

Myth as Marketing: Heroic Branding in the Cases of Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart

by

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Abstract

While mythic criticism has been widely studied in antiquity and in sports contexts, limited attention has been given to its application in other contexts. This thesis examines the utility of myth as a marketing tool. Specifically, it explores how myths and mythic heroes function within branding to build strong, resonant brand images that connect with consumers. Using rhetorical criticism, this thesis shows that Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart function as heroic figures whose mythic branding narratives not only invite consumers to engage with the brand on an emotional level but also the symbolic meaning attached to the products, which ultimately drives sales.

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Soli Deo Gloria.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

A sneaker. A set of pots. These products seemingly have nothing in common, beyond the fact that they are sold for profit. However, a Nike Air Jordan sneaker and a Martha 6-piece aluminum pot set sport big names that summon specific images of the brands that sell them. For the Air Jordan sneaker by Michael Jordan, images of athleticism, victory, and status immediately come to mind for the wearer. The clearest example of this is the brand's iconic logo of Michael Jordan dunking midair, securing another winning shot in front of a cheering crowd. With the set of pots by Martha Stewart, the user immediately thinks of a well-organized home, cozy holidays, and attractive decor. The 2001 December cover of the *Martha Stewart Living* is a good example of this: a gold Christmas tree sits cheerfully on a hallway table greeting passersby, decked in shiny decorations and fruit. These brands have sold consumers not only on products but on the myths behind these notable figures, symbolized in their rhetorically heroic representations. This thesis explores the connection between myths and marketing, specifically how mythology can be used in a branding space to drive the sales of products.

Myths in Function and Form

Myths are constructed stories people use to understand reality (Rowland, 1990). They are “society's collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation, that help to make the world understandable, support the social order, and educate the society's young” (Rushing, 1978, pp. 67). In antiquity, ancient mythology consisted of tales of gods and demigods, which helped explain the natural world and its phenomena (Campbell, 1968). Myths have a divine element to them that gives life meaning, shaping even the most important aspects of life like national identity (Parry, 2021) and religion (Bostdorff, 2018). As Chidester (2009) says, “myths work to maintain a vital sense of connection between humans and the cosmos,

between our daily experiences on the material plane and the promise of something better and greater in the realms beyond” (p. 355). There is scholarly consensus that myths perform a key problem-solving function in society. Additionally, myths have several components, the most prominent being the heroic main character.

The foremost function of the contemporary myth is to resolve societal issues, not solvable through other rational means (Rowland, 1990). According to Lévi-Strauss (1955), myths are logical tools that rhetors use to replace the original problem, resolving inconsistencies in reality with narrative. Lewis (2011) writes, “Myths infiltrate a culture’s rhetoric to bring the dominant symbols and rituals of the culture to bear on contemporary problems” (p. 131), including the actions of others (Bostdorff, 2018). For example, Dorsey and Harlow (2003) argue that Theodore Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West* constructed a frontier myth that countered anti-immigration sentiment of the time. Roosevelt built the narrative of the young United States as a rugged, hostile place that needed direction and command, and certain immigrants were the ideal people to do it. The main story played upon archetypal images of the untamed frontier to make room in the national heritage for foreign-born Americans. Another instance of this problem-solving function is detailed by DeSantis (1998) in an article on “the Great Migration.” In the early 1900s, Black Southerners began to relocate in droves to cities in the north. The *Chicago Defender*, a widely read Black newspaper of the time, ran an intentional migration campaign aimed at southern Black readers, framing Chicago as the place where they could finally achieve the American Dream as a place that offered both a moral escape from racism and a practical path to prosperity. In this way, the remade American Dream myth offered a symbolic “solution” to the seemingly unsolvable issue of Black Southerners’ oppression and lack of opportunity in the Jim Crow South. This problem-solving function can be additionally separated into three dimensions:

sense-making, justifying actions, and providing a code of conduct to follow, which will be further explained in a later chapter.

For myth to be used within culture to solve issues, it must have specific components. Rowland (1990) lays out five attributes, which work together to give myths its rhetorical power. The first is the narrative quality of myths. Alexander and Smith (1993) note, “Narratives help society understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and anti-heroes, epiphanies and denouncements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms” (p. 156). Second, myths usually occur outside of normal historical time or in a period that, because of the great symbolic power associated with it, has been transformed into mythical time. According to Rowland (1990), that time is mythical because it is extraordinary and sacred, compared to other events. Third, myths also usually occur outside of the normal world or in a real place possessing special symbolic power. That setting could be anywhere of significance within the myth, such as a baseball field (Butterworth, 2007) or the Wild West (Lewis, 2011). Fourth, myths rely heavily on archetypal language, or universally recognized symbols of significance. Berkowitz (2005) defines archetypes “as an ‘ideal story’ repeatedly called upon for new telling” (p. 608). While archetypes are formulaic, they can be adapted for the specific situation.

And lastly, myths must center a heroic main character (Rushing, 1983; Rowland, 1990; Campbell, 1968; Chidester, 2009). In ancient mythology, the hero was “a legendary figure who performed brave and noble deeds of great significance, who possessed attributes of great stature such as bravery, strength, and steadfastness” (Wenner, 1998, p. 134). Heroes possess an element of the divine because they accomplish things that others cannot manage (Bostdorff, 2018). Tudor (2018) argues that the hero myth persists because people psychologically need figures who can

confront danger, change history, and return with benefits for others, especially when they feel helpless or unable to shape society themselves. Within a myth, the hero does two key things: they represent idealized action and engage in a struggle with opposition.

First, the hero must labor against some foe. According to Frye (1957), “A hero is not of truly mythic proportions unless his struggle is made difficult and his success is wrought from the headlines” (pp. 186). Without resistance, there is no hero. Their mythic power arises through confrontation with a challenging environment that defines the scope of their achievement. By establishing the struggle, the narrative constructs the heroic arena and reveals the hero’s elevated character through the successful overcoming of obstacles (Slotkin, 1998). Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968) establishes the idea of “the hero’s journey.” He asserts that all myths follow a storyline that involves a hero embarking on a mission and struggles, but ultimately triumphs. For instance, Buffalo Bill is a heroic representative of the mythic Wild West - a larger-than-life figure. He represented certain American ideals at the time of his popularity, such as masculinity, righteous order, and hardiness (Dickison et al., 2005). As a legendary hero, he supported the narrative of Westward expansion in the developing, late 1800s United States. The story neatly split the West into good guys and bad guys, in a way that repackaged the violence that came with claiming Indian territory. Buffalo Bill, being on the correct side of the narrative, ultimately prevailed against the opposition.

Second, the hero also acts as a template of behavior and action within the narrative (Rowland, 1990). Possessing otherworldly qualities, heroes within a myth embody public values and ideals, and function as unifying social forces (Frisk, 2017). They are “outstanding human beings” (Butterworth, 2013, p. 18). Campbell (1968) explains that the hero’s struggle and eventual triumph are what make them admirable. Athletes are common mythic heroes (Reed,

2023) because they so clearly fit the rise and falls of the hero's journey, showcasing valued traits like discipline, resilience, and competitive mastery. Butterworth (2007) analyzes the rhetoric around the home run race of 1998 between athletes McGwire and Sosa. As Butterworth notes, "baseball is a potent site for social drama" and has long served as "a metaphor for America itself" (p. 229), with players serving as role models. Competing against each other and past athletes to break the baseball home run record, McGwire and Sosa emerged as heroes. McGwire represented the American individualist myth while Sosa represented the successful immigrant myth. In the backdrop of political scandal in the White House, the "Home Run Race" provided both coherence in social narrative and a model for idealized American behavior. In this way, the hero symbolically solves the problems confronted in the myth (Rowland, 1990). Together, these examples demonstrate how myths work to organize social reality and symbolically solve cultural issues. They do so through formal components of narrative, symbolic time and space, archetypal language, and a main hero who exemplifies societal ideals and values.

The Evolution of Myth in Popular Culture

Additionally, myths evolve and change as society changes and develops new contexts. As Eliade (1960) notes, "an adequate analysis of the diffuse mythologies of the modern world would run into volumes: for myths and mythological images are to be found everywhere, laicized, degraded or disguised; one only needs to be able to recognize them" (p. 33). Myths are not just ancient stories, but continue to exist in modern day, repackaged in different forms as society evolves. Rushing, in an article on America's "Wild West," expressed that the frontier myth is confronted by the fact that America has no more frontier, in the physical sense (1983). However, Kelly and Neville-Shepherd (2020) suggest that the frontier myth lives on in another form - the subjugation of women's bodies. The authors relate experiences in Christian purity culture, where

female sexuality is something to be protected and controlled. The frontier myth was even utilized by President Kennedy to inspire Americans to support the Space Race with Russia, emphasizing the usefulness and adaptability of myth.

Within popular culture, heroes and mythic narratives can be used for branding, particularly if a brand is built around an individual's heroic narrative. Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) explain, "brands are semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning" (p. 11). Balmer and Gray (2003) identify key factors of a brand, emphasizing them as image-building devices, and a means by which to construct individual identities. Brands are enduring institutions, existing since ancient civilizations (Mauyra and Mishra, 2012). They often intersect with myths. Brown et al., (2013) referring to the Titanic, asserts that it became an enduring brand commodified for decades after its origination, because it played on several enduring myths ("the unsinkable ship, class and order, heroic death), repackaged and reformulated over time.

