordan 1 Became the Sneaker King.” The Ringer. The Ringer, May 4, 2020. <https://www.theringer.com/nba/2020/5/4/21246027/air-jordan-1-nike-michael-jordan-sneaker-king-legacy-the-last-dance>.

individuals by “confer[ing] increased status or uniqueness” upon the buyer.¹⁶ When a product offers an individual a means to consume a product that others don’t have, they may be more inclined to purchase it to differentiate themselves from others.

Additionally, “products with high scarcity [...] induce impulse behavior”; and by utilizing limited release shoe drops, Jordan can capture value from impulse buyers who may purchase the shoes for the fear that they won’t be able to find them again, or may have to purchase them for a higher price on the secondary resell market.¹⁷

In 1994 after Michael’s retirement from the NBA to play professional baseball, Nike retroed the first Air Jordans, the 1s, by rereleasing the Bred and Chicago colorways. At the time, there was not a market for the rerelease of shoes that were no longer in production, and the shoes did not sell to the point that they were ultimately marked down from \$80 to \$19.99.¹⁸ It wasn’t until the 90s, when Hip-hop culture became intertwined with throwback clothing that the retro model became sustainable, as there was now a demand for classic styles from the past.¹⁹

In 1999 and the early 2000s, the Jordan brand rereleased retro 4s, 5s, 6s, and 11s. Thanks to the external environmental shift in fashion towards nostalgic clothing, the public was receptive to this round of retro releases and demand was generated for the classic models. Since then, the company has continued to release hundreds of retro

¹⁶ Ku, Hsuan-Hsuan, Kuo, Chien-Chih, and Kuo, Tzu-Wei. "The Effect of Scarcity on the Purchase Intentions of Prevention and Promotion Motivated Consumers." *Psychology & Marketing* 29, no. 8 (2012): 541-48.

¹⁷ Chae, Heeju, Seungwan Kim, Jungguk Lee, and Kyounghye Park. “Impact of Product Characteristics of Limited Edition Shoes on Perceived Value, Brand Trust, and Purchase Intention; Focused on the Scarcity Message Frequency.” *Journal of Business Research* 120 (2020): 398–406. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.11.040>.

¹⁸ Sayles

¹⁹ Ibid

versions of the Air Jordan collection to capitalize on this sustained demand. The key aspect of retroing the shoes, is to release limited quantities in order to keep demand high without oversaturating the market; “unrequited demand is imperative to keeping a product afloat, while ubiquity all but guarantees a sneaker will fall out of favor.”²⁰

Collaborations have been another hugely successful aspect of the rerelease/retro business model. Each shoe collaboration project has been a reimagining of a previously existing shoe from the Air Jordan collection. Re-producing these shoes in an innovative way allows for each pair to take on a new meaning while also imbuing it with the status associated with the collaborator. Collaborations with Virgil Abloh, the designer for Off-White, and numerous celebrities such as Travis Scott are more relevant to current consumers than retro shoe models.²¹ These collaborations add a level of newness to older models that creates more value and personal resonance for consumers that may not connect directly with the Jordan brand or its history.

One of the core marketing strategies that the brand has employed in order to achieve maintain a consistent identity is heritage branding. A heritage brand is one that incorporates its historical legacy into its marketing as a means to emphasize authenticity and brand trust. These brands leverage their history as an integral part of their business model and this concept is more commonly applied to brands that have been established

²⁰ Siu , Michelle. “Sneakernomics: The Regulated Supply of and Intense Demand for the Air Jordan 11 Retro Low Concord.” nationalpost. National Post, May 24, 2014.
<https://nationalpost.com/life/fashion-beauty/sneakernomics-the-regulated-supply-of-and-intense-demand-for-the-air-jordan-11-retro-low-concord>.

²¹ Lux, Moritz, and Peter Bug . “Sole Value – the Sneaker Resale Market : an Explorative Analysis of the Sneaker Resale Market,” January 2018.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332330011_Sole_value_-_the_sneaker_resale_market_an_explorative_analysis_of_the_sneaker_resale_market/citations.

for a longer time period than the Jordan brand. For the purposes of this thesis however, the Jordan brand can be classified as a heritage brand due to the fact that the brand's history is an integral part of the storytelling in its ad campaigns and product lines. Heritage marketing "influence[s] future purchasing behavior by employing historical references in current marketing initiatives" which the brand has done through its advertisements in the 2010s.²² Additionally, through the retroing of classic models of the Air Jordan shoes, the brand uses heritage marketing through "the creation of updated products that incorporate visual elements from prior versions."²³ By threading the history of the Jordan brand through its messaging and products, the brand evokes nostalgia both for its older consumer base who remember the history of the brand; while simultaneously evoking authenticity and trust from younger consumers who can recognize the core elements of the brand as established by its heritage.

The external trend shift in fashion that generated demand for classic models of the Air Jordan, as well as the brand's utilization of scarcity and heritage marketing, has contributed to the modern popularity of retro Air Jordan shoes. Utilizing the heritage of the brand to sell the story of Jordan has been so successful thanks to Jordan's incredible career in the NBA. While the narrative that the Jordan brand has communicated to consumers over the years has been one of dedication, skill, and god-like prowess, the marketing would not have been as successful had it not been for Jordan's career in the NBA that substantiated these notions. Retro models of shoes are all the more valuable from their association with different historical events in Jordan's career. Thus, the critical mass of

²² Hudson, Bradford T. "Brand Heritage." Wiley Encyclopedia of Management, 2015, 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118785317.weom090025>.

