The Sports Hero Narrative: How online media create stories around athletes and influence fan perception

A study about the role and importance of narrative in creating a sports hero and the way digital media influences audiences

Master's Thesis
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Preface

This study's goal is to gain insight in the role and importance of storytelling in sports as it is created by media. The idea behind this research is to not only explain how media create "modern-day heroes", by applying narrative elements, but also to examine the way media influenced fan perception of the athletes.

In order to research how media created narratives around athletes, the narratives of LeBron James and Oscar Pistorius were analyzed as they were created by the media and how they were reflected among the fans. I would like to thank both athletes for all the work that they have put in, allowing media to frame the different events of their careers, and, in turn, helping me gain insight on this topic. Further thanks I would like to extend to my supervisor, Marco van Leeuwen, for further increasing my interest in the matter and for putting up with me during the process of writing this study.

Lastly, I would like to also thank my friends, who were able to help me on the matter with discussion, thoughts, and feedback.

Contents

Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to gain insight in the way media create narratives around sports athletes. In today's world sports are multi-billion industries enjoying great success and attention. Thanks to media, sports are able to reach virtually anyone. Top performers are celebrated by fans as modern-day heroes. It is the interest of this report to see how media contribute to this otherworldly image that athletes have and how they influence the way fans perceive sports performers.

Narrative adds meaning to events, and by using it media are able to deliver a message of the event in an interesting way that will help fans understand things. By applying narrative, media shape athletes to be heroes, not unlike ancient times when stories were spread far and wide of someone's strength or agility. These stories continue to spread and eventually transcend time and enter the domain of the mythic.

The thesis looks into the structure of narrative and the different parts, necessary to creating a narrative. Narrative helps understand complex issues in a familiar and easy to understand way. The mythological narrative and more specifically, the heroic monomyth of Joseph Campbell are also of great interest in this study.

In order to research this, a case study approach was selected. Two cases were selected, LeBron James – NBA superstar, and Oscar Pistorius, the Paralympic runner who was able to participate in the Olympics. These two cases present a good opportunity to study how media helped shape narratives around these athletes during the different stages of their careers. Along with the cases, a media content textual analysis will be performed on articles gathered from popular media to see how they were creating this narrative. In order to see if media were influencing fan opinion of athletes, netnography was used to determine if what fans posted online corresponded to what media were writing.

"All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely players"

"As you like it", William Shakespeare

Introduction

Narrative is a term used in literature theory, literature critique, as well as in philosophy and semiotics. A narrative can be understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole (Elliott, 2005). Telling stories is an essential aspect of human nature and we are the only creatures that tell stories. Storytelling as an act has been going on since man learnt to speak. Early narrative forms like myths, legends, fables, etc. were passed down from generation to generation, transmitting and showing the knowledge and wisdom of earlier people. A look into different mythologies, like Greek, Norse, Egyptian, etc., shows that the typical theme of such forms of stories was centered on natural forces, gods and goddesses, heroes and monsters (Jordan, 1997).

Narrative has a broader set of functions – it should not be thought only as a means to entertain, but also as a way to communicate morals, cultural and political perspectives. With the rise of the network society and the state of today's connected world, applying narratives can be done in almost anything. Sport is no stranger to this concept as will be shown further ahead. The competitiveness of different sports, having two teams face off against each other, can be reminiscent to ancient times, when heroes would measure their strength, the victor being made famous through sculptures or stories.

It is mainly through the narrative that media create that athletes become larger-than-life entities, celebrities, role-models, etc. Mediated sport often involves a mixture of several elements including sounds, text, and images. According to Kennedy & Hills (2009), these images, words, sounds and symbols are woven together into narratives which are understandable for the audience. Whannel (2002) similarly states that sports stars are constructed profiles, created with the help of well-established practices.

Aim of the study

The main aim of this study is to gain insight into the role of storytelling in sports in creating modern-day heroes. What we will look at is how online media create stories around athletes, elevating them to heroes, and in turn influencing fan perception of the athlete. We are interested in how media frame the events around athletes so that the audience is primed to react in a certain way. Thus we formulate our research question:

Figure 1. Michael Jordan statue in front of the United Center

How do online media create narratives around athletes? To what extent do these narratives influence public opinion about the athletes?

Questions that arise from this main question include – Why do media need to create narratives? Why is the mythological narrative suitable? Which steps are most important in creating these narratives?

Past research has looked into the relationship between media and sports. The focus, however, has mainly been about engaging fans with a healthier lifestyle or engaging them with the team brand. Research into the creation of narratives by online media and influencing sports fan perception of athletes is limited.

In order to answer our question, we will take a look at some cases of famous sports figures and the way that stories were developed and further enhanced by online media in the course of the athletes' career. We will look into the case of NBA superstar LeBron James, revered by many to be the best basketball player on the planet. The second case that we will analyze concerns the South African Paralympics and Olympics runner Oscar Pistorius, who broke boundaries by competing in the Olympics, despite his disability, and inspired millions of people only to be convicted of homicide later on.

These cases will show us the sports hero stories as they were created by internet media. We will look into how online media framed events around athletes and, possibly, using narrative, influenced their perception of the athletes. To answer the research question, however, we also need to analyze fan reaction and perception of these stories. With this in mind, we present the following conceptual model that we will test in the course of this report:
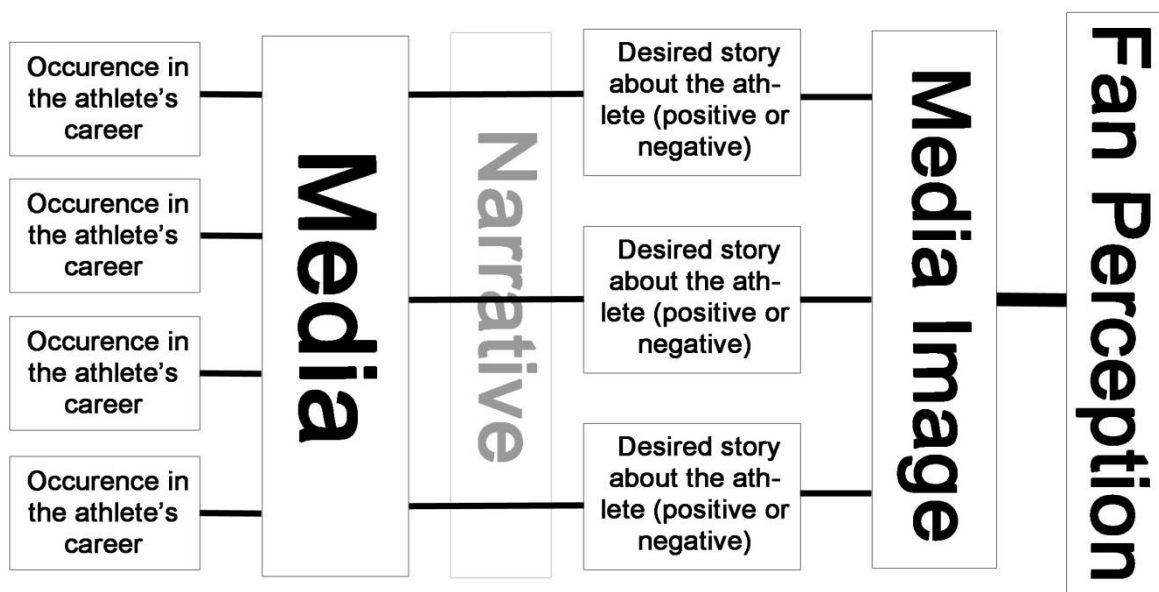

Figure 2. Conceptual Model

The model highlights how media take an occurrence in the athlete's career and, using narrative, transform it into a desired story, mostly either positive or negative. The number of desired stories that are created by the media form a core media image of the athlete which then influences fan perception.

Outline of the report

In the following chapter we will continue with an overview of the concept of narrative. Definitions of narrative as well as its structure will be discussed in this chapter. We will use theories by Chatman, Barthes, and Polkinghorne to give a basic layout of the theory of narrative. We will continue with a look into the mythological narrative, where we will try to understand what myth is along with a look into the main types of myths, which are commonly used in narrative. The chapter will conclude with a look into the relationship between media and sport, the sports narrative, and the sports star.

The third chapter concerning methodology will provide an outlining of the cases that will be examined and discuss the methods of research. Argumentation for the selection of each case in relation to our topic will also be provided there. Argumentation for the selection of articles and targets of the netnographic research will be explained in this chapter as well.

The fourth chapter of this study will go into the cases in detail, examining the development of the narrative around the athletes and how reporters framed stories in an attempt to influence fans. In this chapter we will also present results from our netnographic research to see if the fans' opinion to these stories was corresponding to the image created by media. The chapter will conclude with a discussion and analysis of the results.

Lastly, the study will finish with conclusions that were reached in the course of writing this report and reflecting on the importance of the subject, as well as recommendations for further research.

Theoretical background

Narrative

Narrative is the primary form by which meaning is added to human experience. According to Polkinghorne (1988), narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organizes human experience into temporally meaningful episodes. Examples for narrative include personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and everyday stories that are used to explain our or other's actions. To understand a narrative is not only to follow the unfolding of the story but also to recognize in it a number of "strata", to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative is not only to pass from one word to the next, but also from one level to the next (Barthes, 1975, p.243). Barthes compares it to the structure of a sentence – a phoneme becomes meaningful when used in a word, and the word – when used in a sentence. Similarly, a narrative is structured on several levels, coming together to create a meaningful story. Levy-Strauss (1955) as well stated that the meaning cannot be found in isolated elements, but in the combination of these elements.

Polkinghorne (1988) distinguishes three realms of the human existence – the material realm, the organic realm, and the mental realm – all related to one another in the human existence. It is not merely the consciousness and the other unique parts that are newly evolved in the human organism that produce the human realm, but rather the interaction between the material, organic, and meaning structures (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Human encounters with reality tend to produce meaningful and understandable experiences. Narrative is then fundamental in linking human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite. Polkinghorne (1988) gives the following example:

> *"The action of a narrative scheme joins the two separate events 'the father died' and 'the son cried' into a single episode, 'the son cried when his father died'. Seeing the events as connected increases our understanding of them both – the son cares for his father, and the father's death pains the son". (p. 13)*

The definition that Polkinghorne (1988) gives for the term narrative is narrowed down to "the kind of organizational scheme expressed in story form". Narrative, however, can also refer to the process of creating a story, to the cognitive scheme of the story, or to the result of that process – also called "stories", "tales", or "histories" (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative is a constant part of our lives. It fills our cultural and social environment. When we are children we are read fairy tales. When we grow up, we watch motion pictures and read novels. We create narrative descriptions about ourselves when revisiting our past actions, and we give storied accounts that make sense out of our behaviour or that of others. For the importance and pervasiveness of narrative, Roland Barthes (1975) writes:

"There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings, stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds." (p. 237)

Plot

Every story has to have a plot. According to Polkinghorne (1988), the plot of the narrative is the organizing theme that identifies the significance and the role of the individual events. The goal of the plot is to unite the individual events into a schematic whole by highlighting the contribution that each event makes to the development and the conclusion of the story. Without a plot, the events of the story would appear as separate and the meaning would be severely limited.