Brands often use famous, mythic figures to market their products (Wang et al., 2025). "Celebrities have long been used to sell products, dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century" (Keel and Nataraajan, 2012). In recent years, there has been an increase in celebrities selling self-branded products rather than merely endorsing the products of other companies (Tseng and Wang, 2023). Osorio et al. (2020), asserts the idea of human brands. Human brands are not just created images that sell the individual to consumers, but a larger identity/ideology that consumers co-create with the individual. The person themselves *is* the brand, with the focus on the persona and the value it generates in the marketplace, not just personal traits. Mythic branding fits into this idea of human brands, because myths are crafted stories surrounding a

hero. As Mocarski and Billings (2014) state on the Lebron-Nike product collaboration: “The goal of a product or celebrity brand is to make their collectively constructed and understood personality align with consumer expectations, so that those consumers will buy. For celebrity brands, this purchase includes both the literal purchase of goods and the pathos and ethos the celebrity promotes” (p. 7). Put simply, mythic branding sells the hero, and the products they use or represent, as the brand (Luedicke, 2010).

Mythic Branding

Two mythic characters that embody this concept of “mythical branding” are Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart. Although vastly different in their abilities, Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart function as heroes for others. The narratives they embody elevate them beyond celebrity status; they become models of what success looks like in their respective spheres. There is no doubt that both Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart are heroes of mythic proportions and illustrate how mythic principles may be applied in branding contexts. From winning NBA Slam Dunk contests to leading the Chicago Bulls to six championships victories, Michael Jordan was an athletic superstar. Every game reinforced his myth as a cultural hero (Muniowski, 2015). Even the iconic “Like Mike” tagline stands as one of the clearest expressions of the mythical hero as a blueprint for idealized behavior. At a certain point, Michael Jordan was one of the most popular marketing commodities in the world (Wenner, 1998). His brand collaboration with Nike (“Jordan”) was launched off his mythic story and image. Similarly, Martha Stewart amassed fame that extended far beyond her role as a lifestyle and home influencer. Stewart embodies a mythic hero in her own right, demonstrating how order, quality, beauty can transform ordinary home life into something extraordinary. Beecher (2001) notes, she was not only a domestic advisor, businesswoman, and media figure, but also a “maker”: a hero who creates value and

beauty from raw, disorganized materials - whether food, plants, or furniture. Stewart embodies several roles in her myth, serving as a model of transformation and control whose labor and vision guide followers toward realizing a more ordered, productive, and aesthetically satisfying life. Through this narrative, Stewart's brand communicates not just products, but a vision of the "good life" (Chidester, 2009). She built an empire that inspired millions to emulate her practices, framing domesticity as a space for mastery, creativity, and meaningful engagement with the world.

Jordan wins on the basketball court. Stewart wins in the home. Jordan conquers opposing teams and Stewart conquers disorder and chaos in the domestic realm. Their stories follow recognizable narrative patterns: competition and victory, order and beauty, and cultural influence. Jordan's mythic storyline is one of relentless striving, extraordinary talent refined through discipline, and repeated victory over adversity. Stewart's mythic storyline centers on organization, aesthetics, and special rituals. The myths they embody help people see what is possible for them to accomplish in the ongoing quest for the "good life" (Chidester, 2009). Thus, fans and followers are inclined to buy the products that are part of the mythic brand they believe.

Plan of Study

Although myth has been theorized across various areas of communication, its role within contemporary marketing and celebrity branding is underexplored. This thesis analyzes branded artifacts to reveal how mythic hero narratives are embedded within the brands of Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart. Because myth operates rhetorically, its presence can be examined through the symbolic artifacts that circulate within culture. Rhetorical criticism provides the methodological lens for identifying and analyzing these mythic narratives as they appear in everyday texts (Foss, 2009). By systematically examining branding materials, and promotional

content, and advertisements, this rhetorical analysis reveals how myths shaped around a strong heroic character make for strong brands. Additionally, while sports settings are especially ripe for myths, exploring mythic branding outside of athletics adds to the expanding concept of mythic theory. Michael Jordan's case builds on the well-established field of sports rhetoric, while Stewart offers a unique example of myth operating in a nontraditional context particularly rituals, further developing the concept of mythic branding.

In chapter 1 of this thesis, I will introduce my topic and the main premises of my argument. Chapter 2 goes in depth into the concepts introduced in chapter 1 and explains myth, heroes, and branding in extensive detail. In chapter 3, I will apply those principles to Jordan and Stewart's brands through a rhetorical analysis of selected artifacts to illustrate how mythic heroes create strong brands. Finally, in the last chapter I will suggest direction for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Intro

The study of myth has a long history in rhetorical scholarship, communication studies, and cultural analysis. This chapter will review myth theory in detail: what a myth is, its components, and functions. Additionally, this chapter will examine current literature on branding as it relates to mythic heroes, setting a solid base for the analysis chapter.

Scholars broadly agree that myths are constructed, shared stories used to interpret reality, give meaning, and perpetuate values. They are “society's collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation, that help to make the world understandable, support the social order, and educate the society's young” (Rushing, 1978, p. 67). Myths are used to give meaning to life and its events. Even when rooted in imagination rather than factual events, myths, through the narrative form, serve a necessary function by affirming meaning and value in a world that often appears chaotic and disordered (Collins, 2015; Armstrong, 2005). They are more like frameworks, “patterns, images, motifs and characters, taken from and shaped by the shared experiences of human life, that have helped structure and shape stories across cultures and eras” (Lule, 2001, p. 15).

Myths have existed since early times. They were the foundations of the social life and culture of ancient civilizations. In those times, most myths revolved around divine entities or cosmic elements. Beyond other functions like entertainment or cultural record, these myths illustrated social principles, explained natural phenomena, and provided examples of moral or immoral behavior (Campbell, 1968; Johnston, 2015). For instance, in ancient Greek and Roman mythology, stories of gods and mortals exemplified desirable and undesirable behavior in society. Campbell (1968) gives the account of the Minotaur, a mythical half-man half-bull born

from King Minos's defiance of the gods and confined to the Labyrinth as both punishment and warning. The minotaur story illustrates the important truths of unchecked power, the consequences of moral wrongdoing, and the need for heroic action to restore order. Malinowski (1926) observed the tribes he studied use myths as a way of shaping the most important aspects of life, origin, death, and rituals. For example, one myth from a clan of the Trobriand Islands described the story of a family of three women. Long ago, a grandmother, mother, and daughter dwelled together in harmony. When the granddaughter failed to recognize her grandmother in youthful form one day, the furious grandmother cursed all of them to age just like her. The people of the Trobriand Islands used that myth to explain why people age and die instead of living forever. Another account from Malinowski detailed the origin of the ranking system of the island clans. The myth describes how each animal, representing a separate clan, was created in a certain order. The people of the island respected the ranking and the social hierarchy because it was based in a sacred origin myth. These stories of minotaurs and grandmothers illustrate how myths are used to explain complex aspects of human life, offering narratives that help people understand natural phenomena, social structures, and moral consequences.

Contemporary myths are still prominent in our culture. Political systems, religious ideas, national holidays, and celebrations likewise function mythically by reinforcing shared values, collective memory, and a sense of meaning within society (Eliade, 1975). In contemporary rhetoric, we can see myth being used in all sorts of sectors such as sports (Butterworth, 2007; Butterworth, 2013; Chidester, 2009), politics and national issues (Frisk, 2017; Dorsey, 1997; Parry, 2021), journalism (Berkowitz, 2010; Reed and Forbes, 2024; Nossick and Berkowitz, 2006), and even the home (Beecher, 2001). They are not just stories but "hardworking" social forces that are used to fulfill indispensable functions (Malinowski, 1926, p.13; Armstrong,

2006). What is remarkable about this rhetorical form is that from ancient stories about minotaurs to contemporary depictions of athletes and political candidates, the form and functions of these narratives are largely consistent.

Mythic Form

Myth has five important components that provide its rhetorical power (Rowland, 1990). The first is narrative. Myths must take the form of a story to organize experience into a coherent sequence. They relate a series of events that took place in the past or some other place (Eliade, 1975) in a way that makes sense. As Berkowitz (2005) puts it, “Stories arrange events of reality in resonant and familiar ways for the audiences” (p. 608). However, myth does not have to be a “true” story or historically accurate to be an effective tool (Rowland, 1990). Malinowski (1926) describes myths as “reality lived,” regardless if it is reflected in reality (p. 18). They only have to be regarded as truthful by those who believe in them (Eliade, 1975). For instance, the “Myth of Communion” encapsulates multitudes of smaller, fragmented tales of extraterrestrial encounters into one cohesive reality (Kelley-Romano, 2006, p. 384). In that myth, each of the abductees’ stories fits under one of four narratives that clarify the aliens’ motivations for the abduction. This example illustrates how myth validates shared experiences of its believers by structuring individual stories into a systematic whole.

The second and third components of myth are an otherworldly time and place, which are interconnected. For one, myths cannot occur in ordinary time. Instead, they take place during events or periods of time that are special to the rhetor and audience. For the myth to serve its purpose in society, it has to “take us out of history to solve the problems posed by history (Rowland, 1990, p. 104). The main character in the myth must be detached “from profane, chronological time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time” (Eliade and Mairer,

1975, p. 23). One time that is always sacred is the time of origin, because it is a venerated occurrence that does not happen regularly or in a regular way (Rowland, 1990). One such example of this is the frontier myth, which was used to establish the origins of the diverse American population. In the late 1700s, hundreds of thousands of hopeful Americans migrated to the wild West in search of a better life. By the early 1900s, the West was inhabited and mostly settled, and this was the context that the frontier myth first emerged (Stoeltje, 1987). President Theodore Roosevelt utilized the frontier myth narrative to resolve cultural anxiety surrounding immigration and national identity at the turn of the twentieth century (Dorsey and Harlow, 2003). In order to supply an origin story, the frontier myth had to transcend the current situation or context of that time period. Thus, the sacred time in this myth is the rebirth of the US during the rapid westward expansion.