²³ Hudson, 1

marketing that allows the brand to sustain itself and continue to be successful, is upheld by Jordan's career. The association that the brand has with Michael's career can never be broken, even without Michael himself as the face of the brand, and this heritage as communicated through the brand's advertisements throughout the years functions to sustain and validate the brand identity that has been established.

The Early Years of Air Jordan: An Analysis of the Advertisements that Started it All

Prior to 1986, Nike had almost exclusively worked with advertising agency Chiat/Day on their advertising campaigns. This agency had developed the first two campaigns for Michael Jordan's Air Jordan collection, "banned" and "who says man was not meant to fly." These original commercials only scratched the surface of what the Jordan brand was to become. They focused solely on Jordan's athletic talent and his body. And while they were compelling, it wasn't until Wieden and Kennedy stepped in that the commercials transitioned from advertisements to a storyline.

The initial advertisements from the beginning days of the Air Jordan Shoe line focused primarily on Jordan himself, his image, and his skills. The first ever commercial to feature Michael Jordan and his shoes was a part of the "Banned" campaign, featuring the Air Jordan 1s. While many media outlets and publications have mis-reported on the matter, the Nike Air Jordan 1s were not actually banned from the NBA. This was a sensationalized story that resulted from Michael breaking the NBA's dress code, and 51% rule, that required all players to wear shoes that were majority white and matched the team's colors.²⁴ In an official memo written to Nike, the NBA expressed that Michael was unable to wear his black and red Air Jordan 1. The rhetoric was that Jordan wore the shoes while Nike forfeited a five thousand dollar fine for every game, he played in them. In the end, Jordan only wore the red and black "banned"

²⁴ Sayles

colorway in the 1985 Slam Dunk Contest, and never in a league game. However, Nike capitalized on the sensationalized story and created the iconic “Banned” campaign.

This original advertisement featured a 30-second full body pan of Michael handling a basketball, panning down to his feet which were clad in the “banned” colorway, black and red. The stoic manner in which Jordan stands draws in the viewers’ attention to his physique and powerful presence. The audio that plays in the back stated that “On September 15th, Nike created a revolutionary new basketball shoe. On October 18th, the NBA threw them out of the game. Fortunately, the NBA cannot stop you from wearing them.” The shoes are censored with black bars during the short commercial, and in tandem with the audio, the message is rebellion; encouraging consumers to join Michael as the “bad boy” of the NBA and wear the shoes in defiance. This anti



(Air Jordan. “Banned.” Television Advertisement. 1985)

-establishment position is one that Nike readily assumes, as founder Phil Knight has said, “we actually welcome the kind of publicity that pits us against the establishment,

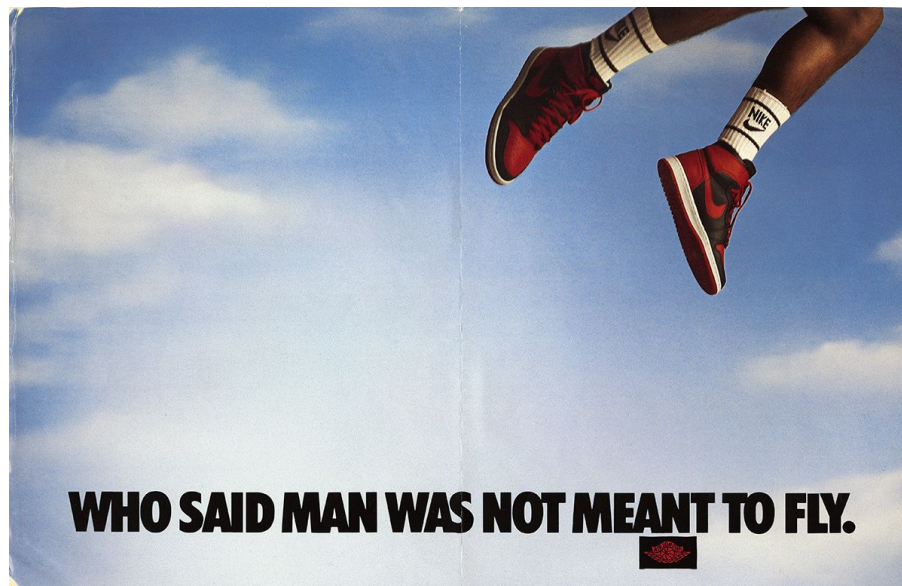
as long as we know we're on the right side of things.”²⁵ Michael already stood out in the league as a player with talent no one had seen before, and this campaign further positioned him as a standout player, too talented to respect the rules. This was a bold statement to both the NBA and fans. It was also a huge success for the company, as the Air Jordan 1 quickly sold out and generated enough demand to start a secondary sneaker resell market for consumers to purchase the shoe. While the message of the campaign is not reflective of the rest of the advertisements in his career, its success was significant for the brand and signified the huge impact that Michael was already having in the NBA.

The next advertisement that Nike released for the Air Jordan collection, was the first to feature Jordan in the iconic Jumpman position, and current brand logo. The logo originated from a *Life* Magazine shoot in which Jordan, prior to being signed by Nike, replicated a ballet step known as the “grand jetes.”²⁶ Nike and Chiat/Day used this photo as the inspiration for the logo and advertisement to dramatize the appearance of Jordan dunking. In the commercial, Michael is seen moving in slow motion in the Jumpman position, and then dunking a basketball. The background noise is a jet taking off and the commercial finishes with the tagline “who says man was not meant to fly.” This commercial was released along with print advertisements featuring this same phrase, as pictured in this figure. Nike placed a strong emphasis on Jordan’s ability to take flight,

²⁵ Willigan, 90.