Polkinghorne (1988) further elaborates that a plot is able to weave together a complex web of events to make a single story. The plot is able to take into account the historical and social context in which the events took place and to recognize the significance of unique and novel occurrences (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Story Events

An event in the narrative sense is either an action or a happening. Both bring about a change of state. Actions are the changes of state brought about by an agent or one that affects a patient. If the action is plot-significant, the agent or patient is called a character (Chatman, 1978). The events of a story are usually seen as forming the "plot". The general actions that a character or other existent can perform are nonverbal physical acts (like running), speeches, thoughts, and feelings, perceptions, and sensations. A happening, however, is some kind of predicament that is not caused by the character; the character is the affected and not the effector.

Events also have a certain sequence. This sequence is not simply linear but also causative. According to Chatman (1978), our minds inadvertently seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. The following example explains this: take these two sentences:

- "The king died and then the queen died";
- "The king died and then the queen died of grief";

The first sentence presents a mere chronicle of events, while the second sentence, Chatman (1978) states, is a "plot", because it adds causality. He further discusses that unless specifically instructed, readers will tend to assume that "the king died and then the queen died" presents a causal link that the king's death has something to do with the queen's (Chatman, 1978). The two sentences differ narratively in the degree of detail on the surface, but at a deeper level both present a causal element.

Events in narrative not only consist of sequence and connection, but also have an apparent logic of hierarchy. Some events are on a different scale than others, so we differentiate between major and minor events. Barthes (1975) sees these major events as an action which opens (or maintains, or closes) an alternative directly affecting the continuation of the story, calling them nuclei. Chatman (1978) has a similar idea, calling these events kernels, which he states are narrative moments that

give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. An example of such a kernel, Chatman (1978) gives with Achilles and the taking of Briseis by Agamemnon in Homer's Iliad – Achilles can either give up Briseis or he can refuse.

Minor events, which Chatman (1978) calls satellites (translating from Barthes' catalyse), are on the contrary, not so crucial to the plot. They can be removed without any danger of disturbing the overall logic of the plot. The function of satellites is that of filling in, elaborating, completing the kernel; they form the flesh on the skeleton (Chatman, 1978).

Existents

Existents are characters and settings, or objects and persons performing, undergoing, or acting as a background for them. Aristotle stated in Poetics, that characters are not even essential to a successful tragedy. It is important to note that he distinguishes between "characters" and "agents", which he describes as people performing actions, while "character" comes later (Poetics, chapter II). There can be fables without characters, according to Aristotle, but there cannot be characters without fables (Barthes, 1975).

Characters exist and move within a space which exists abstractly at a deep narrative level. The setting "sets the character off" in the usual figurative sense of the expression; it is the place and collection of objects "against which" his actions and passions appropriately emerge (Chatman, 1978). The main function of the setting is to contribute to the mood of the narrative. Let us take for example the movie Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. In the beginning we find Luke Skywalker in the desert planet of Tatooine. The desert signifies the boredom and loneliness that the hero feels, yearning for adventure. Later on, when he begins his adventures, the settings (the Mos Eisley Cantina for instance) become more dangerous, thus corresponding to the elevating tension of the narrative.

Discourse

So far we explained the different parts of the story. Narrative, though, contains two parts – the story and the discourse. Discourse according to the formalists (Erlich, 1980) contained two parts in it – the narrative form itself and its manifestation. The manifestation is connected to the specific medium of transmission of the narrative, while the narrative form has to do with the specific way the story is told.

This look into the theory behind narrative shows us the elements and tools that reporters might use to frame a story in a certain way. Modern-day sports are a good place to add narrative, because the whole structure of a certain sport fits in with a narrative structure. The typical plot is who will win the championship at the end of the season, while all the teams, players, coaches, etc. are existents within this plot. The struggles or rivalries of teams during a season can be seen as story events.

Mythological Narrative

After establishing a basic understanding of the term "narrative" along with its basic components, we will turn our attention to mythology. The reason that mythology is of particular interest to us, is because it is one of the oldest forms of narrative. Also mythology is rich with stories of heroes and gods, which is associated to our interest of sports stars, them being the modern-day equivalent of "heroes". Firstly though, we must establish a basic understanding of myth.

The first scientific theories about myths arose in the second half of the 19th century. Mythology was seen as an old and no-longer necessary way of thinking; an antique duplicate of modern science (Segal, 1997). Humans could not come up with unbiased natural laws, so they started explaining these phenomena by assigning them souls and characters, also known as Animism (Segal, 1997).

Twentieth century theories about myths stopped seeing mythology as an opposition to science. Carl Gustave Jung tried to understand the psychology of myths and stated that people had unconscious psychological forces that he called archetypes. He thought that the similarities in myths from different cultures proved the existence of these universal archetypes (Oldmeadow, 1995).

Claude Levy-Strauss (1955) thought that myth was much like language. It differed from language, because it had its own characteristics, which made it a language by itself. The uniqueness of myths, Levy-Strauss (1955) believed, was its ability to translate a magical narrative from one language to another. Myth, according to him, was the same thing as language, but somehow also different from it. Differing from poetry, which when translated suffered serious distortions, the mythical value of myths remained preserved (Levy-Strauss, 1955). The substance of myths does not lie in its style or syntax, but in the story which it tells.

What is a myth?

According to Alan Dundes (1984), myth is only a form or a genre of folklore. This form is shown through a sacred narrative, explaining how the world and humanity have reached their present day state. Roland Barthes defines myth as a deformed and falsified history. He believes that myth distances us from reality. In this way we remodel history based on our own ideologies and we create mythologies (Kaftandjiev, 2007).

The definition that Joseph Campbell (1988) gives is contradicting the one by Barthes:

"Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry; it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth - penultimate, because the ultimate cannot be expressed with words. It is beyond words, beyond pictures, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known, but not told".

Thinking in mythological terms, as Campbell (1988) states, teaches one to recognize the positive values in what appear to be negative moments and aspects of life.

Birth of myths

Myths can arise in several ways. They can be inspired by historical events or people, they can be allegories for natural phenomena, or they can be explanations of rituals. In this sense, myths are used to transfer religious or idealized experiences, create patterns of behaviour, or just teach.

One of the earliest theories claimed that myths were distorted accounts of historical events (Honko, 1984). This theory, named Euhemerism, claims that the gods of ancient Greece were inspired by legends of great human beings, who were raised to a status of gods after their deaths. A similar concept can be seen with past great athletes, whose achievements in a particular sport in their era elevated them to a higher status, modern-day players often being compared to these "legends" (Kareem Abdul-Jabar, Pele, Johan Cruyff, etc.).

The first scientific theories of myth state that it is old and unusable way of thinking – an antique double of modern science. According to Sir James Frazer (1922), man starts with a belief in magic laws, which he eventually abandons for a belief in gods, which is then in turn abandoned in favor of scientific laws. This is true in that specific context; however mythology has an important role in the context of modern society, where it has found a place in different modern discourses, for instance books, movies, sports, etc.

Main types of myths

Here we will give an account of the main types of myths, based on the work of Jordan (1997). These types of myths can be seen across different mythologies of different cultures and are also sometimes inspirations for the creation of a new narrative.

1. Creation myths – This type of myths explain the creation and ordering of the world. A popular idea across different mythologies is that Chaos was all that existed before the world was created. Then a singular being comes forth and creates light from the darkness (Jordan, 1997). Cosmogony myths lay the foundation for other myths within a culture.

2. Destruction myths – In contrast to the previous type of myth, we have the destruction myths, which typically refer to the creation of death and, on a wider scale, the end of the world. (Jordan, 1997). Famous examples of eschatological myths can be found in Christianity with its Apocalypse, Norse Mythology with its Ragnarok, etc.

3. Messiah myths – this type of myths is often connected to the destruction myths. At the basis of the messiah myths, lies the idea of a cyclical world of birth, death, and birth again. Usually there is a hero who arises to lead humanity against the forces of evil and usher in a new era (Jordan, 1997).

4. Heroic myths – The hero, in its meaning in Greek mythology, signifies the son or descendant of a god and a mortal. They usually are revered for their immense strength, as well as their bravery and noble behaviour (Kaftandjiev, 2007). The function of the hero in mythology is typically to maintain the order set by the gods and to help the mortals. In most myths, heroes bring some gift to humanity, such as Prometheus and the fire, or

they help them against some sort of danger – Theseus and the Minotaur, Hercules and the Hydra, etc.

5. Conflict myths – Humanity has a need for a constant conflict between good and evil, light and dark, which is evident in mythology. Earlier sagas depict conflicts between man and animal (Sioux myth about how ravens became black). With the evolution of cultures come conflicts between gods and natural phenomena or monsters, while later on conflicts come between the gods themselves (Jordan, 1997).

Messiah and Hero myths are particularly attuned to the sports world. They present a relatively simple way to build a narrative around an athlete – young stars are often seen as the future saviors of their respective teams, while other athletes are celebrated as heroes for their "unique" skill or strength.

The heroic monomyth

The heroic monomyth was according to Joseph Campbell (2004) the basis of any heroic story. This is important, because athletes are, as we stated above, modern-day heroes and the stories around them have similar traits to the heroic monomyth. Campbell's monomyth has 17 steps, spread across 3 stages – departure (separation), initiation, and return. The first stage, departure, has 5 steps that are a part of it, which mainly introduce the hero and set him on the course for adventure (Campbell, J., 2004). In the second stage of the heroic monomyth – the Initiation – the hero is cast into the new world or on his quest, trying to acquire the Ultimate Boon (Campbell, J. 2004). The last step in the heroic monomyth – The Return - requires that the hero shall bring the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess back into the kingdom of humanity, where this boon may be redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds (Campbell, 2004). We will turn our attention to only several of the steps included in these stages, which we deem relevant to the sports hero narrative:
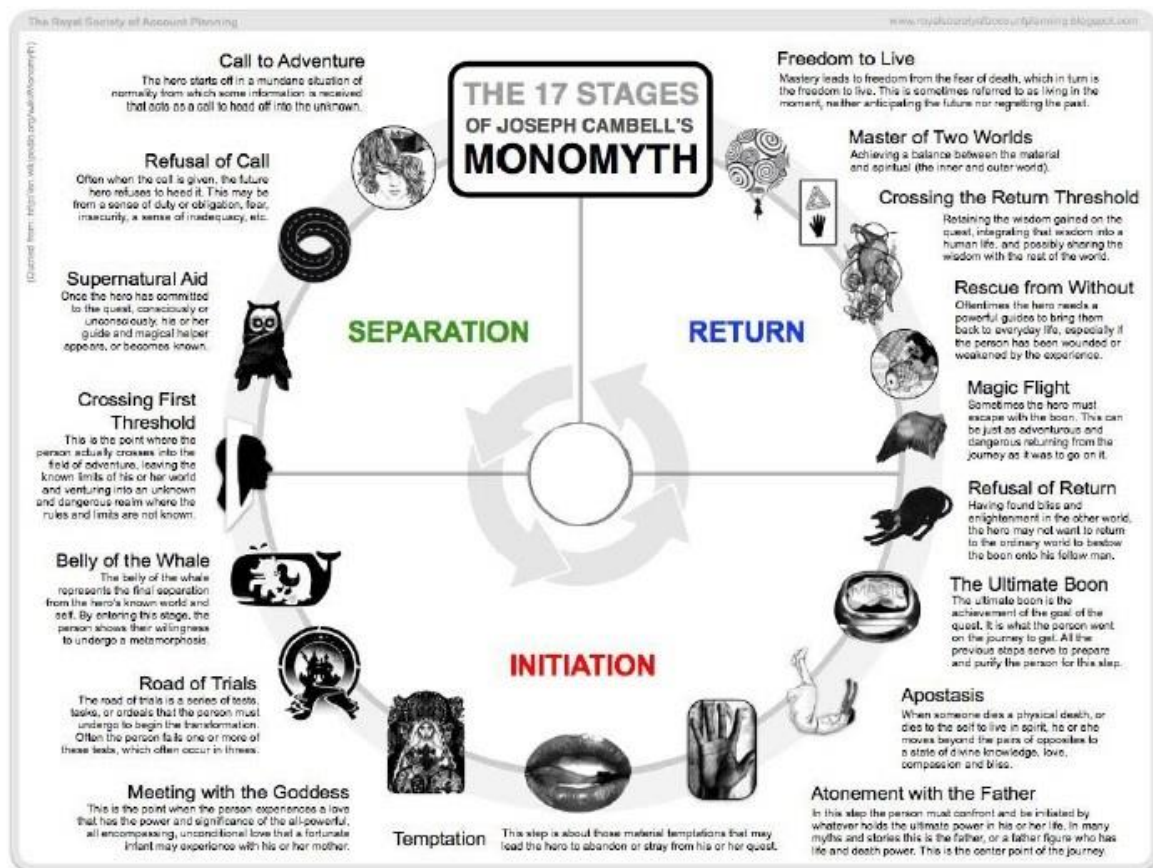
Figure 3. The Stages of Campbell's Monomyth