In the same fashion, myths also occur in extraordinary spaces outside of the normal world which possess symbolic power. The main character of the myth leaves the ordinary world and travels to a supernatural realm (Campbell, 1973). For instance, in a sports myth, the mythical location could be a football field (Butterworth, 2013) or a baseball diamond (Butterworth, 2007). These may look ordinary but take on a mythic dimension because they hold great significance to the audience, represent specific shared values of the culture, and occur during unique times of competition, rivalry, and celebration. These special qualities set these mythic locations apart from “common space” (Rowland, 1990, p. 104). Besides a physical location, the mythical space could be a metaphysical concept. For example, in a myth constructed around the Korean War, Douglas MacArthur positioned himself not only as a hero in the Western Pacific, but also on the ideological frontier of the West’s struggle against Communism (Perry, 2012). This allowed MacArthur to be a larger-than-life figure who could bring lasting peace. By removing the mythic

location from the normal world, it moves the conflict to a place where issues may be resolved as part of the narrative progression.

The fourth component of myth is archetypal language. Archetypes are broad, exemplary symbols in society that are widely understood: good and evil, right and wrong, bravery and cowardice, light and darkness, and others (Lule, 2001). Kelley-Romano (2006) states, “because myths are those stories that provide transcendence, they necessarily include symbols that appeal to a deeper understanding of life and the universe” (p. 386). Those symbols connect with the audience on a fundamental level to help them enter the world of myth (Slotkin, 1998). An example of archetype in a myth can be found in President Theodore Roosevelt’s rhetorical frame of the expansion of the American naval fleet (Dorsey, 1997). Roosevelt, in the process of legitimizing the military act, utilized the archetype of “weapon.” The naval battleships were perceived as weapons of war, but Roosevelt highlighted the battleship as a tool of peace rather than destruction. The audience of the myth can relate to the mythic narrative because of the broad symbols it incorporates.

Lastly, myths must center around a hero. The word hero is derived from Greek, meaning a person distinguished for exceptional courage, fortitude, enterprise, superior qualities or deeds (Wenner, 1998), part human and part divine, transcending the mortal and the mundane. They are the main characters in the narrative because of their extraordinary qualities (Rowland, 1990). In contemporary times, mythic heroes may be well-known communal figures, but popularity is not necessarily a requirement. On the difference between heroes versus celebrities, Boorstin (1987) remarks “there was never a time where fame was precisely the same thing as greatness,” signifying the extraordinary qualities that heroes must possess, beyond simply being popular (p. 46). We venerate heroes over celebrities because of their incredible feats and achievements

(Bale, 2006), accomplished through struggle and perseverance. A hero is more than just a celebrity because they carry an element of the supernatural that empowers them to battle past the personal, contextual, and historical limitations of average people (Campbell, 1973; Wenner, 1998).

All components of a myth are significant, working together to give myth its power and utility in society. Although some components are more prominent in certain myths, they're all present. Narrative sets the story and plot, of which the hero is front and center. That narrative is set in a mythic place and time. The entire myth is wrapped in symbolic archetypal language. As Rowland (1990) explains, none of the components on their own is mythic in itself, but the combination of components that build upon each other give myth its problem-solving function.

Mythic Functions

Myths with all its parts persist as a rhetorical form because they serve several essential social functions. They do not operate independently; rather, they are constructed and used by communities to make meaning, shaping how people understand both the world and how they fit into it. Overall, myths help societies make sense of events, justify actions, and present a code of conduct to follow. In this way, they function as tools for solving problems not subject to rational solutions (Rowland, 1990).

Mythic problem-solving can serve a sense-making function. First, myth is a psychological tool used to reduce anxiety when individuals face risks or danger. When individuals encounter events that feel chaotic, uncontrollable, or threatening, they experience anxiety rooted in a lack of understanding. Myth reduces that anxiety by placing those events within a larger, narrative structure that rationalizes emotions and restores sense and order (Wright, 2005). For the people that Malinowski (1926) studied, myths soothed fears about things

out of their power, like fishing and agriculture. Similarly, during tragedies myths provide comfort and a way of processing traumatic events. Following the aftermath of the Twin Towers and other plane hijackings, the US was reeling. The media, through myth, was able to contextualize tragedy by endowing order and resolution (Berkowitz, 2005). Similarly, coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings relied on mythic narratives to provide meaning in tragedy. The media positioned a key victim as a heroic figure within a narrative of good versus evil, where good ultimately prevails. Conveying long-standing societal values, like goodness, “is at the heart of telling mythical narratives” (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 655). Also, the bravery and self-sacrifice the hero showed was also framed as a redeeming factor in the narrative, giving an optimistic interpretation to the events. These examples show how myths help audiences make sense of something senseless by providing a logical framework that connects people to meanings beyond themselves (Chidester, 2009).

Next, myths can be used to justify actions. Eliade (1975) described myths as justification for all human action and activity. They can be used to legitimize or show cause for some action or decision. For example, in the example regarding President Roosevelt he used myth to rationalize his efforts to the American naval fleet (Dorsey, 1997). He faced one serious hurdle as to how one can promote military preparedness in times of peace while avoiding imagery associated with war. The president did not want to portray his political actions as acts of military aggression, so he constructed a new myth of a new “wonderous now” by sending the naval fleet on a worldwide cruise. This framed the naval improvements as a showcase of American ingenuity and a token of peace, prosperity, and stability. The media portrayed the ship as a marvel, rather than a weapon of war, justifying his actions. People even sold merchandise based on the cruise and the reports from the faraway lands it visited. In this way, myth was used to

secure both the funding from Congress that Roosevelt needed to bolster the American navy, and bypass tension socially and politically. As this example shows, myth can be a helpful tool that provides rational support for specific decisions.

Lastly, myth serves as a problem-solving tool by providing an example to follow. Myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief, safeguards and enforces morality, vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (Malinowski, 1926, p. 19). People use myth as a reference for life, emulating desirable or idealized behaviors (Parry, 2021). As Campbell (1975) notes, “The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities - diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom” (p. 45). For example, Collins’s (2015) analysis of myth in World War I France shows how myths can inspire people to act. During the conflict, the country needed young men to volunteer to defend the nation. To address this, the French press promoted a narrative of brave young American volunteers crossing the ocean to fight for honor, constructing a myth that was both meaningful and inspirational. This myth served two purposes: it bolstered French morale by reframing the war as a noble sacrifice, and it subtly pressured the United States to abandon neutrality by portraying American involvement as inevitable. Through the examples provided by myth, certain actions can be encouraged. These narratives solve problems by modeling ideal, desirable behaviors and motivating individuals to emulate them.

Hero Functions in Myth

While all myths have a hero character, some myths foreground the hero to take advantage of several unique functions it provides. First, heroes often fight a foe in the narrative. Campbell (1973) established that most heroes follow a predictable journey or progression as part of their story, which he terms the “monomyth.” The hero’s journey involves separation, initiation, and

return. In the first part, the hero leaves the common day into an otherworldly realm to achieve some sort of goal. In the next step, the hero faces opposition. They must survive a series of obstacles and trials. Their enemy is great and usually in a position of power, but the hero wins. After this, the hero returns “with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” Heroism depends on resistance; without opposition, there can be no hero. Mythic power emerges through confrontation with a challenging environment that defines the significance of achievement, through which the hero’s elevated character is revealed by overcoming obstacles. (Solomon, 1983). Without the foe, the mythic hero would not be able to bring value to society. An example of this is the frontier myth (Dorsey 2003; Dorsey, 2013; Lewis, 2011). The myth helped rationalize a significant historical period of national expansion by establishing who the main characters are. In the story, the immigrant settlers are the heroes, while disorder and cultural difference are the challenges they overcome. This is different from the historical accounts of this time because Roosevelt purposely wanted to make room for the immigrant population in the national fabric. The narrative establishes a hero who conquers obstacles, masters the wild Western wilderness, and embodies the American Dream. It’s through this journey of overcoming that the main character becomes a hero of mythic proportions.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the hero serves as a template for behavior. Through their conduct, heroes embody culturally valued traits and demonstrate how challenges should be faced and overcome (Reed and Forbes, 2023). Their struggle and eventual triumph make these qualities visible and compelling, marking the hero as worthy of admiration (Bale, 2006). In this way, heroic narratives inspire audiences to follow the hero’s example, offering a model of idealized behavior that translates abstract values into concrete, feasible actions (Parry, 2021). The hero is revered not “because they possess charisma, divine favor, a grace or talent

granted by God, but because they embody virtues. We admire them, not because they reveal God, but because they reveal and elevate ourselves” (Boorstin, 1987, p. 50). Kitch (2002) provides the example of John F. Kennedy Jr., who served as a model that people could emulate. This is evident in the media coverage of Kennedy Jr. following his death, where he was memorialized as part of the larger Kennedy family myth. As Kitch explains, the media emphasized archetypal themes of legacy, style, composure in tragedy, and public service, positioning JFK Jr. as a popular, heroic figure who carried forward the romanticized ideals of the “Camelot” era. His life was not simply reported but set out as a model of grace and patriotism. In this way, his myth provides a template for behavior, encouraging audiences to embrace specific American values in their own lives. Together, these functions position the hero as both someone who challenges opposition and models conduct. Their struggle against a foe gives weight to their actions while demonstrating how audiences should navigate challenges in their own lives. Through this dual role, the hero becomes central to myth’s ability to both make sense of the world and guide behavior within it.