²⁶ Rovell, Darren. “Nike Sued over Michael Jordan Logo.” ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, January 23, 2015. https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/12218091/photographer-sues-nike-michael-jordan-photo-copyright.

and the commercials and advertisements have continued to emphasize themes of flight and jet engines to highlight that Jordan’s talent was beyond the normal capabilities of humans. This theme has translated into the brand’s mission in modern day. In a 2014 News Release from Nike, the Jordan brand mission is: “to help athletes fly on and off the court.”²⁷ This campaign, in addition to the “banned”



(Air Jordan. “Who said man was not meant to fly.” Print advertisement.)

campaign both place Michael on a pedestal as an untouchable, almost god-like figure. Michael’s career as an NBA-all star made Jordan brand commercials all the more compelling because they substantiated the marketing claims that individuals could in fact “fly” whilst wearing Air Jordan shoes. Thus the brand utilized Michael’s referent power, imbued from his status as both an NBA player and now celebrity, to persuade consumers that the products were superior. Referent power builds aspirational status for

²⁷ Nike News

both Michael and the brand which contributed to consumers desiring to obtain the shoes to achieve prestige of their own.

The Next Era: Building the Brand

After this campaign, Wieden and Kennedy, who had previously been a secondary agency for the company, were given a contract for the Jordan commercials. The Chiat/Day commercials were fairly superficial in nature, focused mainly on Jordan the incredible athlete, his body, and his talents. As of yet Nike had not provided consumers with a consistent message nor had they really tapped into who Jordan was as a person. These commercials were engaging but “So far, the only given had been how brilliant an athlete he was, which had made millions of young American teenagers who wanted to jump a good deal higher buy the shoes, but there was a ceiling on that kind of message” and the company needed to go in a different direction.²⁸ The commercials that Wieden and Kennedy produced followed a narrative structure that gave the consumer a glimpse into the life and character of Michael Jordan. His authenticity and charisma shown through and captivated the world.

The Mars Blackmon era of advertisements occurred in the 90s with the release of the Air Jordan II through V. These commercials are significant for their cultural implications as well as the narrative that they created around Michael Jordan. As mentioned in a 1998 Fortune Magazine article entitled the Jordan effect, these

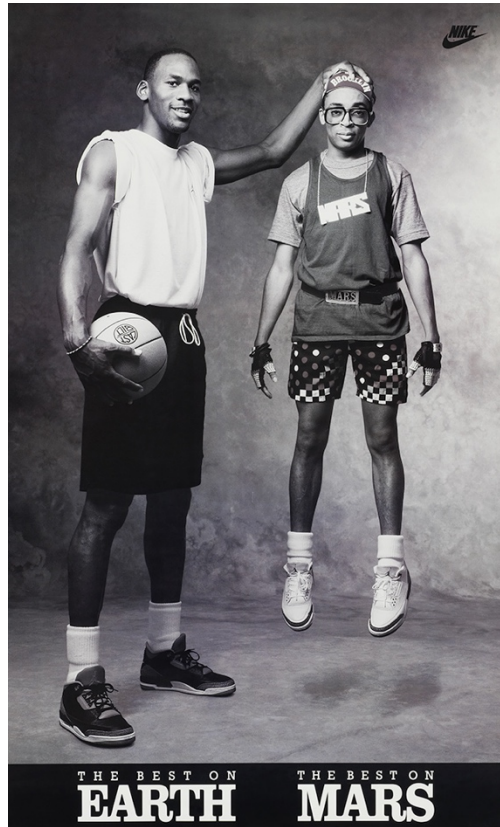
²⁸ "ONCE UPON A TIME, NIKE, WIEDEN & KENNEDY AND MICHAEL JORDAN WEREN'T YET A TEAM. IN THIS EXCERPT FROM HIS NEW BOOK, DAVID HALBERSTAM DESCRIBES HOW IT ALL CAME TOGETHER, WITH A YOUNG FILMMAKER.: BIRTH OF AN ICON." Advertising Age, 1999, 22.

advertisements “not only gave Jordan an engaging persona but also infused urban culture into advertising years before hip-hop and rap pulsed through commercials.”²⁹ Famous director Spike Lee partnered with Nike and Wieden and Kennedy to produce this series of commercials featuring Michael and the character Lee portrayed, Mars Blackmon, from the 1986 film *She’s Gotta Have It*. Jim Riswold from Wieden and Kennedy was the man responsible for hiring on Spike Lee to create these commercials with the intent to show the consumer a different image of Jordan than had previously been seen. The public knew and wanted to be like Michael for his athleticism, but these new commercials functioned to highlight his humanity and charisma.

In the original commercial from this campaign, Mars Blackmon is seen above the basketball rim, making a bold claim, that he is the best player in the game. The camera then pans downwards to Michael, who mischievously leaves him hanging from the rim to dunk on him, after revealing that the only way Mars got up there in the first place was from standing on Michael’s shoulders. Jordan’s smile in the clip is infectious and pitting him against the goofy, talkative Mars Blackmon makes him all the more impressive.

²⁹ Johnson, Roy. “The Jordan Effect .” *Fortune Magazine* , June 22, 1998.