1. The Call to Adventure - the first stage of the mythological journey, it signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown (Campbell, J., 2004). The hero may undertake the adventure of his own volition (Theseus and the Minotaur), or he may be put in that situation by some malignant agent (Odysseus). In the case of the sports hero, this is where it all begins, when the future star is drafted or starts competing professionally and is joining the elite ranks.

2. Crossing the First Threshold - With his destiny guiding and aiding him, the hero eventually come across the "threshold guardian", a being at the entrance to the zone of magnified power that the hero must enter. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe (Campbell, 2004). Similarly in the sports

world, this step is where the athlete is confronted with new and different experiences, which are exclusive to the elite ranks.

3. The Road of Trials - Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials (Campbell, 2004). In sports terms, this is the step where the sports hero has to overcome hardships and challenges to prove himself.

4. The Ultimate Boon - It is the goal and objective of the quest (Jason and the Golden Fleece). All the steps before serve to prepare and purify the hero for this part of the monomyth, since in many myths the Ultimate Boon is something transcendent (elixir of life, holy grail, etc.)(Campbell, 2004). Often times, athletes are judged based on their accomplishments, i.e. how many championships they won, or how many accolades they accumulated. Modern-day athletes prove themselves by reaching the ultimate boon (championship trophies, MVP trophies, number of All-Star selections), becoming celebrated after acquiring it.

5. Freedom to Live – This is the last step in Campbell's monomyth. It comes after the hero has returned with the boon and has become the Master of Two Worlds (returning from a death state, proving the hero himself has become something transcendent). The mastery of the two worlds leads to freedom from the fear of death, which is in turn the freedom to live (Campbell, J. 2004). In sports, after the star has acquired the ultimate boon, he is freed from the pressure of attaining this achievement. Thus, usually, when his career ends, he joins the annals of history as a past hero.

Interesting here is also the framework of the sporting hero narrative by Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers (2011). They distinguish 3 phases:

1. The rise – the typical rise to prominence, for instance an important victory or the achievement of something great;

2. The fall from grace – the fall of the hero, becoming the victim of something, for instance an injury or drug problems;

3. The resurrection – the chance to defend and explain mistakes related to their "fall" or for instance the return to action from injury;

By looking into the mythological narrative, we are trying to see how athletes are elevated to higher individual level, transcending the team context. By using mythological narrative, mostly represented by the heroic monomyth of Campbell (2004), star athletes emerge and are elevated higher, becoming role-models, larger-than-life entities, and modern-day heroes. The 13 steps in the heroic monomyth along with the main types of myths we have outlined, provide an easy and proven way of framing stories around the athletes.

Sports and Media

Now that we have concluded our look into narrative and the mythological narrative, it is time to turn our attention to the modern day by focusing on the relationship that sport and media have, as well as the use of narrative by media. Sport is a product of society and bears its imprint in every aspect of its manifestation (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). International sporting events that attract the world's media are intrinsically connected to the global political and economic organization of society. The bodies of sports people are branded with the logos of global corporations, transferring the athletes' qualities onto consumer goods for mass consumption. The communication and media networks enable these connections to be made and broadcast around the world (Kennedy & Hills, 2009).

Barthes (1972) states that myths are a kind second-order signifying system; a kind of message found not just in oral speech, but in a range of things like photography, cinema, and sport. He further suggested that the effectiveness of myth is that it does not need to be deciphered or interpreted to be understood – for myth to have power, it must seem entirely natural, and if the ideological message is evident, it ceases to work as a myth (Kennedy & Hills, 2009).

Kennedy & Hills (2009) give an example of the relation between media and the sport with a cover of Sport Monthly in 2003, which featured the football player Paul Gascoigne:

"*Gascoigne's body as shown on the cover of the magazine was noticeably thinner than it had been at other times during his career, yet it was not the athletic, hard body associated with sportspeople at the peak of their careers. In fact, his stomach appeared concave beneath his prominent ribcage, giving the impression that he was sucking it in. Altogether, these*

*signifiers created a picture of vulnerable masculinity, a body sensitized to
the media's appraising gaze".*

Mediated sport often involves a mix of sounds, text, and images. Media theory suggests that these images, words, sounds and symbols are woven together into narratives for the audience to understand (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). Kennedy & Hills (2009) further state that mediated sport can have an immediate impact on the audience, and any or all of the sounds and images may generate affects, whether the audience is consciously aware of them or not.

Sports content allowed media to reach a very desirable and otherwise difficult-to-reach audience, while the publicity and money from media, in turn, helped sports become consistently more profitable and culturally important (Raney & Bryant, 2006). This relationship has reached such a great height that sport and media are no longer discussed as separate institutions. A consistent, loyal, and lucrative audience, which is less able to avoid advertising and promotional messages and is tied into an emerging global popular cultural and consumer mainstream, is one of enormous value to the media (Raney & Bryant, 2006).

According to Whannel (2002), sports writers draw on preexisting formulaic narratives to mold the raw material of the sport world into stories designed to appeal to the readers. Whannel (2002) further explains that star performers are characters within a set of narratives. The media reconstructs a sporting contest as a story, identifying athletes as heroes and/or villains, developing a plot and creating drama and interest (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). Sport narratives are often organized around a central question – Who is going to win? Prematch stories usually generate an interest in upcoming events, while postmatch ones recount explanations for the outcome and implications for the future (Kennedy & Hills, 2009).

Sport provides the mass media with many precious opportunities. The core audience of sports fans is a reliable 'commodity' that is usually profitably sold to advertisers, and on occasions a much larger and less committed audience can be drawn in to take part in the great national and international spectacles which generate their own momentum of interest through their sheer size and cross-media visibility (Rowe, 2004).

The importance of mediated sports in contemporary global society is undeniable. Teams and players have the power to unify and/or divide communities and nations (Raney & Bryant, 2006). They also generate billions in advertising revenues and merchandising sales. Another thing they are able to do is arouse feelings of euphoria and despair among their loyal fans (Raney & Bryant, 2006).

Online media is an important tool in establishing a brand in today's world. Computer programs, software, video games, websites, social media, etc. all fall under the broader term of online media. Social media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities, and individuals (Kietzmann et al., 2011). No longer are organizations seen as faceless money-hungry corporations. Thanks to social media, businesses can build trust and interact personally with the customer base. Social media is a cost-effective tool for companies to develop their brand. The personal experience that social media offers is invaluable to organizations, helping to publicly demonstrate the customer service level of the company, as well as enrich the relationship with its customers. Social media can also help organizations gain valuable insight into what people think or expect.

When it comes to sports, things aren't much different in this aspect. Online media helps spread awareness about a brand, brand in this case being either a team or athlete. Social media helps in engaging the fans by creating a personal experience for them, when they feel that they converse with an athlete directly. Be it compliments or criticism, social media helps in creating a sense of normality to the otherworldly image that athletes possess.

The Star and the Media

Stardom is a form of social production in which the professional ideologies and production practices of the media try to win and keep the attention of the audience by linking sporting achievement and personality in ways which have resonances in popular common sense (Whannel, 2002). According to Whannel (2002), the heightened drama of major sport events often involves three features associated with the structure of heroic narrative – separation, trials, and return. This corresponds to our earlier statement regarding the heroic monomyth in relation to modern-day sports. The image of stars is also a social product – the result of a set of institutional

structures, production practices, representational conventions and the relations of production and consumption (Whannel, 2002). Representations of stars are, however, heavily conventionalized; those who construct profiles of stars do so with the help of well-established professional practices (Whannel, 2002). Whannel (2002) also tells us that, as the media sports industry grew in power and the representations of sport assumed a greater cultural centrality, media representations of stars acquired a greater power to shape perceptions. Meaning emerges precisely from the productive representational practices of the media, and not simply from the inherent characteristics and qualities of the star that is being represented (Whannel, 2002).

The Sports Hero

According to Whannel (2002), Hopes are still invested in the ability of sport to produce heroic role models, and a failure to fulfill these hopes feeds into a critique of sport as having become corrupted. The heroic role can be taken to imply exceptional courage and self-sacrifice and involves the idealization of a man of superior qualities or virtues (Whannel, 2002). Whannel (2002) further states that heroic tales provide a fund of metaphoric allusion, and that the representations of sport draw upon the connections to the traditional and the legendary that such allusions facilitate. Heroism is a vital aspect of human behaviour and human endeavor and the idea of the hero is at the center of our cultural thinking – heroes are not only enjoyable, they are necessary (Calder, 1977).

Narrative in Sport Media

Sport media, as we said, is the result of the mutually beneficial relationship between the media industry and the sports industry. The importance of sports as media content programming and software is further demonstrated by its key role in the diffusion of the newer media technologies (Bellamy, 2006). Bellamy (2006) further states how spectator sports became an important component of popular culture with the rise of electronic media. There is little doubt in the increasing importance the media place on sports and sports-influenced content (Bellamy, 2006). Bellamy (2006) lists 8 reasons sports is a key programming exemplar for media:

1. Sporting events typically are presented live with the attendant element of real-time suspense.

2. Unlike other "live" events, sports are regularly scheduled and continuing like other entertainment series, which makes them cost effective compared to many other forms of programming.

3. There are minimal barriers of language and literacy for sports viewers.

4. Even those who are not fans have a generally benign attitude toward sport. Very few people are sports haters/evaders, especially when viewing in groups.