Rituals in Myth

Closely connected to myth is the ritual. Rituals are the physical enactment of myths, through which myth is sustained (Campbell, 1972). They are formal and elaborately repeated sets of actions - a special activity with multiple parts (Nachbar, 1992, p. 376). Examples include burial rites, festivals and holidays, military celebrations, and even the simple act of sitting at the table together. Participating in rituals gives the partaker a sense of security, and a connection to something larger than themselves (Morgan, 1998).

Since ancient times, rituals have been a part of the home, including sacred religious practices (Bowes, 2015). Oftentimes, these domestic rituals center around food preparation (Devi

and Ghatani, 2022) or family time and traditions (Heiler, 2025). For example, the Thanksgiving holiday is a ritual of feasting for most in the US. Authors Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) explain that Thanksgiving is a ritualized consumption event where people use food, objects, and behaviors to create meaning, reinforce deep cultural values, and perform identity. The holiday itself is not just a special day but plays out what “family” and “home” are supposed to be. This connects to myth through the idea that rituals are the enactment of the interpretation of society that myths give. Similarly, domestic practices can also be considered rituals. Even small acts such as making the bed or pulling weeds are part of a greater system of repeated, meaningful behaviors that reflect values like order, care, and beauty. In this way, everyday practices serve as ongoing enactments of myth, sustaining and reinforcing cultural ideals about the way we understand home and family.

Branding overview

Heroes and mythic narratives are used in multiple ways, including branding within marketing. First, it’s important to set an overall overview of branding before moving into mythic function. The American Marketing Association defines brands as “any distinctive feature like a name, term, design, or symbol that identifies goods or services” ([ama.org](https://www.ama-assn.org), n.d.). Brands function as carriers of both functional and symbolic information about goods, services, and experiences. As communication tools, they distinguish a company’s products from competitors while helping consumers associate personal meaning with those products (Oh et al., 2020). For example, in a 1992 interview, Phil Knight, cofounder of Nike, explained that “A brand is something that has a clear cut identity among consumers, which a company creates by sending out a clear, consistent message over a period of years until it receives a critical mass of marketing” (Willigan, 1992). Balmer and Gray (2003) divide brands into several components: marks denoting ownership;

image-building devices; symbols associated with key values; means by which to construct individual identities; and a conduit by which pleasurable experiences may be consumed. For the purpose of this thesis, “brand” will be defined as the whole symbolic representation of the person selling the products, including the marketing. Michael Jordan’s brand is Jordan, and Martha Stewart’s brand is Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MLSO).

Brands serve several important functions for both consumers and companies. Besides creating meaning, brands help consumers identify the source of products, signal quality, reduce risk and search costs. For the business or company, brands set products apart from others, legally protect unique features, build customer loyalty, and provide a source of competitive and financial advantage (Keller, 2003). Overall, research emphasizes the importance of having a strong brand for a product(s) (Keller, 2003). As Aaker (2025) writes, “Without a brand, you may find it difficult to draw attention, condense information, change perceptions, influence behavior, and make ideas stick in the memory” (p. 8). There are many more components of branding in the marketing field, such as brand equity, loyalty, authenticity, etc., which are all important, however they are outside the scope of this study. Instead, I will be focusing on branding as it relates to the overall image and understanding of the brand.

Fournier (1998) emphasizes the relationship brands have with consumers as an important part of marketing success. Particularly, a common component of strong brands is emotional connection to consumers (Diamond et al., 2009). One way this connection can occur is through representation - consumers are likely to buy something from a brand if it is represented by someone well-known (Tseng and Wang, 2023), particularly if that celebrity is an expert in their field (Batra et al., 2006). While being a celebrity is not the same as being a mythic hero, heroes

oftentimes are very well known in culture, and it is part of their narrative. Such is the case for both Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart.

Keel and Natrajaan (2012) discuss the concept of celebrity endorsement. This type of marketing has a positive influence on advertising attitude, brand attitude, brand recall, purchase intent, and even stock value. Celebrity endorsement can be especially effective when the celebrity is paired up with a product that makes sense for them to sell, when it matches who the celebrity is and what they do. At the end of the article, the authors introduce the idea of celebrities creating and branding their own lines of products, as opposed to merely endorsing other companies' products. One type of celebrity self-brands, cobranding, involves products with the names of both the celebrity and the cooperating manufacturing brand. As the authors put it, "a co-branding strategy can be more beneficial than other branding strategies because a second brand can increase the perceived value of the product as well as that of the primary brand" (p. 696). The Jordan brand and MSLO fall under this category, because both the brands carry the name of the celebrity that endorses it. Although Jordan is technically a subsidiary of Nike, the Jordan brand became a separate entity in 1987 with the Jumpman logo and Jordan's increased ownership of the brand. Jordan's astronomical popularity helped bolster Nike into the company it is today (White, 2019). Likewise, the MSLO brand is under Martha Stewart's name. Not only is MSLO a conglomerate of all of Stewart's enterprises, it was also owned outright (up until 2015) by Stewart, with herself as CEO. The celebrities are the main characters in the product story that the brand is trying to sell. This connects to the hero component in myth.

Osorio (2020) takes celebrity endorsement one step farther by introducing the concept of human brands. With this type of brand, the individual is not in full control of marketing themselves, but the brand is co-constructed between the person and the audience. In that way, the

brand can evolve to something highly meaningful and symbolically significant. This concept connects to myth because myth also holds important symbolic meaning for its audiences. Human brands, represented by a heroic character, can operate similarly to modern myths, and fulfill the problem-solving mythic function.

Mythic branding research

Previous research has been conducted into myths used in marketing. Holt (2004) argues that brands can become cultural icons through the strategic use of myth. Similarly, Czeremski (2020) suggests that myth allows brands to become compelling cultural forces through narrative structures, association to desirable abstract values, and memorability. Consumers are drawn to mythic branding because it is both relatable and familiar, reflecting patterns they already encounter in everyday life (Levy, 1981). As a result, key components of myth, like narrative and archetype, frequently appear in marketing, shaping how brands communicate meaning and connect with audiences.

Storytelling frequently makes its way into marketing. Stories provide symbolic value to a product by arranging a sequence of events, including plot, setting, time, and characters, into one coherent whole (Mills & John, 2025). Consumers are better able to connect emotionally with what is being sold to them. Tillotsen and Martin (2015) discuss mythic narrative within the brand of a business. They give the example of a Finnish dairy company that constructed a story that helped resolve cultural tensions and identity issues within the company so they could better sell to their consumers. Another example is the American Girl Doll brand. Diamond (2009) argues that American girl is an emotionally powerful brand for its consumers, because it is part of a complex system, or gestalt. This system, which can be understood as a narrative, provides deeper significance beyond just the product, and strengthens the consumer-brand relationship.

Archetypes are another mythic component that can frequently be found in mythic branding. Myth functions to make life events easier to grasp and understand in a world that is seemingly complex and full of contradiction (Holt, 2004). One way a mythic narrative can become more easily understood is using broad overarching archetypes that allow consumers to connect to the product and product narrative. For instance, Belk and Tumbat (2005) give the example archetypes used within Macintosh marketing. The company packages their brand under four key myths that contain archetypal language such as hero and visionary, good vs evil, among others. The archetypes give clear pictures that build into the overall brand image and understanding. Without archetypes in their brand, Macintosh would have been able to build as strong a connection with consumers.

A third aspect of myth that can show up in a brand is the hero. As discussed in the previous section, a well-known person can be the center and representative of a brand. Within the brand narrative, this well-known person ends up being the main character, through which the myth is formed. All three components of myth, when used in marketing, can fortify the understanding and image of a brand by providing structure, emotional connection, and representation. For this thesis, I will be honing in on the hero aspect of branding.

Mythic branding can show up in different ways and different industries, including sports and the domestic arts. Mocarski (2014), in an article on LeBron James, demonstrates the connection between myth and marketing. Nike co-constructed a mythic narrative on James, based on him being a sort of Messiah for his fans. Regarding the domestic arts, Barthes (1977) discusses myth as utilized to sell recipes in a copy of *Elle* magazine. He describes the elements in the recipe's accompanying photo as "ornamentation" - cherries stuck onto meat, elaborate garnishes, and decorative shapes. He illustrates that something simple like cooking can become a

myth. Creating a pleasing aesthetic solves the issues of taking raw materials and resources and transforming them into something else. To Barthes, the consumers of *Elle* magazine idealize visuals and “artifice,” and thus seek to replicate the recipes in the magazine. This illustrates that marketing can turn everyday activities into myths by stripping away reality and presenting an idealized version that communicates cultural values and ideals. Whether in sports, home cooking, or another setting, myths and their components have a prominent spot as a marketing strategy.

Summary of section

Overall, the five parts of the myth - narrative, time, place, archetype, and hero - come together to make an instrument for social cohesion and harmony. The myth fulfills its problem-solving function by making sense of reality, justifying decisions and actions, and providing a framework for conduct. Particularly, the hero component of myth, through challenging opposition in the narrative, serves as an example for this code of conduct. Rituals are a part of that code of conduct, especially in certain myths. Altogether, myth and its functions can be used in a marketing space to build a strong brand that connects with audiences and inspires them to follow the hero by buying the product. The next section will analyze two strong examples of mythic branding, and how the brands were built around a popular mythic hero.

Chapter 3 - Analysis

In this third chapter, I will be discussing how Martha Stewart and Michael Jordan demonstrate the forms and functions of mythic branding. Beginning with biographical and cultural context and then moving into their personal myths, this analysis shows how Jordan by Nike and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MLSO) use mythic principles to build distinctive and enduring brands. This analysis adds to the research on mythic rhetoric by illustrating how its utility extends to a nontypical context like marketing.