In *She's Gotta Have It*, Mars Blackmon is a basketball and shoes obsessed bike messenger from New York with a special pension for Michael Jordan.³⁰ The advertisements followed a structure in which Blackmon provided a narration and Jordan displayed his ability to dunk and outperform everyone



(Jordan. Magazine print advertisement. 1988)

The commercial series “juxtaposed [Michael] with the nerdy urban blowhard's Everyman,” in order to position Jordan as superior, highlighting his referent power and aspirational status.³¹ But the commercials also had a comedic element in them which

³⁰ ONCE UPON A TIME

³¹ Bob Garfield. "Nike Brings Mars Blackmon Back to Say Farewell to Jordan." *Advertising Age* 74, no. 16 (2003): 49.

enabled viewers to see Jordan's humanity as well. Pictured in the above figure is a print advertisement from 1988, which provides a visual for this juxtaposition. Michael is effortlessly palming Mars' head as if it were a basketball, not only to highlight the differences in stature and athleticism in a comedic manner, but also to emphasize the superhuman qualities of Jordan as first established in Chiat/Day era of Jordan advertisements. Throughout the series, Mars is consistently complimenting Michael for his abilities while also trying to figure out how he does it. In this way, Nike used the

commercials offer the consumer an explanation for Michael Jordan's incredible talent: their shoes.

In another one of these commercials, Mars is focusing on the shoes by showing off a pair of Air Jordan IIIs, said man was not mean Through this commercial, Nike employs the tactic of using absolutes with reference to



(Jordan. "It's gotta be the Shoes." Television advertisement. 1989.)

Michael's ability. With regard to the shoe, Mars tells The audience "this is something you can buy," while simultaneously telling them that they cannot do Michael's "patented, viscous, high flying, 360 slam dunk." He then re-affirms his statement by adding "this you can buy. Can. Can't" while pointing from shoe to dunk. The use of absolutes position Michael as an indisputable talent, while highlighting that the shoes are the only means by which one could attempt to be like him.

Using absolutes was a common theme in the Mars Blackmon series. In another commercial, Mars tells the audience that "nobody in the world can cover [his] main

man Michael Jordan,” and repeats nobody again four times, followed by five statements of “impossible.” In a comedic twist, Michael walks up to Mars in the end and covers his mouth, stating “however, it’s easy to cover Mars Blackmon”. Through this commercial and the one previously discussed, Mars impresses upon the audience with certainty that they cannot cover Michael nor dunk like him, but they can buy his shoes.

In “it’s gotta be the shoes,” Mars seeks to identify what makes Jordan “the best player in the universe” by pestering Jordan with various potential sources of his talent such as “viscous dunks,” “haircut,” and “shoes.” To all of this Jordan says no, and in response Mars exclaims “it’s gotta be the shoes.” The commercial finishes with the tagline “Mr. Jordans opinions do not necessarily reflect those of Nike Inc.” suggesting that they, and Mars believe that it is in fact the shoes. In total, Mars says shoes ten different times, solidifying that the focus is on the footwear. This theme is emblematic of the “banned” commercial and “who said man was not meant to fly” print advertisements in which the intent was to communicate to the audience that owning a pair of Jordan brand shoes could provide the owner with the ability to perform like Michael Jordan himself.

The narrative of Mars seeking out the source of Michael’s talent is threaded throughout the series of commercials. In “Genie of the lamp,” Mars asks the genie from Aladdin’s lamp what he should wish for. While he could choose a million dollars, or a new car, he chooses to become Michael Jordan. Once he is transformed, he says “Look mom I can fly” followed by a dunk and the genie’s exclamation that “[he] is the greatest!” This suggests to the audience that being Jordan means possessing super-

human qualities such as flight, perpetuating the theme of flight while also emphasizing Jordan's superior nature.

This era of advertisements functioned to establish a more approachable and relatable persona for consumers to resonate with while simultaneously creating a narrative that the Jordan brand shoes contribute to superior athletic performance. There is a duality to the advertisements in the sense that they compare Michael to Mars in order to emphasize his aspirational nature but also, by pairing him with an "average" man they bring out Michael's more ordinary qualities as well. Seeing Jordan talk to and interact with Mars enabled the consumer to see him as a talent, but also as a man. Mars' fixation on the shoes being the source of Michael's talent, coupled with his intense desire to be like Michael, perpetuated the association of his talent with the product offerings for the brand. Thus, through these advertisements the brand identity became synonymous with both Michael's skills and personality.

Jordan The Coach

The next era of Jordan advertisements pivoted in a new direction in which the narrative largely surrounded Jordan, his career, and how he achieved his successes. Commercial structures in the 2000s became more about speaking to the fans and conveying different messages about Michael's career, his capabilities, and the future generation of the sport. As Michael Jordan's career came to an end, and he had a brief stint in minor league baseball, these commercials chronicled his journey. This is where the heritage branding started to be utilized by the brand, by using events from his career to create a storyline in their advertisements. Commercials such as "Tell me," "Failure," and "What is love" are all narrated by Jordan in order to emphasize his work

ethic and ability to turn on his talent in every moment on the court. While commercials such as “let your game speak,” “maybe it’s my own fault,” and “look me in the eye” functioned as calls to action, challenging the next generation of basketball players to step up to the challenge of becoming the next Michael Jordan. Through these commercials, Nike and the Jordan brand engaged fans of the brand in a different way than had previously been done. By engaging directly with fans through Michael as the narrator in many of these commercials, they were able to bring them into the experience and created a conversation between the man behind the brand and his followers.