5. Sports are so culturally ingrained that they can have direct and powerful media effects such as civic or even national celebration, that most programming cannot. The connection to such celebration and emotion is highly desired by advertisers and programming outlets.

6. Sports telecasts offer many opportunities for zap-proof advertising.

7. Sports telecasts are widely regarded as an excellent forum for effective promotion of other television promotions.

8. The long-term marriage of television and sports is so well-established that the industries are increasingly integrated in effect or in fact. Vertical integration (control of programming by the program outlet) is a key desire and strategy of major media firms.

Storytelling in sports often serves as a vehicle to describe a much larger story, for instance about culture or humanity. The Harlem Globetrotters serve as an example of global superstars in a time of profound racism, but through their sport, the players were able to convince audiences to see them for something more than just the colour of their skin.

In sports, media creates narratives in an attempt to sell its product – the product being the athletes themselves. The more controversial the athlete, the more attention he or she brings these media outlets. The creation of these narratives is further enhanced by the similarities modern sport shares with the realm of mythology.

Sport is an organized and ritualized activity, which relates it to the domain of the mythic (Whannel, 2002). Important to this mythic are the concepts of time and space. Time can mean the moment when a memory was created (Jordan's final shot with the Chicago Bulls to win his 6th championship for instance). Such moments are instantaneous at the time of happening and immortal in the space of memory –

constantly retold, reprinted and rescreened (Whannel, 2002). Space, on the other hand, is related to the place of the arena – a special space, outside and separate from the normal flow of existence. Mythic power attaches itself to particular places, for instance Wembley, Camp Nou, Madison Square Garden, etc., which creates a specific resonance and aura (Whannel, 2002).

Time and space are, however, mediated through media representation, and it is in the media that the crucial interface between the space and time of the sporting event, popular memory, the reproduction of sporting capital and audience pleasure takes place (Whannel, 2002). According to Whannel (2002), sports coverage is dominated by stars, which, as the bearers of the process of narrativisation, play a central role in the strategies employed by media organizations to win and hold audiences. Whannel (2002) describes 13 narrative functions in this process among which:

- The emergence of a striking talent;
- The accomplishing of an extraordinary feat;
- Public celebration;
- Secondary circulation of star image;
- Displays of arrogance;
- A failure to deliver;
- Public doubts;
- Erratic behaviour;
- Public scandal;
- Failure;
- The hero redeemed by extraordinary performance;
- Forgiveness;
- The power wanes;

Through the media, sport stars are turned into familiar figures, household names, but also into heroes and mythologized icons (Whannel, 2002). By using this narrativisation, the media makes events meaningful, and as such, careers of sport stars are told and retold, and become inscribed in popular memory, so that even those who never saw these stars compete are familiar with the tales of the stars' achievements (Whannel, 2002).

Priming and Framing

Priming is a nonconscious form of human memory concerned with perceptual identification of words and objects. It refers to activating particular representations or associations in memory just before carrying out an action or task (Psychology Today). Priming can also refer to a technique in psychology that is used to train a person's memory both positive and negative ways (Psychology Today).

According to priming theory, media images stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members (Straubhaar, LaRose & Davenport, 2013). In a similar way, stories around athletes that are created by media can be designed to stimulate the fans in a certain way. Sheufele and Tewksbury (2007) state that by making some issues more salient in people's mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues. This is not only limited to politics.

Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This does not mean, of course, that most journalists try to spin a story or deceive their audiences. In fact, framing, for them, is a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue, given the constraints of their respective media related to news holes and airtime (Gans, 1979). Frames are valuable tools that help present relatively complex issues, efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

What fans get out of watching sports

Individuals experience psychological and sociological needs in their daily lives that they expect media content to address and fulfill. These needs vary between individuals of different ages, gender, stages of life, etc. (Raney & Bryant, 2006). The motivations for audiences to watch mediated sports are separated in three categories – Emotional motivation, Cognitive motivation, and Behavioural and Social motivations (Raney & Bryant, 2006).

Most of all, media consumers state that they view mediated sports because of the emotional rewards they receive from doing so (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Examples of the kinds of emotional motivations that fans have include: Entertainment motivation (experiencing enjoyment or "the thrill of victory"), Eustress motivations (excitement,

arousal), Self-esteem motivation (a victory by a favorite team can lead to increased self-esteem and confidence), and Escape motivation (escape from day-to-day stress) (Raney & Bryant, 2006).

Watching sports is not, however, only associated with emotional activity, rather, a lot of fans tune in with cognitive stimulation in mind. Cognitive motivations are separated into two kinds – Learning motivation and Aesthetic motivation (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Among examples of learning motivation are those that watch to increase the knowledge that they have about their favorite team, becoming more knowledgeable about sports as a whole to increase enjoyment from watching them, to become walking sports encyclopedias, etc. With Aesthetic motivation, fans are drawn in by the performance or beauty of the sport, regardless of the sport (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Naturally, sports like figure skating or gymnastics are more attuned to this aesthetic, seeing as how the athletes are scored on their performance. However, fans can find this aesthetic element in a fancy dribble in basketball, or a marvelous goal in football, or even a hockey player's movements with the puck.

With that we come to the last type of motivation for watching mediated sports, namely the Behavioural and Social motivations. Among this type of motivation we can distinguish several examples. Release of pent-up emotions, regardless of win or lose, is a reason some people watch sports (Raney & Bryant, 2006). According to Raney & Bryant (2006), the expectation of experiencing emotional release drives viewers to sports programming. Sports programming presents people with an opportunity to interact with each other on the basis of the sport they are watching. This is a type of social motivation that Raney & Bryant (2006) call Companionship. This is, however, used to mean temporary companionship between viewers and it should not be mistaken for the next type of social motivation called Group affiliation. Fans of a certain team share a larger sense of belonging, which can be felt on different levels (Raney & Bryant, 2006). On a grander scale, World Cups and Olympics, which pit nations against each other, generate an increased national pride based on this sense of belonging. Related to this concept, but on a lesser scale, is the Family motivation. Watching sports can be motivated by the desire to spend time with one's family or to have something that is shared across the family (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Sometimes this motive has to do with tradition as well, for instance in the United States it is popular to spend Thanksgiving Day watching the annual NFL

Thanksgiving game. The last motive that Raney & Bryant (2006) distinguish has to do with economics. This is the case when individuals are motivated to watch sports because of some financial investment, namely gambling.

Methodology

In this part we will give a brief explanation of the method that is going to be used in this study. Furthermore we will explain the reason for the choice in such a method and why it suits the study.

In order to answer our research question, we first have to describe the actual events or occurrences in an athletes' career. This we will achieve with the help of a case study and two cases. The reason for selecting a case study approach is that a case study research is useful for testing whether theories or models actually work in real-life contexts. According to Patton (2002) the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Indeed the way we have chosen for this study is what Patton (2002) refers to as extreme or deviant case-sampling. This approach focuses on cases that are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way, for instance cases with outstanding success or notable failure (Patton, 2002). In order to research the cases, we will use media content analysis. Content analysis is used to study a broad range of 'texts' from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research to the narrative and form of films, TV programs and the editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines (Macnamara, 2011). There is no simple relationship between media texts and their impact, and it would be too simplistic to base decisions in this regard on mere figures obtained from a statistical content analysis (Macnamara, 2011). Because of this, for our research, we will use a qualitative media content analysis, which will help us establish the tone of the articles. According to McKee (2004), textual analysis is the central methodology; however there is still no straightforward published guide as to how to do it. According to Newbold et al. (2002), sampling for media content analysis comprises three steps:

1. Selection of media forms and genre;
2. Selection of issues or dates;
3. Sampling of relevant content within those media;

The first case that will be examined is the career path of the NBA superstar LeBron James. This case was chosen because it is a prime example of an athlete of great fame, often regarded as the best basketball player of our age, whose whole path in the NBA has been structured like a storyline. Even before he turned

professional and signed with an NBA team, he was being propelled to stardom, signing endorsements with popular brands like Nike and Coca-Cola and being hailed as "the next Michael Jordan". At first he was hailed as the future savior of a fallen franchise, destined to bring glory to the city of Cleveland. Later on in his career, LeBron left Cleveland to play for another team and his image turned into that of a villain. After winning a couple of championships, LeBron James returned to Cleveland in the hopes of winning a title for his hometown, leading to another dynamic in the perception of this athlete. What makes this case particularly interesting for us is the change from different roles – chosen one, superstar, villain, and the returning hero. What we are interested in is the way media reported these events and how it framed the events of the athlete's career. What we will look into is the way that media reported these events in an attempt to create a specific narrative.

For our research we have chosen to use internet articles as our main media form, as well as some documentaries. Genre is, logically, restricted to sports news. Relating to the second point – selection of issues and dates - we searched for articles from the same time periods as the different events of the athletes' careers. Finally, articles with relevant content to our study were chosen. The sample selected for our content analysis consists of articles from ESPN.com, NBA.com, Cleveland.com, etc. ESPN.com is one of the most popular sports sites with an estimate unique monthly visitor count of 80 million people currently. NBA.com was selected because it has a direct relationship to the case and registers an estimated 8.2 million unique daily visitors (NBA.com, 2015). These sites were logical choices based on the topic of this study, either being directly tied to the subject or being extremely popular.

The second case that we will turn our attention to is the one of Oscar Pistorius – the Paralympic runner, hailing from South Africa, who became extremely popular with his desire to compete at the Olympics despite being a double leg amputee. He was eventually allowed participation and became the first double leg amputee to participate in the Olympics, becoming an inspiration to millions. What is mostly interesting about this case is that it is still in development. On the 14th of February 2013, Pistorius fatally shot his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. He was later found guilty of culpable homicide and sentenced to jail. Using the sporting hero narrative of Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers (2011), we see that this case is at the end of the second step – the fall from grace. In a similar fashion to the first case, we are

interested in the way media reported, first his rise, and then his fall from grace and how they created a narrative around him. For this case our main media form is also internet articles. We will not restrict genre to sports in this case, because Pistorius' case had a deeper societal meaning than the case of LeBron James. Similar to the first case – the selection of issues and dates is correspondent to the events of the career of Pistorius. The media content analysis sample for this case includes articles from BBC Sport, The New York Times, The Guardian, Time, etc. BBC.co.uk receives around 5.3 million unique daily visitors, ranking in at number 89 in the world (BBC.co.uk Info, 2015), while The New York Times is ranked 98th in the world with 57 million unique visitors each month (The New York Times Media Kit, 2015) meaning both are popular enough to be a logical choice. Time Magazine as well is one of the most popular magazines in the world, its special editions Time Person of the Year and Time 100 always being of great importance.

For our second part of the research we will need to analyze fan opinion and determine to what extent it corresponded to the online media-created perception of the athlete. In order to analyze the fan opinion, we will use netnography to study how fans perceive the sports hero. Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002). The reason behind this choice of research is that it allows us to reach people, regardless of nationality, that are engaged with the stories around these athletes. Social media has become a crucial part of modern society and is used by not only individuals but also by companies and businesses. In today's culture, social media has become a vital part of communication. Thus, with netnography will enable us to reach online communities that are engaged with the respective sport and are the focus of the social media image of the athletes.