Context

Biographical background

Both figures have interesting biographies marked by perseverance, growth, and success. Michael Jordan was raised in a small North Carolina town and was involved in sports from a young age. Despite not making the varsity basketball team until his junior year of high school, Jordan rapidly progressed to star player status. He was recruited by legendary coach Dean Smith to play at the University of North Carolina. By his sophomore year, Jordan was the leading scorer for his team, making the game-winning basket in the 1982 national championship game against Georgetown. It was in college that Jordan began to be known for his quick moves, jump shots, and dunking skills on the court, adding “to the growing legend that was Jordan himself” (Witry, 2022). In 1984, Jordan was drafted to play with the Chicago Bulls. He was quickly recognized as a rising star and was named Rookie of the Year. (Hehir, 2020). Also in 1984, Jordan signed a shoe deal with the then small-scale brand Nike, launching the first Nike “Air Jordan” shoe. The shoe sold over 100 million dollars’ worth in the first year alone, way beyond the 3 million dollar projected 3-year revenue (Earl and Burbank, 2025; Rovell, 2013). Although Jordan broke his foot in his second professional season, he recovered and returned during the

playoffs where he continued to build his reputation on the court, setting himself apart as a superstar. In 1987 and 1988, Jordan won the NBA Slam Dunk contests back-to-back, further distinguishing his athletic abilities and driving up his brand in the public consciousness ([NBA.com](https://www.nba.com), 2026). In 1991, the Chicago Bulls, led by Jordan, won the NBA championship, the first in that team's history. This was followed by consecutive wins in 1992 and 1993. By 1993, Jordan was an established icon in professional basketball, with multiple MVPs, NBA All-Star appearances, and All-NBA selections, among other recognitions. His championship victories, individual accolades, and cultural influence positioned him not only as the league's most recognizable player but as one of the most celebrated athletes in the world ([NBA.com](https://www.nba.com), 2021).

Martha Stewart was raised in a big family in New Jersey in the 1950s and spent much of her childhood helping her mother and father in the kitchen and garden, setting her up for the future. She earned a degree in history and architectural design from Barnard College, after which she became a stockbroker on Wall Street. Her career in the domestic arts did not officially start until the mid 70's, when she used the business knowledge she accumulated to start her own catering company ([PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org), n.d). In 1971, Martha and her husband moved into a new home in Connecticut, named Turkey Hill, where Stewart used her skills of renovation and homemaking to transform the neglected property into a renowned farmhouse and garden that served as the base for her growing business (Stewart, 2025). In a few years, she used the success of her business to write several books on cooking, gardening, holiday preparation, weddings, and other aspects of home and lifestyle. It was during this time that Stewart began consulting at Kmart, serving as a spokesperson and assisting with product creation. In 1990, Stewart developed her own magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, featuring recipes, advice, and home tips with her as editor-in-chief. (Cutler, 2024). At its peak, the magazine was circulating 2 million copies per issue (Marritz,

2011). Three years later, Stewart launched a popular television segment under the same name and concept of her magazine (Schreiber and Buiano, 2025). In 1997, Stewart began to sell products at Kmart as the “Martha Everyday” line, which continued to expand in subsequent years due to its popularity. Her line contributed \$1.5 billion of the chain's \$36 billion in revenue (Hayes, 2002). By the early 2000s, Stewart had built a powerful lifestyle empire spanning publishing, television, and retail, solidifying her position as one of the most influential figures in American domestic lifestyle.

Historical and cultural background

Before delving deeper into their individual myths, there are two contextual factors to consider with both Jordan and Stewart: race and gender. Michael Jordan’s rise to prominence occurred during a period of significant cultural and racial transformation in the United States. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Civil Rights movement had reshaped legal and social structures. While segregation and legally enforced forms of discrimination declined, more covert forms like residential segregation, employment discrimination, and other subtle social and economic practices continued (Bowser, 1985). Incidents of racial violence, such as the Rodney King incident and the murder of Michael Griffith, also increased in the 80’s into the 90’s (Gup, 1988; Rehder, 2018).

Despite continued discrimination and violence, many African American figures rose to prominence in mainstream culture. Superstars in music (like Michael Jackson, Run DMC) and media (Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington) emerged. Directors like the Academy Award Winner Spike Lee introduced mainstream culture to race relations and problems in the Black community with films such as “Do the Right Thing” and “She’s Gotta Have It.” Many Black athletes were extremely popular at the time, such as Mike Tyson, Bo Jackson, and Michael

Jordan. In the NBA, in particular, most of the players, including the most popular in the league, were black, and became very well known.

There has been much research into the intersection of black athletes in majority white culture. Prior to the 80s, Black athletes did not show up in brand endorsements, with OJ Simpson one of the forerunners (Folk, 2024). Ferber (2007) explains how contemporary racism took on a more subtle form during this time. Azzarito and Harrison (2008) discuss that while Black men were associated with physical superiority and natural athleticism, it perpetuated the harmful stereotype that white athletes succeed with intelligence, effort and discipline. Despite being accepted by mainstream culture, Black athletes were framed in certain, palatable ways deemed appropriate to White audiences. However, Mocarski (2014) asserts that Black athletes who achieve superstardom can effectively supersede the bounds of race through their popularity. Overall, the 1990s were a complex, transitional decade where progress in media and sports existed alongside racism and social unrest.

Similarly, the 1990s were a period of progress and tension for women. Many of the advancements that had been made for women's rights in the second wave of feminism began to emerge at the start of the third wave in the 90's. Women in the U.S. showed up in the workforce like never before (Covert, 2017). The same time period saw many women enter places of power, like First Lady Hillary Clinton taking an unprecedented role in health care reform, before launching her own political career in 2001. Madeline Albright became the first woman U.S. Secretary of State, one of the most powerful diplomatic positions in the world, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a major figure in constitutional law and women's rights, was appointed Supreme Court justice. However, sexism still showed up in different ways despite progress. Women were subject to scrutiny in multiple high-profile news stories, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal,

and the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. The rise of the 24-hour news cycle also meant women in public life were constantly analyzed, scandalized, or sexualized. However, the publicity of these two incidents set the growing stage for more equality (Yarrow, 2018).

The biggest difference between the second wave of feminism and third wave of the 90s was the inclusivity and intersectionality (Evans, 2016). With the newest wave of feminism, the objective was different: empowering women by allowing them to find their own expression of femininity and identity, whatever that meant to them. Race and sexuality were important to younger feminists. Prominent figures emerged as cultural leaders, such as Courtney Love and Madonna who showed that women could challenge traditional expectations of femininity. Oprah Winfrey became a powerful media figure whose platform emphasized personal empowerment, self-improvement, and the visibility of women's experiences. Martha Stewart as well, represented a new type of femininity which combined the traditional domestic expertise, with authority, independence, and corporate power (Brunsdon, 2005). Overall, the 90's was a time of progress and advancement for women, working to redefine strict gender roles and attitudes. Both Jordan and Stewart existed and developed their brands in these historical and cultural contexts. Despite limitations and boundaries due to race or gender, they were able to succeed and grow as heroes, eventually developing into the extraordinary mythic figures who transcended the world around them.

Methodology

In the next section, I will be breaking down both Jordan and Stewart's branding myths, according to the framework posed by Rowland (1990) discussed in chapter two. My analysis draws from the marketing materials, such as ads, promotions, and commercials distributed by their marketing teams that showcased the myths of Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart. I read

through and watched the various marketing materials, looking for patterns, key themes, and repeating keywords to derive fuller meaning. Essentially, I examined how their brands took their myths and “sold” them to the public.

Both Jordan and Stewart came to prominence and were at their height of popularity *before* the widespread use of social media. Therefore, these case studies look different than perhaps more contemporary examples due to the absence of current technology. I examine traditional media and marketing materials for this analysis because that is what was available. From the Jordan brand, I analyzed 13 TV commercials and 10 print ads from 1987 through 1993. I chose this time range because 1987 was the first time the Jumpman logo was used, distinguishing Jordan by Nike as the brand we know today, and 1993 was the last year Jordan played for the Bulls before his first retirement. I sourced the videos from YouTube. The print materials were more difficult to source, due to the lack of reliable databases cataloging them. I was able to find most print materials on second-hand websites selling the prints, or as graphics accompanying an article written on Jordan. As for the MSLO brand, I analyzed 13 commercials, two tv promos for her show, and five books. All the videos were found on YouTube, and the books in print. I chose that time range because 1997 was the official introduction of Martha Stewart retail in Kmart stores, although they had collaborated before that date. Additionally, 2003 precedes her legal issues and trial. For the scope of this thesis, I will not be analyzing either brand during crisis or scandal because doing so would introduce additional complexities related to reputation management and image repair that fall outside the focus of this mythic branding analysis.

Mythic Forms in branding

As reviewed in the previous chapter, myth has five components that make up its rhetorical power. These components make their way into the branding of Jordan and Stewart, which is discussed below. Narrative, time, and place add the compelling storytelling aspect that engages the audience with the brand and the product. Archetype provides enriching images that strengthen the brand image and, again, an emotional connection for the audience. Lastly, the hero serves as a clear and inspiring representative of the brand who sells the product as part of the myth. These elements are prominent in the marketing campaigns for Jordan and Stewart's brands. Each campaign will be analyzed to demonstrate both the presence and the utility of myth in branding.

Jordan

Narrative

The first characteristic of myth is a narrative format. As mentioned in the literature review, storytelling is also a prominent marketing strategy, providing a memorable structure on which branding messages and images can be built. The Jordan brand created a story around Jordan based on key characteristics of his character and abilities: being superhuman, otherworldly, and a cultural standard. Jordan, a superhuman man with extraordinary abilities, engages in conflict with both physical and metaphysical opponents. Through it all he sports that year's newest pair of Air Jordans. As a cosmic-level figure, his influence and victory on the court extend past basketball and into everyday life, inspiring audiences to be extraordinary in their own lives.