In “Tell Me,” an older more experience Michael Jordan says to the audience “Challenge me. Doubt me. Disrespect me. Tell me I’m older. Tell me I’m slower. Tell me I can no longer fly. I want you to.” The commercial flips through different shots of Michael, wiping his sweat, staring down the camera, and ultimately dunking like he has done time and time again in these commercials. In “Failure,” Michael narrates himself getting out of a limo to walk into the stadium as he says “I miss more than 9,000 shots in my career [...] I’ve failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” In both of these commercials Michael engages with the audience in order to tell them that nothing can stop him, not words and not failures. In this way, they function to position him as role model for the audience, like a coach who is telling them not to let negative remarks or results stop them.

And in “Maybe it’s My fault,” Michael narrates over video clips of places and symbols from his past: old locker rooms, dorm rooms, his family home, and images of his accomplishments, trophies, and a statue in his honor. He tells the audience that maybe he misled them to think this his successes came easy and that he didn’t work for

it but finishes by saying “maybe you’re just making excuses.” This was the first of the become legendary commercials in which he simultaneously emphasizes his hard work while also calling the next generation to action by telling them to stop making excuses. In a 2008 press release from Nike, *Jordan Brand Unveils “BECOME LEGENDARY” Campaign*, the company explains that the campaign “promise[s] to be a revealing expose on what it takes to BECOME LEGENDARY.”³² The story of Michael’s career is a vehicle employed to encourage athletes and customers that they can achieve greatness like Jordan, but they have to work for it.



(Jordan. “Maybe it’s my Fault.” Television advertisement. 2008)

“Clocktower,” the fourth commercial from the BECOME LEGENDARY campaign conveys the intended message with only images and a brief tagline at the end. Clips of athletes working out in Jordan gear, watching film of basketball games, and playing on

³² “Jordan Brand Unveils ‘BECOME LEGENDARY’ Campaign.” Nike News, January 8, 2008. <https://news.nike.com/news/jordan-brand-unveils-become-legendary-campaign>.

the court are seen with a clock tower ringing slowly in the background. The ticking of the clock adds a sense of urgency to the commercial, and the tagline “there are no Cinderellas” follows the image of a clock striking midnight to solidify this message that success is not achieved overnight.

This era of advertisements used references from Michael Jordan’s career as a means to build and sell the brand image. In the majority of these commercials, the focus is not on the product itself as it was in the previous advertisements but rather on the story of Michael’s journey throughout the NBA and his personal beliefs and value systems. While his career in the NBA ended, in large part, his presence in the brand’s advertisements also dwindled after this point in time, bringing in the new era of Jordan brand athletes that would emulate the qualities that it takes to “become legendary.” The consistent brand image of Michael Jordan as the god-like, skilled basketball player has been maintained but now, the marketing positions him as a wise mentor for future athletes as well. Using heritage branding through these advertisements, in tandem with the brand’s utilization of retro shoe rereleases that pay homage to different moments in Jordan’s career, aid in establishing an authentic, consistent, and appealing brand identity for Jordan.

The Jordan Family: A New Era of Excellence

In commercials from the 2010s, various Jordan brand athletes are used as a replacement Jordan to carry on the same themes and brand messaging as their predecessor. To market the release of the Air Jordan XXXI in 2016, Russell Westbrook, a prominent member of the Jordan brand family, and nine time NBA all-star, starred in a commercial that is reminiscent of the earlier “who said man wasn’t meant to fly” commercial. Like “who said man wasn’t meant to fly,” the Westbrook commercial features the sound of a jet engine taking off while Westbrook takes flight to give the impression that he, like Jordan possesses the ability to fly. Overall, the advertisement functions to highlight one of the core themes of the Jordan brand: the ability to take flight.



(Jordan. “Some run, some make runways.” Television advertisement. 2016)

An integral part of the Jordan brand is the inclusion of other athletes that exemplify the Jordan legacy. In 1997 when the Jordan brand was officially established, Jordan hand-picked the “starting five” NBA players that were the first to be endorsed by the brand: Ray Allen, Vin Baker, Derek Anderson, Michael Finley and Eddie Jones.

Gentry Humphrey, former Jordan brand product director explained that “while you may never find that one guy that has the complete package, you can find a little bit of some of those things in several athletes.”³³ While Jordan’s legacy will continuously live on through the brand, he is no longer the face, which allows consumers who don’t have a personal connection to Jordan to be able to connect with the new athletes that are a part of the Jordan family.

Not only do these athletes exemplify the qualities that the Jordan brand symbolizes, i.e drive and greatness, but they also come from various sports. The Jordan brand is representative of athletic excellence and including athletes from various sports expands the reach of the brand to consumers with interests outside of basketball. The most recent additions to the Jordan brand family also include members of Gen Z in order to provide a point of connection for the younger demographic of consumers that Jordan is seeking to engage with. As the brand no longer uses Michael Jordan as the face, it now uses a variety of athletes that possess similar qualities to the NBA legend in order to maintain the consistent brand identity while also evolving to attract new generations of consumers.