So for the case of LeBron James, our target consists of the Facebook page of the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team, the forum of NBA.com, comment sections beneath the articles, and other basketball related online communities engaged with this athlete (youtube.com; reddit.com, etc.). The reasons for selecting these communities are various. Facebook is the biggest social network and has 968 million daily active users (Facebook company info, 2015). It also allows us to find online communities specifically engaged with the subject we are interested in. Similarly, we

have decided to use NBA.com, because it consists of an online community of the type that suits this study. Youtube.com has over a billion users and videos on the topic allow us to examine opinions of fans engaged with the athlete (Youtube stats, 2015). Reddit.com is a site consisting of so-called subreddits on various topics, having over 8,000 active online communities in 2014 (redditblog.com, 2014). The site also registered 71.25 billion pageviews that year. All three sites are among the most popular ones on the internet – facebook.com and youtube.com coming in at numbers 2 and 3 respectively, while reddit.com landed on number 36 (Alexa stats, 2015). Similarly, we will analyze fan perception in regards to the second case, by using netnographic research and observing the changes. Facebook.com, reddit.com, and Youtube.com are again the prime targets for gathering data for fan opinion.

Our research approach is a qualitative one, so we are mostly interested in the qualities that are prevalent in online media stories. For this reason our netnographic sample consists of 25 posts per phase (100 in total) for the case of LeBron James and 25 per phase (50 in total) in relation to Oscar Pistorius. The reason for this number of posts and phases is precisely because we are interested in qualities and not quantities and that will allow us to examine fan perception of the different parts of a narrative. This number of posts (25) is enough to receive a general impression of the qualities of the athlete that are most commonly encountered among fan opinion. The posts were gathered among the various online communities as well as comment sections underneath the articles. Such an approach will give us the opportunity to see if fans mirror the online media opinion without being directly influenced by the discussed articles.

Results

In this chapter we will explain the cases of LeBron James and Oscar Pistorius. Because we are interested in qualities that online media accentuate for these athletes, we will need to describe the actual occurrences in detail, so we can also use them in relation to the media stories to gain better insight. We will begin with an account of the occurrences and stories in the athletes' careers and how these stories were reported by the media. After analyzing the aforementioned media articles, we will present the results from our netnographic research and see how they measure up to the image in the media.

Case 1: LeBron James

The first case we will look at is the one of LeBron James, widely regarded as the best basketball player on the planet. LeBron James was born in Akron, Ohio on the 30th December 1984. His mother, Gloria, gave birth to the future superstar at the young age of 16, while the father, Anthony McClelland - an ex-convict, had no desire to raise a family and left. Showing a talent for basketball at a young age, leading his high school team to 3 titles in 4 years, LeBron came under the media spotlight as the "promised child" of basketball. This is where our analysis of the media stories around the athlete will begin. What we are interested in at first are media stories during the period when LeBron James was finishing high school and was set to become a professional basketball player. Grant Wahl, a writer for Sports Illustrated, said at the time: "When you are a skeptical sports writer you try and nitpick and say to yourself that this kid isn't as good as everyone says he is. And yet he was that good" ("More than a Game, 2008).

The first article we are going to analyze is from ESPN.com and is from the year 2002. The article examines the 17-year old LeBron James and is entitled "Don't praise King James just yet". From the title we already see a part of the narrative that was starting to form around the young athlete. The nickname King James, which media often used, relates the player to royalty and royalty is always connected to power and fame. In Greek mythology, the kings of different states were often descendant from the gods and were blessed with superhuman qualities. In the beginning of the article the young player is called a phenom. The word is shortened from phenomenon which originally meant fact or occurrence, but later took the meaning of an extraordinary occurrence (Online Etymology Dictionary). According to

the author, LeBron has been crowned by many the next "Air Apparent" (ESPN, 2002). This is an extremely powerful statement in the basketball word. First of all this is a play on words with "heir apparent", meaning the next in line to inherit the property of another. The power in the statement lies in the use of the word "Air", which in the basketball world is usually related to Michael Jordan (famous nicknames include His Airness, Air Jordan, etc.), widely regarded as the best player to ever play the game. Just mentioning someone in the same sentence with Jordan is usually big praise, but LeBron is seen as someone who will inherit Michael Jordan's position as the best in the game. Overall the article has praise for LeBron's physical abilities, but also reflects on the young athlete's undeveloped skills as opposed to his fame regarding those skills, but we see how the player was already treated as something extraordinary.

Also worthy of note is the cover of Sports Illustrated from the year 2002. LeBron James, being 17 at the time, became the first person from Akron, Ohio to be on the cover of the famous magazine. The title states "The Chosen One". This is again a part of the mythological narrative, where heroes are typically chosen by gods or some other entity to defeat a monster or do some other heroic deed, saving mortals or bringing balance in the process. The words "Chosen one" make it
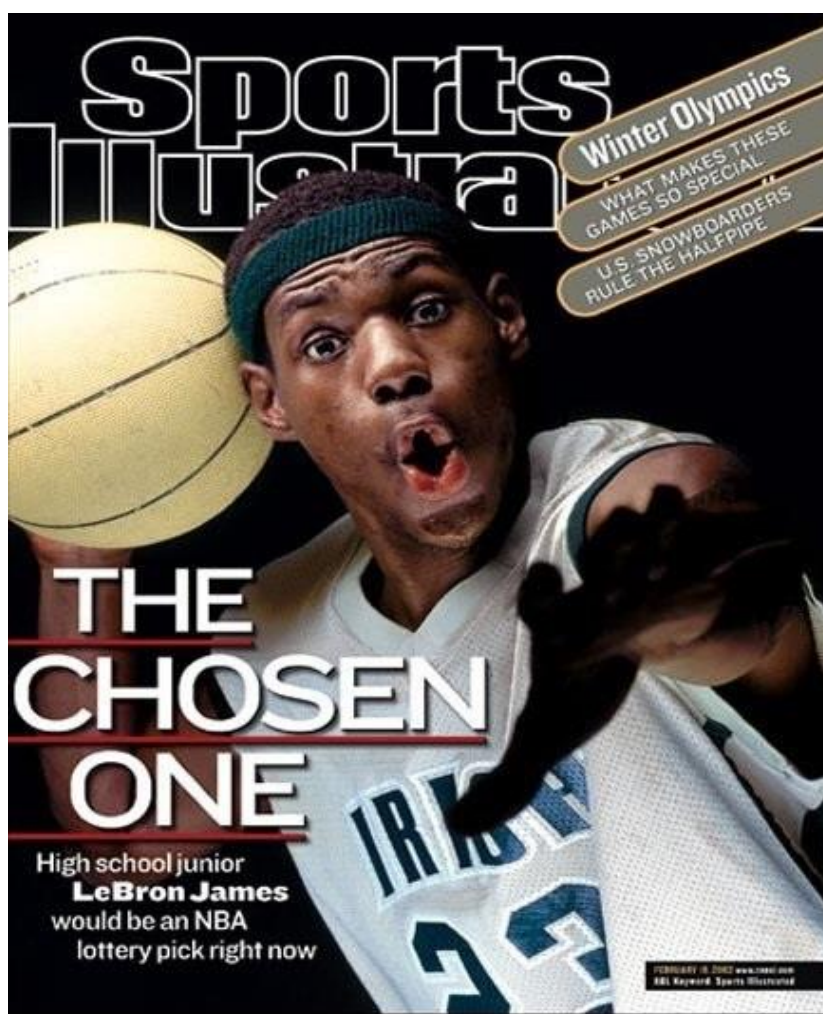

Figure 4. LeBron James SI 2002 Cover

seem as a higher power has selected the young athlete and he has a destiny to achieve, not unlike the heroes of old folktales.

Another article from ESPN chronicles LeBron James' performance in one of his marquee games as a high school player when his team upset the number 1 ranked high school in the country. The article states "LeBron James isn't a myth, glossy magazine cover or urban legend. He's the real deal." Again this is related to the notion of myth and legend, along with the connotations that these words bring. Hall of Famer Bill Walton, who casted the game which was broadcast live from coast-to-coast, is quoted in the article saying he came with high expectations and being impressed more than he could have ever believed (ESPN, 2002). This praise from a proven player, one in the Hall of Fame no less, comes as a form of consolidation of this narrative that is being built around the young athlete. The article mainly depicts LeBron in a positive light, using testimonies of other famous names (Vitale, Smith), besides Walton, that praise James' abilities, using words like "awe", "unique", "best I've ever seen", etc.

In the first few examined articles the narrative being built around LeBron James is still in its infancy one might say, but it is intriguing still that such attention and focus is centered on such a young player. History has given multiple examples of young players displaying tremendous skill, only to fail to live up to the expectations in the professional league (Darius Miles, Eddy Curry, Kwame Brown for example). This might be the reason why narrative elements are used a bit sparingly in the aforementioned articles, but we can still see how media were framing the events around this high school player, creating a narrative. This point in James' career can be seen as the first phase of the narrative – the chosen one, or the promised child. From the reviewed articles we can isolate several keywords – "Abilities" and "King James" - which will later help us in our netnographic research.

Before we reach the seconds phase of our article review, we need some context on LeBron's development as a player which will help us better understand the dynamic of the narrative. On June 23rd 2003, the Cleveland Cavaliers (prior season record of 17 wins to 65 losses) draft LeBron James as the overall first pick in the NBA draft. LeBron's first season in the league resulted in a 35-47 record for the Cavaliers. This record improves every season and the Cavaliers become a top-tier

team, reaching the NBA Finals in 2007 on the back of LeBron James. During these seasons James becomes more and more prominent, earning multiple all-star game selections, becoming the youngest player to be named to an All-NBA Team, and also the youngest player to be named MVP of the All-Star Game. In 2007, the Cavaliers entered the playoffs as the second best team in the Eastern Conference and eventually reached the Eastern Conference Finals. During these Eastern Conference Finals vs the Detroit Pistons, LeBron James scores 48 points to help his team take a 3-2 lead with an 109-107 double overtime victory. This game is quite interesting to us, because it represents an important moment in his career where his superstar image reached its apex.

NBA.com (2007) called it a "historic performance", praising LeBron's "late-game brilliance". The article also contains several pictures, all of which of LeBron. He is shown either dunking or laying up the ball, but on almost all of the photographs, defenders look helpless (NBA.com, 2007). Cleveland.com about LeBron's performance: "What LeBron James did Thursday night in the Eastern Conference finals was not Jordanesque. It was Mike to a max not even he reached" (NBA.com, 2007). This is again a really strong statement with a narrative element. Jordan's status as the most overwhelming power in basketball is rarely disputed. Here we have a claim that raises James above that level. Any comparison to Jordan is typically taboo in the basketball world, so the fact that LeBron has been compared on many occasions became a component of his hero narrative in itself. USA Today stated that King James played beyond his royal nickname and that he refused to lose the game. Here we see a similar statement as the previous one but in a different way (USA Today, 2007). Kings are strong and powerful, but they are not gods or demigods (like most mythological heroes). James, however, is said to have moved beyond kingship, so logic would lead us again to a heroic or godly comparison. The statement that he refused to lose the game is also contributing to this mythological status. Basketball is a team game and it is rarely up to one individual to decide things. Saying that LeBron refused to lose makes him seem all-powerful, much akin to a heroic figure whose will cannot, by default, be contested.