First, Jordan was superhuman. In many of his ads, Jordan is pictured jumping extremely high or dunking majestically in a hoop. Playing with the Chicago Bulls, Jordan was known for his extraordinary leaping ability and acrobatic maneuvers (Johnson, 1984). The Jumpman logo,

first used by the Jordan brand in 1987, serves as an icon stamped onto all the shoes that are sold to the public, reminding wearers of his abilities. The ads amplified what he was already doing on the court and illustrated his mythic abilities. For example, the Air Jordan III commercials, starring Mars Blackmon, illustrate his extraordinary performance. Blackmon, a character taken from the popular 1986 movie *She's Gotta Have It*, was created and played by director Spike Lee, who also directed the commercials. In the movie, Blackmon, a New Yorker, is an avid fan of Michael Jordan and wears Air Jordans everywhere, including to bed (Rehder, 2018). In one ad from 1988 (Nice Kicks, 2010). Blackmon remarks, "Nobody in the world can cover my main man Michael Jordan", exclaiming in the end "Impossible!" The montage in the back shows Jordan dunking no less than ten times. Blackmon's dialogue implies that Jordan is superhuman because no earthly person can compete with him. In another commercial, Blackmon is pictured holding onto the basketball rim, boasting about his hangtime and claiming it's because of his Air Jordans (HK-KICKS by Egg廚, 2013). A couple seconds later, it's revealed that he's actually standing on the shoulders of Jordan himself. The height discrepancy between the two reveals how much bigger Jordan is than the average person- quite literally "larger than life." At the end of the commercial, Jordan dunks in the basket easily, driving home the point that he can do things other people cannot do. Print ads from that year continue to play off the size discrepancy between the two. A series of ads differentiate the best on Earth (Jordan) vs. Best on Mars (Blackmon). Jordan is pictured as a much taller figure than Blackmon in one ad (Nike, 1988b), resting his arm nonchalantly on the top of Blackmon's head in another (Nike, 1988c), and palming Blackmon's head like a basketball in yet another (Nike, 1988a). Such ads, commercials, and icons display his superhuman qualities, capable of doing extraordinary things others cannot even attempt. In a commercial from 1989 (Nice Kicks), Blackmon holds up an Air Jordan shoe

and exclaims “Can!,” signifying that the audience is able to purchase the popular new shoes. “Can’t!” he says emphatically, when the camera pans away to Jordan taking a leaping shot. As these examples show, because of the way Jordan’s extraordinary basketball abilities and superhuman size set him apart from normal people, he is designated as the heroic main character in a branding narrative that inspires audiences.

Second, Jordan was an otherworldly figure. Not only were his abilities superhuman, they didn’t belong in the regular world, and the marketing of his brand showcases that. Several commercials imply that Jordan transcends Earth. In a commercial promoting the Air Jordan V, Mars Blackmon asks Jordan, “What makes you the best player in the universe?” (Hokupguy Classics, 2022). The distinction of “universe” already sets Jordan apart as otherworldly. Blackmon rattles off a list of things, including Air Jordans, that could contribute to Jordan’s larger-than-life abilities. After each, Jordan shakes his head and says no, signifying that not only are his abilities unattainable, he also exists in another category altogether. In the same vein, Jordan starred in several commercials with Warner Bros.’s Looney Tunes characters that played upon this theme. In one of these commercials promoting the Air Jordan VIII (Nice Kicks, 2010), Jordan and Bugs Bunny team up to rescue a batch of the new Air Jordans that were stolen. Even the choice of villain in the commercial Marvin the Martian alludes to the otherworldly theme, and his competitors are not normal human beings. The commercial is set in outer space, removing Jordan from the ordinary world. In the end, he restores order by returning the Air Jordans back to earth.

These depictions of Jordan’s otherworldliness mirror Campbell’s (1973) “monomyth” commonly referred to as the hero’s journey. In this myth, (as reviewed in the previous chapter), the hero leaves the natural world and enters another world, removed from their home realm to

achieve a particular goal that is part of their calling. The hero, along the way of achieving this goal, experiences opposition, through which they persevere. In the end, the hero is victorious, bringing the benefits of victory to the people. In the same manner, Jordan leaves the natural world, wearing his Air Jordans, and enters the universe to fight against similarly superhuman opponents. For instance, in the Looney Tunes commercial (Nice Kicks, 2010), the goal is to get back the stolen sneakers, but normally, the goal is to compete on the court. As in the commercial, Jordan is always victorious and his audiences shares in that victory. Altogether, Jordan is an otherworldly hero because he transcends this earth in his abilities, domain, and his achievements. Adding to his otherworldliness, Jordan also breaks natural laws. This separates him as a heroic figure by disconnecting him from the limitations that normal people must abide by. If Jordan was bound by limitations, he would not be able to confront the problems in the myth and solve them. In a 1990 commercial, Blackmon, with Jordan watching, asks a professor from the “American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics” how Jordan defies gravity (Channel 23, 2025). The assertion within the question is bold - Jordan is not challenged by normal constraints. The professor replies, giving his expert opinion which was duplicated in a print ad from the same year: “Michael Jordan overcomes the acceleration of gravity by the application of his muscle power in the vertical plane, thus producing a low altitude orbit.” The haphazard, hyperbolic explanation, while humorous, does not make sense according to natural laws, despite the best effort of top minds. In both the print ad (Falchi, 2020) and commercial (Channel 23, 2025), Jordan demonstrates his gravity defying dunking skills, which are indeed impressive. The commercial finishes with Jordan looking skeptically at the professor, then at the audience, clearly disagreeing with the given explanation.

Other print ads allude to Jordan taking flight, the most common natural law he breaks as an otherworldly figure. One ad from 1992 shows him dunking high in the sky (Union Room, 2017). No ground is seen, just blue sky and clouds, positioning Jordan quite literally in flight. Similarly, a 1992 ad promoting the Air Jordan VII pictures Jordan completing a one-handed dunk at five different stages (Nike, n.d.); at none of the stages is he on the ground, and in three of the five he is fully airborne. The ad is titled “The Art of the Dunk,” highlighting that Jordan’s abilities transcend physics to become artistic. Another ad from 1989 (Nike), titled “A high-flying, death-defying 360 slam dunk”, illustrates his flying abilities once again. Jordan, sporting Air Jordan IV’s, is shown suspended mid-air, in the process of dunking a ball. In contrast, Mars Blackmon is shown staring upwards at Jordan, wide-eyed. Blackmon represents the audience who is wowed by Jordan’s skills and the fact that he transcends this world. In all these ads and commercials, the otherworldly depictions and the fictitious science remove Jordan from the real world into another place, adding to his mythic hero status.

Lastly, Jordan is a cultural hero. He inspires his audience by setting cultural standards, as portrayed by his brand. For one, the choice of co-actors in his ad campaigns solidifies his place as a leader in the culture. In a commercial with Mars Blackmon (Sneaker History Podcast, 2019), Jordan is portrayed with a love interest, Nola Darling from the movie *She’s Gotta Have It*. In the movie, Nola was trying to decide between three guys, one of them being Blackmon. While in the movie, Nola chooses none of the suitors, in the ad, she is pictured enamored with Jordan, clearly choosing him over Blackmon. Jordan alters the cultural fabric by inserting himself into the plot of the movie. Blackmon pesters Nola about her reasons for choosing Jordan, to which she acts annoyed. Finally, she answers, “it’s because he has the newest Air Jordans!” This is just one of many commercials where Jordan is depicted as being more attractive and cooler than most.

Incorporating Looney Tunes as an ad campaign in the early 90's also set him up as a desirable cultural standard, but to a different audience. While the ads and commercials with Mars Blackmon emphasized his more fashionable side, the new campaign (eventually leading to him starring in the movie "Space Jam") with the lovable and well-known cartoon characters widened his appeal, casting him as a hero for everyone. In the 1992 Superbowl commercial (FM1156, 2017), Jordan helps Bugs Bunny defeat a group of basketball players who were bullying him. Bugs Bunny takes on the title "Hare Jordan," a nod to Jordan's nickname "Air Jordan" and namesake of the shoes. Bugs even straps on his own pair of sneakers while they take turns dunking on their opponents, once again connecting the overall branding narrative to the product. The commercial is silly and lighthearted, showcasing Jordan in a different light than his previous commercials. With a large segment of Air Jordan consumers being youth (Wilson and Sparks, 1996), incorporating cartoon characters engages that specific segment. Furthermore, Looney Tunes characters are recognizable by older generations as well. A 1993 print ad (National Museum of American History), playing on the famous Bugs Bunny line reads "What's up jock?" Jordan looks skeptically at the audience while Bugs chews his carrot to the left side of Jordan. Pairing Jordan with other multigenerational icons demonstrates his prominence and relatability in culture. Not only are his shoes fashionable, he himself is an icon in culture.

Altogether, the Jordan brand emphasizes messages of Jordan as a superhuman, otherworldly hero who defies bounds and limitations of the natural world. The branding narrative structure provides a memorable framework for these messages depicted in the commercials and advertisements. His Air Jordans are ever present in the narrative, as a key part of what he uses to accomplish great feats. Additionally, the narrative structure allows consumers to connect emotionally with the hero, subsequently adding value to the product. Through mythic portrayals,

the brand positions Air Jordans as symbolic extensions of the Jordan's abilities and cultural status. The sales pitch at the end is silent; buying Air Jordans is one way consumers can participate in the mythic story.