Through the evolution of Jordan brand advertisements, the brand’s identity was molded around the persona and legacy of Michael Jordan. By leveraging Michael’s talent to convey his aspirational status and referent power, the brand was able to

³³ Dodson, Aaron. “How Michael Jordan's Original Starting Five - from Ray Allen to Michael Finley - Became Team Jordan's First Stars.” *The Undeclared*. *The Undeclared*, October 24, 2017. <https://theundefeated.com/features/michael-jordan-brand-ray-allen-russell-westbrook-sneakers-nike/>.

captivate the initial interest of consumers. But by also highlighting his charismatic personality and positioning him later on as a mentor, making him as more relatable and approachable, the brand became more accessible and resonant with the experiences of its consumers. While the product emphasis in early commercials solidified the connection between Michael's talent and the Jordan brand shoes; the use of heritage marketing within the advertisements functioned to authenticate the messaging by positioning Jordan's career as evidence for marketing claims. Additionally, by threading themes throughout, like flight, with the early commercials featuring Jordan and then with Jordan brand athletes such as Russel Westbrook, the brand maintains its identity while simultaneously evolving to stay relevant. Having established the identity of the brand through these advertisements over the last four decades, the brand is now able to build upon these previous efforts to establish a relationship with the next generation of consumers.

Sneaker Culture: Evidence of Multi-Generational Relevance

Consumers of Air Jordan and the Jordan brand in the 80s, 90s were able to watch Michael play throughout his career in the NBA and understood first-hand the impact that he had on the game of basketball and the world. The commercials that were released in the 2000s, included many career highlights and messaging about Jordan's success to share his legacy with younger generations. With a shoe being released for every one of his seasons, the Air Jordan collection historicized his career and "this ability of the shoes to capture and mythologize certain moments in time, along with Jordan's superstar status and talent on the court, is generally regarded as having popularized the culture of people collecting, curating, and trading astonishing amounts of sneakers."³⁴ But the implications that owning a pair of Jordan's had for the first generation of consumers are not the same for the millennials and Gen Z that are consuming them now. So, the question is posed of whether or not the Jordan brand will be able to sustain the same level of resonance with future consumers.

In the study *I wear, therefore I am: Investigating sneakerhead culture, social identity and brand preference among men*, interviews were conducted with self-identified sneakerheads, some that experienced the Jordan era of the NBA and some that did not. For the older generation of sneakerheads, the Jordan shoe is considered the ultimate collector's item, with one interviewee stating that "Jordans are probably like the Bentley or Aston Martin of the shoe game."³⁵ In addition, these shoes

³⁴ Denny, Iain. "The Sneaker - Marketplace Icon." *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 2020, 1-12.

³⁵ Matthews, Delisia, Cryer-Coupet, Qiana, and Degirmencioglu, Nimet. "I Wear, Therefore I Am: Investigating Sneakerhead Culture, Social Identity, and Brand Preference among Men." *Fashion and Textiles* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1-13.

function to validate the aspirations of many of these men who had coveted the shoes as kids but were unable to afford them. Famous NBA player LaMarcus Aldridge, who was signed by Jordan in 2014, had a similar childhood and has said “Growing up in my neighborhood, [Jordans] were kind of like the Holy Grail. I couldn't afford them. So just being able to work and save up the money to actually buy them was huge.³⁶” In this way the shoes are identity affirming. This relates to the concept of self-image congruence in which there is a match between the consumer’s concept of themselves or their ideal self, which they would like to embody, and the identity or personality of a brand.³⁷ In this way, owning Jordan brand products provide psychological satisfaction by enabling the consumer to become who they want to be, which also functions to create a positive consumer attitude towards the brand. The public knows that buying Jordan’s shoes won’t actually give them the ability to perform like Michael Jordan, but through the narrative created by brand marketing over the years, obtaining the shoes validates aspirations and connects the consumer to Jordan himself.

When it comes to millennials and Gen Z who do not resonate in the same way with Jordan’s career, other brands and more recent shoes hold more value for them. This does not mean that Jordans are not still a sought-after product by younger generations, but the association has changed. As Elizabeth Semmelhack, senior curator of the Bata Shoe Museum and author of *Out of the Box: The Rise of sneaker*

³⁶ Jackson

³⁷ Frank Kressmann, M. Joseph Sirgy, Andreas Herrmann, Frank Huber, Stephanie Huber, Dong-Jin Lee. “Direct and indirect effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty.” *The Journal of Business Research* 59, no. 9 (2006): 955-964.

Culture said, “the cultural meaning behind sneakers is a constantly evolving dialogue between the people who produce the sneakers and the people who wear them.”³⁸ The narrative behind the Jordan’s of Michael’s work ethic, incredible career and legacy, and how that story is perceived by the public is how they have been able to maintain relevancy over the past four decades.

According to a Statista article written about the sneaker resell market in 2020, data analyst Felix Richter mentions that “Nike Jordans were the most popular shoes” on the StockX platform “in terms of total trades, landing an average premium of 54 percent above the original retail price.”³⁹ For comparison, Nike’s average price above retail on the site was 46% while Adidas had the third largest margin at 32% above retail price.⁴⁰ This data is significant in the fact that it highlights Jordans relevancy in sneaker culture and the coveted nature of the shoes that still remains today. And with seventy-five percent of the StockX consumer base being under the age of 35, this is indicative that while some younger sneakerheads may place more personal value on shoes from other brands, Jordans still possess an appeal to much younger consumers.⁴¹ Regardless of age, the Jordan brand narrative pervades society and “because Jordan's name is still attached to his shoes -- and only his name, [...] we connect the signature shoe bearing his name directly to his spirit, performance and

³⁸ Chrisman-Campbell, Kimberly. “The Long Political History of the Sneaker.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, December 28, 2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/sneakers-have-always-been-political-shoes/511628/>.

³⁹ Richter, Felix. “Infographic: Outside the Box: The Booming Secondary Sneaker Market.” Statista Infographics, March 2, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/chart/24313/stockx-gross-merchandise-volume/>.