ESPN.com wrote: "…the way he persevered despite a crummy coach and a mediocre supporting cast…even how he made that game-winning layup look so damned easy. Physically, LeBron overpowered the Pistons" (ESPN.com, 2007). Here

LeBron is again compared to the rest of his team as to make him shine even more. The Pistons were at the time, one of the best teams in the NBA, having a good coach and a stable team with good players that helped the team make 5 consecutive appearances in the Eastern Conference finals, reaching the NBA Finals twice, and emerging victorious as NBA Champions in 2004. On the other side we have LeBron James, who manages to defeat them despite having a bad coach and weak surrounding players, who are called supporting cast, thus further directing attention to LeBron James as the main hero of the story. This comparison again consolidates this narrative of the all-powerful LeBron. Keywords for this phase of the narrative that we highlight are "Best" and "Jordan" because of the increase in comparisons between James and Jordan.

The Cleveland Cavaliers reached the NBA Finals in 2007 where they lost 4-0 against the Spurs, LeBron unable to win his first title. One thing critics often at the time pointed out was the lack of a championship from LeBron James. Even with the media frenzy and the further development of his superhuman persona, LeBron never managed to win a championship with the Cleveland Cavaliers. In the NBA, great players are defined by championships and James had zero, often being the go-to argument against the comparisons to Jordan, who finished his playing career with 6. Having failed to secure a championship in 7 years with the Cavaliers, LeBron James decided to seek it elsewhere and on July 1st 2010 signed with the Miami Heat. In Cleveland, James was branded as a traitor for leaving the city, while in other cities, except Miami, he was seen as a villain for abandoning his city. This is the part in LeBron's career where the narrative that media were building did a 180-degree switch, effectively ending the superstar phase of the narrative and ushering in the third phase of LeBron James' narrative – the villain.

The New York Daily News proposes a new nickname for the player for instance "Le Fraud", "King Lame", etc. (Cleveland.com, 2010). Sports Illustrated writes that LeBron doesn't have the heart of a champion and that he took the easy way out (Cleveland.com, 2010). The overall notion of the article on Cleveland.com (2010) is creating a barrier between Miami, loving that LeBron James will play for them, and the rest of America that declares James a traitor. That can be seen in the photographs included in the article, one showing fans in Miami rejoicing, while the other showing a cutout of LeBron James thrown in the garbage by people in Ohio.

The New York Times declare the Miami Heat an evil empire, again creating a barrier by showing people in Cleveland burning jerseys of LeBron James (The New York Times, 2010). Most interesting of all is the open letter that Cavaliers' owner Dan Gilbert wrote in reaction to LeBron's decision to play elsewhere. In his letter, he calls James' actions a cowardly betrayal, calls him "The Self-titled former 'King'" and blames LeBron for the Cleveland "Curse" of not winning a professional sports championship since 1964 (ESPN, 2010). All these statements counteract the previously built hero narrative, by spreading these negative traits; the hero is declared a coward, a liar, cursed, evil, etc. By definition the Hero cannot possess such characteristics, so these qualities which were repeated by media helped change the image of LeBron to that of a villain. Much like they initially built the hero image, the media this time created a villain image around the athlete.

The Q score is an index of the familiarity with and attraction to a brand, company or celebrity (Meriam-Webster). The typical athlete usually has a 15% positive and 24% negative score, according to Vice-president Henry Shaffer. Circa January 2010, LeBron James had a 24% positive and 22% negative score, which is the highest the company has seen. After his move to the Miami Heat, LeBron scores a 14% positive and 39% negative making him the sixth most-hated athlete in the United States (CNBC, 2010). Keywords from this phase of the narrative include "Traitor" and "Coward".

After 4 years with the Miami Heat, LeBron won 2 titles and reached the NBA Finals 4 times. Being a free agent again, he decided to return to the Cleveland Cavaliers. The media responded by entering another period of reforming the image of the athlete. Cleveland.com states that King James has "reclaimed his throne" (Cleveland.com, 2014). The way this statement is worded makes it seem more like he was chased away, rather than betraying the city, thus entering the last phase of the narrative around LeBron James - the return of the prodigal son. The pictures included in the article also seem to reflect the welcoming nature of the article. James is either shown performing his signature talc toss when he previously played for Cleveland or in the embrace of teammates.

The title of the Sports Illustrated exclusive "I'm coming home" is also a part of this reforming. As opposed to words like "coming back" or "returning", "home" refers to a special place. Looking back at the heroic monomyth of Campbell (2004), this signalizes the return of the hero. The hero went on his adventure, recovered the boon and has proven himself, and must now return with the boon to his homeland.
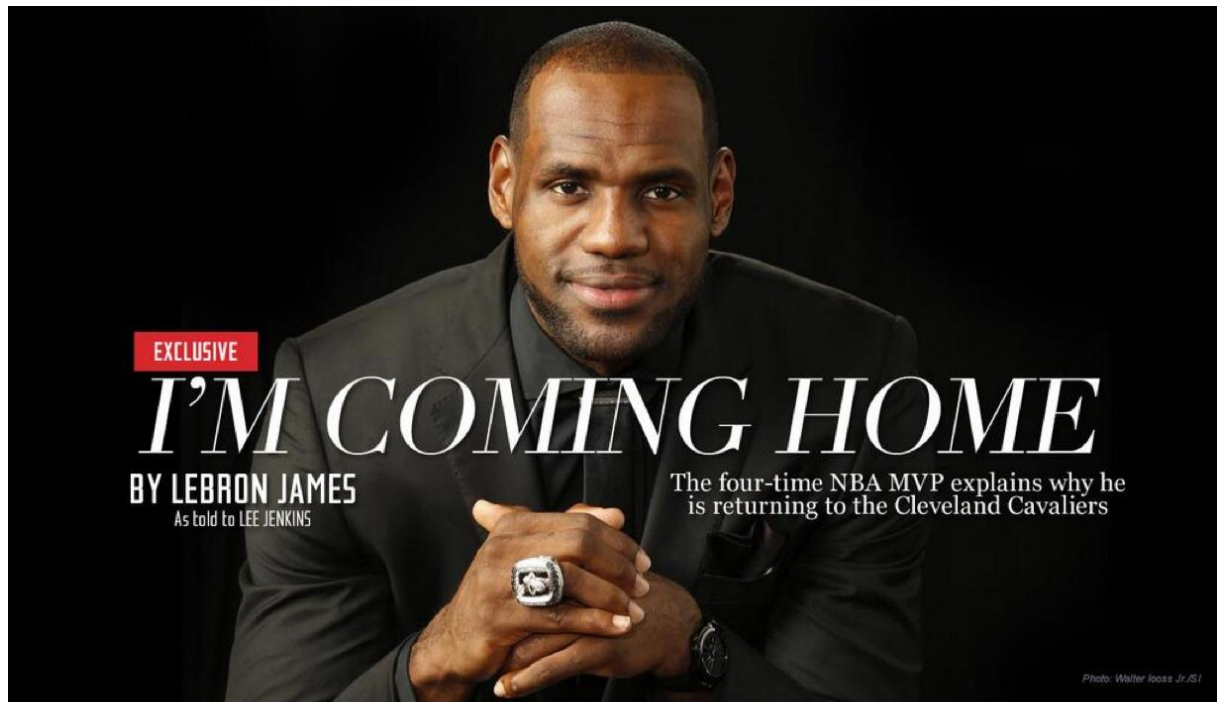

Figure 5. LeBron James SI Exclusive 2014

Cleveland.com notes how James has returned older, wiser, and as good as ever (Cleveland.com, 2014). Here this corresponds to the return of the hero and the end of the heroic monomyth, where the hero has completed the journey, reached enlightenment and is ready to live out his days, while new heroes pick up the mantle. The author echoes this at the end by saying "Basketball's greatest prodigy isn't a kid anymore, but he's better than ever". Cavsnation.com (2014) similarly puts special attention on the word "home", specifying several times how James is "going home", "going back home" or "always thought about home". The article review from this phase presents us with keywords such as "Home", and "Mature".

A consequence of the heroic narrative of LeBron James can also be seen in the fact that colleges are recruiting his 10-year old son. According to Yahoo! Sports (2015), the younger LeBron popping up on the radar of college coaches is a testament to his famous name, his prodigious talent and to the recruiting process starting younger and younger.

Case 1 Netnography

The next part in our study has to do with finding out if the way these events were framed influenced fan perception of the athlete. In order to do this we have used netnography to examine the way fans in the various online communities perceived the player. The data was gathered from posts on facebook.com, the NBA subreddit on reddit.com, youtube.com, and the comment sections underneath the various articles reviewed.

As we saw from our article analysis, the narrative of LeBron James featured various twists and turns. In the beginning, the attitude in the media towards him was positive, praising his great talent, physical ability, and potential, while also pointing out areas that he has to work on. The keywords we distinguished in this phase were "Abilities" and "King James". Of the gathered posts for this phase, 12 were praising LeBron's abilities, 8 were using the nickname "King James", while the rest were comparing him to Michael Jordan. "Extraordinary physical abilities, you almost feel sorry for the little guys he's playing against", one person writes, while many others associate him with the word "beast", which is often a great compliment in the sports world. "Beastly"; "Ridiculous…King James is going down in history!!!"; "LeBron IS just raw talent. He was born to be king" several people write. The "King" nickname can be seen in most of the posts of fans – "The most dominant High School player ever. King James all the way!"; "Lebron is the king, and the king deserves a throne". Another interesting point which we analyzed in the articles and find in the fan reactions is the comparison to Michael Jordan. "It would be a good matchup one on one, Jordan has a better shot, but I would say that LeBron is stronger...it wouldn't be easy for Jordan", one fan writes, while another states that "LeBron James is a beast at basketball, he is going to the top with Michael Jordan and the rest".

After LeBron started playing in the NBA and continued performing at a high level, media, as we saw, became more and more praising of James. Out of the 25 posts, 13 were calling James "The Best" – "The best high school player ever. The best NBA rookie ever. And maybe top 5 NBA player ever right now"; "LeBron is the best player to have ever graced any court…He is the best player on the planet Earth! Hands down!". 9 of the posts contained comparisons, mostly to Michael Jordan, which is, in a way, a consolidation of the "Best" keyword. "The best performance ever. This is coming from a Michael Jordan fan", a user comments regarding the 48-

point game of LeBron's career. Another person says: "I was too young to witness MJ in his prime, but this is personally the greatest individual performance I've ever witnessed. As a kid I was just blown away at what I was watching". The comparisons, however, splinter the fans in two, ones praising LeBron, and ones who react negatively to these comparisons.