Time and Place

The mythic time and mythic place are part of the setting in which the branding narrative exists. They work together to remove the story from ordinary and everyday experience and position it within an otherworldly realm. Mythic time does not unfold like everyday, chronological time but instead occurs in high-stakes moments that hold special cultural significance to the audience. In Jordan's case, advertising and marketing materials consistently frame time as "game time," particularly moments of competition, last-second decision making, and peak athletic performance. For instance, a 1991 commercial aired after the Chicago Bulls' first win takes place, as Mars Blackmon introduces, the NBA Finals (Analog Memories, 2015). The commercial features real clips from the NBA championship games, with Jordan successfully taking shot after shot. In the stands, the crowd cheers. The NBA championship games are a mythic time, separated from normal life during a few days in the summer. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people tune in to watch the best US teams compete. Often, these teams hold special significance to their fans, and the players are part of that significance. Commercials set during the NBA championship like this one, illustrate the special, sacred time in which Jordan exists. Because many can relate to this experience, it builds connection to the product in the audience's mind.

Additionally, Jordan's ads and commercials always feature or take place on the basketball court. Mythic place is created through the repeated use of the court, which is shown not simply as a physical location but as a symbolic space where the hero is tested and proven.

Ads often isolate Jordan in these gameday environments or show him suspended in midair, emphasizing that the court is where he becomes extraordinary. For example, a commercial from 1992 simply presents a simple, slow-motion clip of Jordan dunking a basketball (Weathers, 2021). It's a direct display of his extraordinary character, skills, and abilities. There is no text or voiceover, just Jordan, the ball, and the court. Removed from all the things that make him normal and mortal, commercials like this support a mythic narrative in which Jordan's achievements transcend ordinary experience. The mythic time and place also add symbolic value to the sneaker that is part of the Jordan myth, by separating it from an ordinary setting it usually would be worn.

Archetype

With every myth comes archetypal language, a key ingredient supporting the mythic narrative. Brands themselves are symbolic representations of larger, meaningful structures that hold deeper significance for consumers. Specifically, Jordan's brand is wrought with the broad, symbolic language that creates bold, meaningful images in the audience's mind. The language also creates an emotional aspect which strengthens the brand's connection with audiences. A central theme is flight, as depicted in the many references to "air," including the name of the shoe itself. There are other similar words such as gravity, flight, etc. Examples of this include the 1992 ad of Jordan dunking in the sky (Union Room, 2017) and the 1990 commercial with Mars Blackmon and the physics professor (Channel 23, 2025), both mentioned above. The conclusion after each use of these archetypes is that Jordan supersedes bounds, limitations and natural abilities, creating a clear presentation of a superhuman hero.

Additionally, there are many instances of superlatives within the commercials and ads that drive home his portrayal as a larger-than-life figure. The word "best" occurs frequently, as

does the premise that Jordan is “better.” The commercial and ad campaign with Mars Blackmon especially exemplifies this. Blackmon calls Jordan “the best on earth”(Nike, 1988a) and “the best player in the universe” (Hokupguy Classics, 2022) These words further elevate him above opposition, positioning him at the top of not only the athletic hierarchy but cultural as well. Overall, the audience understands and relates to these archetypal words because everyone has experienced them and the values they communicate. By connecting these common experiential words into the branding narrative, the audience can co-create meaning, making for a more memorable and relatable brand image. Together, archetypal words enrich the Jordan myth and the efficacy of the brand.

Hero

The last component in myth is the hero. In Jordan’s myth, he is the heroic main character, and that is reflected in the marketing of his brand. As mentioned in the literature review, audiences are drawn to representation in marketing, particularly if that person is popular in culture. Celebrity status has a positive influence on brand image, recall, and most importantly, purchase intent. Jordan was immensely famous during that time, and virtually all the commercials feature Jordan front and center, wearing the latest Air Jordans. Through cobranding, as discussed in the previous chapter, Jordan lent Nike the heroic representation they needed to sell their products and grow Nike into the great brand it is today. The ad campaign with Mars Blackmon illustrates Jordan as that heroic representation. While Blackmon (played by Spike Lee) was famous in his own right, he did not come close to the popularity and fame of Jordan, nor his abilities or physical stature. For example, the aforementioned “hangtime” commercial (HK-KICKS by Egg廚, 2013) from 1988 first pictures Blackmon holding onto the rim of the basketball hoop, claiming he is the best player in the game. However, the camera pans

down to show Blackmon wearing the Air Jordan sneakers and standing on the shoulders of Jordan himself. It quickly becomes obvious that Blackmon would not have been able to reach the rim without Jordan. This is just one instance of Jordan being the hero in the commercial's plot, mirroring the hero he is in real life. Without his superhuman abilities and otherworldly qualities, as discussed above in other commercials and ads, Jordan would not be the larger-than-life figure that can solve the problems confronted in the myth or serve as a societal model (Rowland, 1990). Heroes also fulfill two core functions, which are discussed in the functions section in a later section.

Stewart

Narrative

Likewise, Martha Stewart's myth follows the limited definition Rowland (1990) poses. As for her narrative, Stewart is the quintessential homemaker - she cooks, organizes and cleans, decorates, hosts and entertains, and gardens. The narrative not only sets the stage for the myth, but it also helps audiences connect to Stewart and the brand as a whole.

Unlike more traditional depictions, in Stewart's commercials, she is not shown to be a woman in service to her household and family, but her home is in service to her. She is the master of her realm and does things well, efficiently, and thoughtfully. For example, in the 2000 Thanksgiving commercial, Stewart is shown leading the household in holiday prep, and sitting at the head of the table, signaling her essential figurehead role in her home (DH Ad Archivez, 2022). "From my table to yours" she says surrounded by her family. Rather than indicate "his table" or "our table," the language emphasizes Stewart being in ownership. Her niece at some point says, "Aunt Martha likes this," which shows she has the final say. In many of her Kmart ads, such as the 1998 white sale commercial, she refers to her products as "my line," again,

establishing her as the master of her home. Such depictions showcase Stewart's position as Ruler in her myth.

Looking through a broader lens, Stewart is a Creator. She imparts organization, beauty, and goodness where there is disorder and chaos. For one, Stewart's environment is always portrayed as being beautiful and in order. In the 2002 TV Kmart commercial, Stewart wakes up smiling and rested in a plush-looking bed (Chuck D's All-New Classic TV Clubhouse, 2024). Every scene displays a cheerful, clean, and cozily decorated house. "With the Everyday Martha Stewart Line, you'll wake up to good mornings" she promises. The following clips show scenes of happy family members, enjoying the home. Nothing, not even the people, are out of order. Another example is one of Stewart's promo for her TV show (Taylor, 2020). Every scene except for one, features her smiling. The promo is a montage of her doing various household tasks in the garden, kitchen, and bedroom with a cheerful disposition. Nothing is portrayed as a struggle, but rather that Stewart is in control. Even when rushing, like in the first Kmart ad for the Everyday Line (Commercials-N-Ads, 2024), Stewart is still portrayed as having a clean, sunny house, with everything in its place.

Additionally, as Creator and Ruler, Stewart offers quality and luxury, even in ordinary, everyday things. As discussed in the previous chapter, brands help reduce risk for consumers and signal quality - which is exactly what the MLSO brand does for the cobranded products it sells with Kmart. In a 1997 Kmart commercial, Stewart is presiding over a vast cotton field (Chuck D's All-New Classic TV Clubhouse, 2018). She watches as the cotton gets harvested and even orders the tractors to get started. The audience can trust the quality of Stewart's products because she is involved in transforming them from raw materials to the finished product. In a Kmart commercial the next year, Stewart meticulously counts the thread count in her newly released

bed sheets and linens (Random Retro Commercials, 2024). She holds the magnifying glass, ensuring that high quality is accounted for. Stewart, as the arbiter of good quality in her mythic narrative, holds the standard for which quality is measured. The good quality extends past the product itself to the experience as well. Stewart showcases the luxury that the audience can expect from her products. For example, in a 2000 commercial (Commercials-N-Ads, 2024), Stewart talks about her sheets from a catamaran - a luxury boating vessel. The commercial ends when they reach an island paradise destination. Similarly, in a 1999 commercial, Stewart, wearing a full-length gown, introduces her new Everyday Furniture line (PastMeetsPresent, 2017). While the furniture itself is the focal point, a giant pool is featured, with waiters serving drinks nearby. Through these portrayals, Stewart is positioned as both Creator and Ruler, a figure who oversees the transformation of ordinary materials into products and experiences defined by quality, order, and refined living.

Lastly, Stewart's brand plays into her role of authority on household matters. Again, brands with a well-known representative have a positive influence on consumer behavior, particularly if that representative is an expert in their field. As an expert, Stewart guides her audiences through the domestic realm as a wise sage with coveted knowledge. Like the hero's journey (Campbell, 1973), she conquers opposition in the otherworldly realms on our behalf, to bestow the benefit of her expertise on her audiences. As showcased in a Kmart commercial in 2000, Stewart is pictured cultivating a garden (The Tape Keeper, 2024). Young smiling girls singsongly ask her questions about growing a good garden themselves, to which Stewart aptly answers. Stewart's various books and manuals also market her as an expert authority. In multiple of the intro to her books, for instance, in Stewart's book on holiday hosting (Stewart, 1997a; 1997b) and book on organization (Stewart, 2001), she introduces her experiences growing up

and running her successful catering business as her credentials for giving advice. Readers trust her knowledge and therefore follow her advice. Through these portrayals, Stewart's brand constructs her not simply as a lifestyle personality but as a guiding authority within the domestic sphere. Her expertise, instructional tone, and consistent positioning as a trusted advisor reinforce her mythic roles as homemaker, Creator/Ruler, and domestic guru. Not only that, her roles in the narrative extend past the figurative, mythic world and drive up the perceived value of the physical products she sells, encouraging audiences to take part in the myth of the brand.