⁴⁰ Richter

⁴¹ Loizos, Connie. “As the US Shuts down, StockX's Business Is Booming, Says Its CEO.” TechCrunch. TechCrunch, March 28, 2020. <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/27/as-the-u-s-shuts-down-stockxs-business-is-booming-says-its-ceo/>.

being.”⁴² And consumers with an interest in streetwear culture, whether or not they watched his career unfold, can understand that connection due to the marketing that the brand was founded on.

⁴² Jackson

The Jordan brand legacy: Authenticity and Social Change

Authenticity functions to establish brand trust amongst consumers, by assuring them that the brand is using genuine and reliable messaging to sell their products. In the case of the Jordan brand, the authenticity of the company stems from the stories of the athletes that are representative of brand, as well as those of community that the brand serves. The consistency of the brand's messaging throughout the years additionally aids in its authenticity by presenting a clear and consistent identity.

In the digital age, where access to information is unprecedented, consumers have the ability to research and verify marketing claims, making it all the more important to maintain a sense of authenticity in branding. The dawn of social media has created a toxic culture and pressure to present the “best version” of ourselves online, which is inherently inauthentic and often leaves consumers with unrealistic expectations they feel they must imitate. Digital natives, the generation of consumers that grew immersed in digital communications, including Gen Z and some millennials, are pushing back against this. These consumers have a desire for authenticity, preferring ads that “depict ‘real life’ instead of unrealistic settings.”⁴³ This bodes well for the Jordan brand, who has focused their efforts on showcasing the authentic stories and communities of the Jordan brand family members. Continuing to sign endorsers like

⁴³ Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel. “True Gen!: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” McKinsey & Company. McKinsey & Company, December 16, 2020. [https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies#:~:text=Seven%20out%20of%20ten%20Gen,in%20feminism%20\(Exhibit%204\).](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies#:~:text=Seven%20out%20of%20ten%20Gen,in%20feminism%20(Exhibit%204).)

Zion Williamson, the first overall pick of the NBA draft, and a digital native, will be instrumental as this generation “is looking at their peers as influencers.”⁴⁴ And While Williamson is not your average 20-year-old, he serves as a point of connection to the younger generations who are too young to have watched Michael Jordan and other older members of the Jordan family in action.

In addition to asking brands to provide authenticity and peer representation, the younger generations value individuality. As a result, these consumers view “consumption as an expression of individual identity.”⁴⁵ Unite, the 2019/2020 Jordan brand campaign and film series, highlights the stories of different individuals who are connected to the brand. Through this campaign, the Jordan brand is engaging the next generation of consumers through basketball culture and sharing the stories of a variety of Team Jordan athletes, musicians, and designers with connections to the brand. By profiling different individuals and sharing their unique stories about persevering and success, Jordan created a community for consumers to relate to and identify with. These films from the campaign are impactful because each individual profiled in the series tells their story in their own voice and speak to themes about overcoming adversity, connecting with their community, and empowering the next generation to achieve their dreams. While the Jordan brand narrative is no longer directly revolved around Jordan himself, this campaign is authentic to the brand by upholding these themes and values that Michael shares. For the next generation of consumers who value individuality, this

⁴⁴ Meredith, Julie. “Q&A: Nike's Maria Civitate Shares Tips for Omni-Channel Success.” Dash Hudson Blog, Dash Hudson Blog, 1 Apr. 2021, blog.dashhudson.com/omni-channel-marketing-leadership-air-jordan/.

⁴⁵ Francis et. al

campaign offers them an avenue to find where their original spirit fits into the brand.

The slogan that the campaign is centered on is “Impossible Alone. Possible Together.”⁴⁶

Rather than having one idol that the brand is centered around, Jordan is now offering individuals a place amongst a community.



(Jordan. Unite. Digital Advertisement. 2019.)

In 2020, with the release of the docuseries *The Last Dance*, consumers from all generations were afforded the opportunity to re-live or be introduced to the legacy of Michael Jordan and the Jordan brand. The ability for the brand to connect to consumers on various digital platforms is the way that current Jordan brand president Craig Williams says that the brand “stay[s] engaged in an authentically relevant way with younger fans.”⁴⁷ The current strategy of the Jordan brand encompasses the legacy of what Jordan stands for while also focusing on “[furthering] associations through

⁴⁶ “Unite.” Air.Jordan.com. Accessed May 9, 2021. <https://air.jordan.com/unite/#intro>

⁴⁷ Newcomb, Tim. “Jordan Brand Using Community Engagement To Connect With Next Generation.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, June 1, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timnewcomb/2020/06/01/jordan-brand-using-community-engagement-to-connect-with-next-generation/>.

product, [by creating] a mixture of on-court product driven by performance and off-court offerings meant to connect with culture.⁴⁸”

In reference to the off-court offerings meant to connect with culture, the Jordan brand has recently re-focused the company to focus heavily on the community impact. On the Jordan.com website, the brand's mission statement is as follows: “Jordan Brand isn't just what you wear or how you play. It's the confidence to find your voice, own your style, and change the game both on and off the court. Driven by the legacy of Michael Jordan, we inspire the world to **achieve greatness on their own terms.**” In order to continue to inspire the world to achieve this greatness, the Jordan brand has leveraged its authentic voice to engage consumers through social activism within its community.