When LeBron James decided to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers, the media were quick to label him as a villain and critique him for taking the easy way out. From the article review we saw that the popular media opinion was that LeBron was a traitor and/or a coward. In this phase of the narrative, out of the 25 posts gathered 15 had to do with "coward" and "traitor". "This is what happens when the whole country feeds a teenagers ego…by the time he's 25 it's so [expletive] out of control that he thinks he can get away with anything, like saying [expletive] to his home city on national television before bolting to greener pastures"; "…People in Akron and Cleveland supported him since high school, and were rabid, die-hard fans throughout his seven years with the Cavs. And THIS is how he thanks them? Talk about an [expletive]…"; "LeBron James is a coward and should get nothing but misery. Cleveland forever hates you. I know I do" are examples of the public reaction to "The Decision", as it became known in the sports world. People started demonizing LeBron and logically the positive comparisons to Michael Jordan stopped – "He'll probably get his ring(s) like he wants, but he will never be seriously compared to MJ"; "What it shows is that LeBron is not MJ. MJ made the players around him into stars…LeBron didn't do that. LeBron had a damn good team for several years and won nothing. MJ had a damn good team for several years and won title after title…". Another person writes: "…He just completely ruined himself. Went from being the next Michael Jordan, to just being a good NBA player…I hope LeBron never wins a championship". It was not only LeBron who felt this villain role, but his entire new team. "I'm sorely tempted to get NBA League Pass this year just to root against the Heat 82 times", one redditor writes, while another users says that the best thing that can happen is the Heat's jet going down in a ball of flames. Another popular opinion was that James is no longer the king of anything – "LeBron needs to get rid of the phony "King" title he gave himself, he won't even be king on the Miami Heat…".

With LeBron's imminent return to the Cleveland Cavaliers, media, as we saw, were once again switching his image. Keywords in our article review were "home"

and "mature" which was mirrored by some of the fans. "Welcome back LeBron…I knew he had Northeast Ohio in his heart."; "Yeah baby!!! The Cavs are back – Kyrie, Wiggins and now King James" are examples of the fan reactions to the news. A good example of the sway in public opinion is what one person writes: "I'd say I was probably up there with the biggest LeBron haters on the planet for the last four years and I definitely didn't want him to return…The essay completely diffused my rage…All the right things were said…Welcome home LeBron". From the 25 posts gathered about this phase, 12 were welcoming him home, calling him the best, or praising his maturity. While some of the fans were happy at his return, others were still not so forgiving – "Le Choke coming back will guarantee that there will be so many playoff failures". "Worst player of all time"; "Best Player my [expletive]" are examples of the remaining scorn some fans hold towards LeBron James. Overall, the effect of the new "mature mentor" role, however, can be seen among fan perception quelling most fans' anger towards the athlete – "I am so happy to see James come back home to Cleveland. His letter truly shows his maturity and I admire him for what he said"; "I can't believe it. I am so happy I actually have tears in my eyes…I read his words, they are amazing. The beautiful thoughts of James…All I can say is the amount of respect I have for LeBron James the man has far surpassed my respect for LeBron James the player. It's one of the greatest, most thoughtful acts ever by a sports personality".

Case 2: Oscar Pistorius

The second case we will look at is the case of Oscar Pistorius, the famous Paralympic and Olympic runner. Oscar Pistorius was born on 22nd November 1986 in Johannesburg, South Africa. He was born with fibular hemimelia (absence of a fibula in each leg) forcing doctors to amputate both his legs between his ankles and knees when he was 11 months old. He attended Pretoria Boys High School where he played a number of sports, including rugby, water polo, Olympic wrestling, etc. He started running in 2004 as rehabilitation to recover from a serious knee injury sustained while playing rugby. He participated in the 2004 Paralympics where he raced against single below-knee amputees. He reached the final in the 200m race where he posted a world record time of 21.97 seconds. The next years he spent participating in various Paralympic and able-bodied competitions, dominating the Paralympic events. Having little opposition in the Paralympics, Pistorius set his sights

on competing in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. This goal of Pistorius is where the first phase of his narrative began to take shape and where our article review will begin.

Due to his previous accomplishments, Pistorius became known as "The fastest man on no legs", a nickname which became popular with media. Typically the words "fast" and "no legs" should exclude one another concerning a runner. Precisely because of that, however, the nickname has something extraordinary to it, which is why media use it. Dailymail uses the nickname as the title to their article from 2007. The article starts off

Figure 6. Oscar PIstorius in Time Magazine

directly explaining Pistorius' extraordinariness – "In a groundbreaking race; first time in history; Pistorius is now achieving something revolutionary" (Daily Mail, 2007). It continues by echoing these statements, calling Pistorius a "groundbreaking hero". The article then further develops this narrative by defining the villains of this story – the IAAF. Due to concern that his artificial limbs give him unfair advantage over able-bodied athletes, the IAAF would decide if they would allow him to participate in the Olympics (Daily Mail, 2007). "Never before has an amputee athlete been able to claim a place against the world's elite" continues the article. This statement not only puts Pistorius on this elite level, but it states that he claimed it further enhancing this hero image. In the photographs accompanying the article, Pistorius is shown either running on the track or smiling at the camera, presenting him as a strong and happy person, things that not everyone associates with a disabled person.

In 2008, Time magazine included Pistorius in its annual list of the world's most influential people, putting him in 3rd place in its Heroes & Pioneers section. The author also states that Pistorius is on the cusp of a paradigm shift in which disability becomes ability, disadvantage becomes advantage (Time, 2008). This reminds readers how Pistorius has overcome challenging hardships to reach this level. Also worthy of note is the photograph attached to the article, showing Oscar looking down

at the camera, naked above the waist with a backdrop of clouds and a seemingly heavenly light shining behind him.

"The Fastest Man on No Legs" is also the title of a 2009 documentary about Pistorius and his quest to participate in the Olympics. The documentary also shows elements of the hero narrative. The film explains how his disability and his desire to fit in an able-bodied world as a child, made him into an "extraordinary athlete" (The Fastest Man on No Legs, 2009). By being introduced to his signature carbon-fibre blades, he was given wings, the documentary states, creating perhaps a reflection of the Supernatural Aid step in the heroic monomyth of Campbell (2004). The movie in its entirety explains the beginnings of the athlete and how he grew into the "icon for disabled people". It also explores the clash that Pistorius has with the IAAF and the lingering argument whether his prosthetics afford him any advantage over able-bodied athletes.

In a 2011 GQ article entitled "Men of the Year 2011: Superhuman: Oscar Pistorius", the athlete is called "history's greatest para-athlete". His story is called inspirational and an example of the "limitlessness of human spirit". Besides the obvious title referring to the heroic narrative, his battle with the IAAF is called "epic" and "Pyrrhic", both relating to the mythological narrative. The author calls Pistorius a symbol and that is precisely how media would want it – an inspirational symbol showing their audience the purity and very definition of sport (GQ, 2011). Also worthy to note is the photograph in the article – Pistorius is shown in a kind of wild environment with trampled grass and missing trees. Oscar is, however, standing tall in tight-fitting clothes sportswear, showing off his muscles and looking down at the camera. This image of a strong individual standing among the barren environment further reinforces the statements made in the article.

Figure 7. Oscar Pistorius in Gentleman's Quarterly

The IAAF eventually decided to fund independent tests to see if there is any advantage. After two days of tests along with 6 able-bodied athletes at the Cologne Sports University, the results claimed that Oscar Pistorius gains considerable

advantage thanks to his prosthetics. The IAAF, accordingly, banned him from competing at the Olympic Games. Pistorius decided to appeal to the highest authority in sport, the Court of Arbitration for Sport, and the ban was lifted and Oscar resumed his quest of participating in the 2012 Olympics.

In order to run in the Olympics, however, Pistorius had to complete certain requirements. South Africa requires competitors to have run the Olympic "A" standard twice in 2012 before being selected. That means running a qualifying time of 45.30 seconds in an international race (Wired, 2012). Pistorius was able to achieve a sufficient time only once, but he was still selected as a representative of South Africa at the 2012 Olympics in London. BBC (2012) reports how Pistorius is making Olympic history by becoming the first double amputee to participate in the Olympics, calling him impressive and saying he "coasted over the line". Wired.com (2012) makes a similar statement: "It is likely to be a historic moment when he steps onto the track and competes against intact limb individuals". This not only repeats the same statement, but further enhances it by separating Pistorius and creating a one-vs-many image. Important keywords to use later include "Hero" and "Advantage", the second one relating to the popular topic of whether his prosthetics gave him an advantage over able-bodied athletes.

Despite completing his goal, the issue of the advantages or disadvantages that Pistorius' prosthetics provided still lingered. This remained one of the few chinks in the armor of the narrative of Oscar Pistorius until the 14th of February 2013 when he shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, allegedly mistaking her for an intruder in his home. Pistorius was facing a murder charge, which would have meant a lengthy time in prison. The judge, however, found him guilty of culpable homicide, allowing Pistorius to be moved to house arrest after serving one-sixth of his original sentence of 5 years in jail. Looking back at the framework by Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers (2011), Pistorius' narrative has entered the second step – the fall from grace.

The media, however, did not respond to this accident by directly making Pistorius into a villain. Instead they used this accident to discuss other problems. The New Yorker (2013) explains the known details around the case while also raising questions about keeping a gun in the house or the potential use of steroids in

causing said accident. Time (2013) uses the case to underline South Africa's culture of violence. "In 2011 the U.N. Office for Drugs and Crime found that South Africa had the 10th highest murder rate in the world" (Time, 2013). The article includes the positive part of Oscar's career, explaining how he became "the latest incarnation of South African hope" and how he was adored by the people, only to continue with lingering problems remaining after the fall of the apartheid, effectively minimizing Pistorius' role (Time, 2013).

Vanity Fair (2013) points to the prevalent racism, terror, oppression and violence in Johannesburg as the reason. Another problem brought up is the violence and abuse towards women. This article does, however, paint Pistorius in a darker shade. His girlfriend, Reeva, is shown in a positive light, highlighting her ambitions, accomplishments, passions, etc. Pistorius, on the other hand, is represented by previous run-ins with the law. That is also reflected in the title of the article – The Shooting Star and The Model. "The man I heard on the phone is a different man from the image given out there. He carries a gun everywhere and I have seen him be controlling to women" (Vanity Fair, 2013). Photographic material in the article contributes to these statements, showing the grieving parents of Reeva, her friends lighting lanterns in her memory, and, of course, Pistorius crying in the courtroom.

Case 2 Netnography

From our media analysis of the case of Oscar Pistorius, we see that there are 2 main points to his image so far - the inspirational hero and the fallen hero. The debate over disadvantages and advantages of his prosthetic legs has a central part in the first main point to his image. "The world needs heroes like Oscar Pistorius to inspire the rest of us", one person writes while condemning people who would deny him the opportunity to participate in the Olympics. This is not an isolated example either, as a lot of people defend Pistorius while praising him at the same time – "He is an incredible athlete, let him run…He's an inspiration as a human being. Anyone that thinks that a hunk of metal is the advantage has no idea"; "He's an amazing guy, one of the most inspirational people in the world!"; "This guy is a hero of mine! Detractors beware!". "Hero" and "Inspiration" were popular opinions of fans, being showcased in 13 of the 20 posts. Of course there is a fair number of those who don't think he should be allowed in the Olympics – "He is an athlete and a role model. But he cannot be allowed to compete with normal runners". One person writes: "If he is

allowed to run in the Olympics, the games will have become a circus…There are rules about unfair advantages…things we put in our bodies…There are events for those in his physical condition and it should remain as such". Another user echoes this statement in a similar way: "I would deny his right, were I on the board. The goal is to ensure fair competition, not promote social ideals…if you start changing the goal of the Olympics and other major international competition to suit your social goals, you've mixed up their relationship and do enormous harm". Overall, the image of the inspirational hero overcoming barriers is stronger among the fans – "To think of the people complaining about Pistorius…shameful and depressing…As a fully able-bodied person I am full of respect and awe for the man"; "Oscar will be cheered on by millions around the globe. He is a super athlete and deserves to be respected for his efforts. He inspires me as he does so many others both able bodied and those with disabilities" another person writes.

After the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp, we saw that media used Oscar Pistorius as a symbol for underlying problems in South Africa, rather than directly condemning him. Most people, however, were mostly demonizing Pistorius – "Oscar [expletive], oh he's a jealous killer too", one person writes. Of the 20 gathered posts, 15 were negative, accusing Pistorius of being a murderer. Example statements by people online include: "A violent psychopath with a sense of entitlement and an ego the size of Jupiter. Not someone to admire; someone to revile and despise. A loser now and always", "Love watching Oscar lose, because he's the biggest loser of all to say the least" among others. While this is the more popular stance on the accident, there are also people who voice concern over different aspects of the trial. One redditor says: "The man is as guilty as sin. He shot his girlfriend in a rage, then lied and came up with the only remotely believable story he could to cover it up. (and it's not even that believable)…That South Africa has a high crime rate probably helps in making the story a bit more convincing". "South Africa should be ashamed of its judicial system. This is a ridiculous outcome to a heinous murder, one committed with rage. This was no negligent homicide. And if he should be released for home arrest after 10 months, it will be a joke", another person comments. While most are angry at him, one person calling him "a complete disgrace for South Africa", and another saying how South Africans will be united with disgust and will not forgive or forget, there are those who still idolize and defend him, though they are relatively small – 3

out of the 20 posts. As an example of this support, one person writes: "We all make mistake in life, why can't we leave him in peace, plz stop judge now".

Discussion

At the start we set out to see how media created the narrative around athletes and accordingly we chose two athletes - LeBron James and Oscar Pistorius – whose cases would give us the chance to examine this process.

Firstly, we examined the case of LeBron James and from the different articles we have analyzed we saw how online media steered this narrative in different directions. The dynamic of this narrative is what makes it so interesting and highlights how media can change the direction of public opinion at will. The first phase of the narrative can be seen as introductory. With Jordan retiring in 2003, the NBA needed a new face of the league, someone with incredible talent and as marketable as Jordan. This is where the young LeBron James came in and media were quick to praise his every move to mould him into the star that they desired. LeBron's image was shaped into that of the "Hero", the one who would break the curse and deliver a championship to Cleveland (The Cleveland Curse refers to the lack of a championship won by a Cleveland sports franchise since 1964). This did not happen as expected and James left to search for his championship elsewhere. Fans were outraged and media could no longer "sell" the hero image of LeBron. In accordance with this, LeBron became the Traitor, the Coward, the False King, etc. "Teaming up with Wade, Bosh and Darth Riley makes him more anti-hero than hero – but an even stronger marketable commodity for the NBA brand" (The New York Times, 2010). Transforming James into a villain gave new passion to fans. Instead of cheering for their respective teams, now they had someone to always cheer against. It wasn't a matter of which team won, as long as the Miami Heat lost. After returning to the Cleveland Cavaliers after James had won 2 championships, media had an opportunity for another profitable switch in his image. In Campbell's monomyth, the hero traverses the darkness to become the master of both worlds and is then ready to use his wisdom and knowledge to help the next generation. In our case LeBron James became the wiser and grownup player, ready to help his hometown achieve greatness. The reasoning behind this new change is simple – it was the perfect opportunity to switch back to the original storyline, the bumps along the road only

adding more drama to the narrative. This narrative specifically has been used lots of times in popular culture. Take for instance the movie "Star Wars episode IV – A New Hope" – Luke Skywalker is the chosen one who has to undertake the Journey along with Ben Kenobi (the mentor), overcoming all challenges on board the Death Star and passing the Initiation phase. He traverses the threshold between the dark and light and returns as the master of both worlds, ready to complete the quest set before him. So the story isn't new, but it is still fascinating for fans to watch, because it introduces a deeper meaning behind the events of a sports competition. In order to achieve this, however, the fans need to understand the characters within this story, which is where media come in and try to show fans the existents within the plot. In the case of LeBron James online media were able to do precisely that, using the heroic monomyth to frame events in his career and create a narrative around the athlete that engaged fans in the story.

In our look into the second case, the one of Oscar Pistorius, we have seen how media framed the events of his life elevating him to the status of a hero, an "icon for the disabled" as the 2009 documentary called it. It is fact that Oscar overcame significant challenges, which is the kind of story media love to tell, one to inspire and challenge emotionally. This is one of the strongest points to this narrative – if you can reach the audience on an emotional level, then you are already primed for success. Online media often compared him with able-bodied runners, especially during his clash with the IAAF over the issue with his prosthetics, effectively contributing to the hero image by highlighting his ability over disability. With Pistorius' eventual participation in the 2012 Olympics in London, the "inspiring hero" image reached its apex.

After Pistorius shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, however, media didn't immediately turn him into a villain, rather they used his case as a symbol, a symbol for deeper underlying problems, for instance violence, racism, oppression, etc. Such a move is logical from the media point of view, because in this way online media try to salvage what is left of his image, which might prove useful later. Now with his release nearing, it is interesting how the media will react, and how they will frame the events that happen after that. By leaving jail, Pistorius will enter the final phase of the sporting hero narrative described by Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers (2011) – the resurrection. Release from prison may be imminent, but

rehabilitation in the public's eye seems a distant dream for Pistorius (The Guardian, 2015). It might be distant, but not impossible, depending on how media will react and what kind of story around this athlete they will deem most profitable.

Comparing the two cases, we can see a lot of similarities as well as some differences. Both athletes were elevated in a similar fashion to "hero" status by the media. The framing of events of their respective careers using narrative elements influenced fan opinion of the athletes. While the LeBron James case can be considered at its end, his narrative passing through all the important steps of the sporting hero narrative (Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2011), Oscar's is still in the second phase – the fall from grace. It is interesting to compare both cases in their phases where the hero fell from grace. In the case of LeBron James, he merely switched teams, something absolutely ordinary for most athletes in team sports nowadays, yet media turned him into a certified villain. Contrary to some players in the NBA who have violated serious rules and had run-ins with the law, LeBron's only crime was signing with a different team, but the image media created resulted in a serious tide of hate towards LeBron. Such a change in attitude was never seen before in the world of basketball, which was reflected in fan opinion in our research. Oscar Pistorius, however, committed a serious crime, taking a life, yet media weren't quick to grab the pitchforks. Why would one athlete's transgression be minimized, while the other's – magnified? I propose there are several factors for this. First of all it has to do with the sport itself. Basketball in the USA is one of the most popular sports, the NBA being a multibillion dollar industry, whereas running is considered as a part of the broader term "Athletics". Second, media attention towards these sports is not comparable – the NBA season has 82 games over 6 months, while different running competitions are held around once or twice per year. Another factor is the cultural difference in media reporting – USA media are typically very extreme, presenting things in either an extremely positive or extremely negative light, while other media from around the world differ in their approach to reporting. This can in fact be seen to some extent in our research as well. Media articles from our first case were similarly painting LeBron James in an either very positive or very negative light, while in the second case – media were using narrative in relation to Oscar Pistorius, but not to a comparable extent as in the first case. Lastly and maybe most importantly, is what media had to gain from creating a villain persona. In the case of

LeBron James, it built interest and drama, people now had a clear-cut "evil" team that they could cheer against. It was, in fact, a story event in the grander narrative of the NBA season used to add conflict and emotion to each game. In the case of Pistorius, however, media were to gain nothing from painting him the villain. Considering his eventual release from prison and his entrance into the final step of the sporting hero narrative (Hoebeke, Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2011), the resurrection, it would be harder for media to revive his image if he was painted a villain, considering the seriousness of his crime. We can assume that when Pistorius is released and enters the final step, media will use him again as a symbol and try to salvage his image as best they can.

Conclusion

At the beginning of our study we set out to analyze how media creates narratives around athletes and if the framing of events done by the media influenced fan perception of these athletes. We began the journey by establishing a basic understanding of narrative as a concept, with its components and functions, along with the mythological narrative, often used in modern day stories. Continuing on we looked at the growing importance of the relations between media and sports and the creation of superstar athletes – the modern day heroes. In order to answer our research question we decided to use two cases – the case of NBA player LeBron James, and the case of the famous Olympic and Paralympic runner Oscar Pistorius. Both cases presented an opportunity to examine how online media created narratives around these athletes, elevating them to hero-status in the eyes of the fans. Both cases presented also opportunities to see how the narrative evolves and changes due to circumstances and how digital media are able to influence fans and switch their opinion to a negative one.

What we learned during the course of our study was how online media used narrative in an attempt to "sell" sports stars. Using narrative concepts they are able to order things within a storyline that creates a deeper meaning in sports. This they achieve by tapping into the power of the mythological narrative in order to transform athletes into modern-day heroes. The mythological narrative is particularly attuned to sports, because heroes from folktales are often times possessors of unbelievable physical abilities, able to accomplish feats deemed impossible for others. A sport is typically a competition to determine the best athlete, thus proving he possesses superior qualities than all others, much alike mythological heroes. We saw that by using these narratives and addressing certain steps from the heroic monomyth (Call to adventure, Crossing the first threshold, Road of trials, etc.) online media were also able to influence fan perception of the athlete and the qualities that media accentuate the most, do find a reflection in the way fans see an athlete. Narrative helps to challenge fans on an emotional level, thus paving the way for "selling" an athlete and making him a marketable commodity. Both case studies, where we analyzed how online media created narratives, showed the power of media in creating modern-day heroes, or if they desired so – villains.

How do the cases measure up to our conceptual model however? In the case of LeBron James, the model is quite correct. The various occurrences in his career were transformed into stories by online media applying narrative. These stories created a widespread media image – at first it was the Prodigy, then the Hero, then Villain, and finally the Returning son. Fan perception on social media corresponded with this media image during every different phase. Regarding the Oscar Pistorius case, the conceptual model seems to fit with what happened during the hero phase. Oscar's career was progressing steadily and online media were able to transform events in his career into stories about an inspirational hero, thus creating a widespread media image of the athlete. The story of the underdog overcoming great obstacles to win has been proven time and time again and fan perception of Oscar Pistorius mirrored this online media image. In the second phase, however, the media image of the symbol of problems on a grander scale didn't seem to agree with most fans, possibly due to the severity of his crime. Also worthy of note regarding the conceptual model is that while it relates to media as a whole, our research is focused on online media. With this in mind, this model can be further tested across traditional media as well.

A limitation of the study was the fact that it was focused on online communities only, which are generally already engaged with the topic. While these online communities presented us with the opportunity to reach specific groups of fans, we weren't able to see the effects that online media had on the casual fans. Further research could be done on the possibility of the narrative in media influencing casual fans and engaging them more and more. Because our study was focused on the inception of narratives and their inspiration and influence among fans, we could not focus on the cultural differences in media reporting, even though it presents and interesting dynamic to this research. As such, further research in the future could be done on the topic of cultural aspects in media reporting.

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