The Unite campaign has been integral in engaging the next generation of consumers, but it is only one of the ways that the brand is working to make an impact within its community. The brand has also made a commitment to the Black community. Through channels such as Jordan Real Talk, a podcast dedicated to bringing to light issues for the Black community and potential solutions, and the Wings scholars' program which promotes diversity and inclusion by providing educational scholarships for BIPOC youth, the brand continues to provide support for its community. Not only is this incredibly important, as the citizens of the United States continue to fight to dismantle racist and inequitable systems in society, but it also another way for the brand to engage consumers in topics outside of product offerings. Digital Natives, are “more

⁴⁸ Newcomb

racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations” and they “want corporations to ‘take a stand’ on issues.”⁴⁹ According to consumer research conducted by McKinsey&Company, seven out of ten [Digital Natives] say it is important to defend causes related to identity, so they are more interested than previous generations have been [...] in matters related to race and ethnicity.”⁵⁰ Showing support for the Black Community and engaging authentically with the next generation are ways in which the brand will be able to continue to sustain its success moving forward.

This is new territory for the brand that has previously avoided outwardly supporting social causes. In the past, Jordan has been faulted for his a-political stance during his career. A popularized comment, and joke, made by Jordan during his career, that “republicans buy sneakers too,” has widely been used to criticize Jordan’s choice to not make any outward political statements early on in his career. But Jordan, as the smart marketing savvy person that he is, knew that by remaining apolitical, he would be allowed to capitalize on a multitude of brand partnership opportunities. In the commercials of previous Jordan brand campaigns, none of the commercials included political themes in order to appeal to a broader consumer base. Before Jordan, no black athletes had been afforded the same opportunities that Michael had in his career in terms of brand partnership opportunities. It was the wholesome, family-orientated, narrative that the brand marketed for Jordan that enabled him to achieve such immense success. After staying authentic to the core brand values, fearlessness, dedication, family, and culture, the brand can now focus on social change.

⁴⁹ Francis et al.

⁵⁰ Francis et al.

As Barack Obama is quoted saying in the fifth episode of *The Last Dance*, “Any African American in this society that sees significant success has an added burden,” and “ a lot of times, America is very quick to embrace a Michael Jordan, or an Oprah Winfrey, or a Barack Obama, so long as it’s understood you don’t get too controversial around broader issues of social justice.”⁵¹ It was Jordan’s ability to remain uncontroversial that aided in his original success, but now that the Jordan brand has been built, the critical mass of marketing that established the brand identity has paved the way for the brand and others to now take a political stance. For example, LeBron James’s brand has also become heavily involved in racial justice. In a quote from The Undefeated article *We Finally have Answers about Michael Jordan and ‘Republicans buy sneakers, too,’* writer Jesse Washington says that “James’ economic freedom was won by Jordan. James’ leverage over NBA owners, his global reach, his billion-dollar lifetime Nike contract-all that stands upon the unprecedented success of Michael Jordan.”⁵²In this way, Jordan and the brand narrative has paved the way not only for the company to now focus more on creating social change, but also for other athletes to do the same.

⁵¹ The Last Dance . Netflix , 2020.

⁵² Washington, Jesse. “We Finally Have Answers about Michael Jordan and 'Republicans Buy Sneakers, Too'.” The Undefeated. The Undefeated, May 4, 2020. <https://theundefeated.com/features/we-finally-have-answers-about-michael-jordan-and-republicans-buy-sneakers-too/#:~:text=In%20the%20ESPN%20documentary%20The,a%20bus%2C%E2%80%9D%20Jordan%20said.>

In Conclusion

After almost four successful decades in the market, the Jordan brand's longevity is regarded as an anomaly and has attracted a lot of attention for its ability to continue to capture the interest of generation after generation of consumers. It is thanks to its parent company, Nike, for taking a chance on a rookie Michael Jordan, in tandem with Jordan's success in the NBA that the nation was originally captivated by the brand. While the marketing efforts on behalf of the brand established an association of Jordan brand products with excellence on and off the court, these efforts would not have been nearly as impactful as it has not been for Jordan's incredible performances in the NBA to substantiate those claims. As the spokesperson and man behind the brand, Jordan's skill, determination, and charisma have come to be associated with its products. Through heritage branding and the utilization of reimagined retro models, the narrative behind the brand has become intertwined with Jordan's career and persona. These marketing efforts established a critical mass of marketing and legacy for Michael Jordan that serve as a platform for the brand to continue to grow and expand moving forward.

By capturing the essence of Michael's talent and career, the brand's marketing is able to communicate his legacy through the Jordan brand family, as a means to connect with future generations, without having to utilize him as the face of the brand. Commercials in the early 90s with Mars Blackmon created the charismatic Michael Jordan character and established the connection between Michael's athletic prowess and the Jordan brand shoes. Commercials in the 2000s transitioned Michael from being the face of the brand to the nation's coach that would call upon the next generation of young athletes to become legendary themselves. While the current target demographic

may not have been able to watch his career play out, a new generation of Jordan brand athletes now serve as a point of connection for these consumers to resonate with. Rather than centering the brand on one man, the Jordan brand now speaks to and for a community of athletes and consumers, united by their desire to achieve greatness. The critical mass of marketing that was established throughout the years provided a consistent and clear brand message that authenticates the brand identity. As a result, the brand now has a platform it can use to connect with new consumers and enact social change in its community without the fear of negative repercussions for future successes. The Jordan brand's ability to simultaneously evolve and remain consistent in conveying its Michael Jordan's legacy, from which it derives its core brand identity, have allowed it to achieve incredible brand longevity thus far and will allow it to continue to do so in the future. Critically examining the evolution of Jordan brand marketing efforts can serve as a basis for other major brands who may need to adapt when their center is no longer relevant and resonate with its target consumers.

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