Time and Place

As with Jordan, Stewart exists within mythic time and place in the overall branding narrative. As with Jordan, the setting of the narrative creates memorable connections that support the overall brand image. Regarding mythic time, Stewart functions during sacred periods, such as holidays, gatherings with friends and family, and dinnertime at the table. These rituals, as explained in the previous chapter, give the audience a sense of security, and a connection to something larger than themselves. In the US, there are several important sacred times that everyone collectively observes. For example, Stewart caters to holidays, as pictured in her Christmas (All Life Commercial, 2024) and Thanksgiving commercials (DH Ad Archivez, 2022). These occasions are removed from ordinary temporal life, by the fact that they are symbolic rituals.

Sacred times of gathering and celebration are closely tied to sacred locations. Although the home may seem commonplace and mundane since we exist in this space every day, the home is far from, as Eliade and Mairet (1960) put it, "profane" (p. 23). The home, separate from the building structure, is valued and revered in culture. Stewart dwells in these sacred times and rules over this domain. Her books are written on special ritual times, like weddings, Christmas,

and even Halloween (Stewart, 2001). She introduces her own experiences with ritual times at the beginning of her books, for example, in the 1997 *Christmas with Martha Stewart Living* book (Stewart), she talks about family traditions that are an inspiration to her, and in turn, she shares with us. Another example are her holiday ads. In a 2003 Christmas Kmart commercial (All Life Commercial, 2024), heartwarming scenes of families enjoying Christmas activities are presented. Products from Stewart's lines are used, like her Christmas tree and decorations. Stewart resides as a benevolent and calming presence in the background, observing the Christmas rituals. The commercial implies that Stewart's items are an essential part of the special time. Overall, the mythic setting sets the stage for narrative, and particularly in ritual contexts, sticks in the memory of the consumers.

Archetype

Stewart's brand uses symbolic archetypes that evokes images of order, beauty, and the home. As discussed in the literature review, human brands like Jordan and MLSO, audiences help co-construct the brand's image and significance through their understanding of it. One way this can happen is through broad, relatable experiences described in archetypal language. Stewart's audiences are presented with order and disorder, particularly in domestic spaces. The importance of order within the household is not something that audiences need to be persuaded to comprehend. Similarly, beauty is a universal archetype which the audience understands and values. Stewart pursues beauty in everything she does; in addition to order, this archetype is deeply embedded into the brand myth. And lastly, every person understands the significance of the home, and the domestic harmony it provides. This specific archetype is strongest throughout Stewart's myth. Not only does the home evoke powerful associations, when audiences see or read about this archetype, it also imparts a deeper emotional connection to the mythic narrative

as a whole. Together, these themes construct Stewart's archetypal role as a figure who brings order and beauty to everyday life by transforming domestic chaos into the ideal home.

Hero

The final component in myth is the hero. In Stewart's branding myth, she is the heroic main character. As that central representative, she helps the brand evolve beyond a normal brand and serve as a problem-solving tool in society. Stewart is set apart from ordinary individuals through her expertise, authority, and ability to transform everyday spaces into environments of order and beauty. For instance, in the 2000 commercial introducing her "Everyday Garden" line, Stewart replies to cheerful questions on gardening from a group of little girls (The Tape Keeper, 2024). We see the end product, a lush garden of colorful flowers - as proof that her advice is the correct one. In another commercial from 1997 (Commercials-N-Ads, 2024), we catch glimpses of Martha's bright and organized house in between images of her rushing out the door. Despite the circumstances, she still maintains order in the household. Stewart occupies a position of control within the narrative where her actions guide the transformation from disorder to harmony, as pictured in commercials like these; all the desired outcomes and experiences in the home revolve around her and her expertise. Stewart and her entire brand represent the idealized qualities characterizing her myth, and in doing so, she not only resolves the problems presented within the domestic sphere but also serves as a way in which audiences can impart meaning and value into their lives.

Mythic functions

Now that I have established an idea of the individual myths of Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart, it is important to connect their myths to how they are used by their marketing teams to sell products. As Rowland (1990) asserts, a myth cannot be separated from its function.

The main function of myth is problem-solving, which, as outlined in the previous chapter, occurs in three dimensions: sense-making, justifying action, and providing a code of conduct. In the section below, I connect these mythic functions to the marketing/selling of Air Jordan sneakers and Martha Stewart Kmart products.

First, Jordan and Stewart's myths help make sense of the world in their own separate ways. Jordan rationalizes effort and performance. Through his own example, he shows that extreme achievement is fathomable. In the 1988 commercial with Mars Blackmon discussed above (Nice Kicks, 2010), Jordan, with his Air Jordans on, dunks almost a dozen times in the background of the short video. In the foreground, Blackmon declares, "Nobody in the world can cover my main man MJ!" The bold claim and montage of aerial dunks drive the point that while such a level of skill is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, it's still possible. In ads and commercials like these, the Nike sneakers Jordan wears are positioned not simply as athletic gear, but as symbols associated with the pursuit of greatness. While the audience lacks the superhuman element that makes Jordan outstanding, they can strive to be like him as much as possible and achieve greatness in their own way.

As for Stewart, her myth serves a sense-making function by rationalizing the uncontrollable aspects of life: cleanliness, order, and domestic harmony. As the hero, she provides order in the home and family, imparting meaning and value to everyday domestic work/tasks. She offers the audiences the keys to similar control through not only her advice, but the products she uses and sells. For instance, in the 2000 Thanksgiving commercial for Kmart (DH Ad Archivez, 2022), Stewart presides as the leader of the preparations. The audience is familiar with the chaos and stress that accompany holiday preparations. Instead, we see calm task completion, smiles, and cozy family time. Throughout the commercial, we also see close-ups of

kitchen utensils, pots and table linens, as part of the Martha Stewart Everyday Line being advertised. Through these types of portrayals, Stewart's myth reframes household work from a source of discomfort and unpredictability into a space of control, satisfaction, and significance. In doing so, it provides audiences with a framework for understanding everyday life, where the purchase of her products becomes part of achieving that sense of stability and harmony.

Second, Jordan and Stewart's myths work to justify action by reinforcing why certain behaviors are desirable. In Jordan's myth, excellence is desirable, and he shows us why we should strive for excellence through his achievements. For instance, in the "Michael Jordan Flight school" ad (Nike, 1991), audiences learn about all the cool things Jordan does to maintain who he is and what he does; examples include "learn how to dazzle defenses, learn how to wear really cool sneakers, learn how to sign lotsa autographs." In the ad, Blackmon showcases Jordan's lifestyle and successes as something worth aspiring to. The Air Jordan sneakers then become symbolically tied to that pursuit, serving as a practical way for consumers to align themselves with the values and success that Jordan represents. Overall, the myth supports the pursuit of excellence by demonstrating its benefits and encouraging audiences to work towards the same.

In the same manner, Stewart justifies the benefit of taking care and nurturing the household. In her Kmart commercials, everyday domestic tasks are elevated into rewarding experiences where effort results in visible beauty and harmony. For example, the 2002 Kmart "white sale" commercial illustrates the mundanity of the home to a blissful place (Chuck D's All-New Classic TV Clubhouse, 2024). While the commercial advertises sheets and linens sold by Kmart, we also see the order and happiness the household is experiencing. Stewart wakes up in a bed with perfectly fluffed pillows, a smile on her face. A woman picks from an assortment of

new, starched dish towels, arranged tastefully. A young girl smiles and breathes in the clean and ironed white curtains. A mother and her young son cuddle in a freshly-made bed with plaid sheets. The montage frames household care not as a burden, but as a desirable practice that gives joy to everyone. Stewart's product lines then become directly tied to that outcome, offering consumers the tools needed to achieve the same level of order, elegance, and control within their own homes. Overall, the myth justifies everyday actions that otherwise would not be as valued if not for Stewart.

Third, their myths provide a code of conduct to follow. Jordan demonstrates how to live life excellently and extraordinarily, not settling for less. Regardless of the arena, his audiences have a model to follow within the myth. This is discussed further in the hero section below. Additionally, Stewart demonstrates how to have a pleasant home in her own myth. As the hero, she also models and exemplifies idealized action. Again, this is discussed in the section below. Altogether, all three dimensions solve the same problem from different angles. In the case of Jordan's myth, the shoes are part of the rational solution that addresses limitations and mediocrity that society faces. As for Stewart, her product line is built into the solution she offers against disorder, ugliness, and disharmony in the home. Without the tangible goods that act as practical ways to enact the brand's myth, the myth would not be as effective a tool in Jordan and Stewart's marketing.

Hero functions in Myth

As discussed in the literature review, the hero is an important part of mythic branding. As Osorio (2020) mentioned, human brands that center around an individual have the ability to create deeper meaning for the product that individual represents. In a human brand, the representative empowers the brand to evolve into something greater connected to values,

identity, and emotion. The product does not exist in isolation but becomes associated with the messages of the branding myth and heroic representative. Within myth, the hero specifically has two important functions. He or she battles a foe and serves as a template for behavior. Both Jordan and Stewart fulfill all functions of a hero, while also highlighting different aspects of those functions. While Jordan's myth foregrounds the conquering hero and illustrates the additional cultural work such figures can perform, Stewart's myth positions her at the center of ritual space, where values are enacted and sustained. Below, I review both the general hero functions and the specific.

Jordan

The foe, as constructed by the Nike marketing team, is both actual and figurative. In reality, the opposing team players are his opposition. He competes against them for victory. Returning to Campbell's (1968) hero's journey, Jordan's narrative parallels the same separation, initiation, and return. Jordan is already separated from ordinary people when he is in the arena. With his superhuman abilities, he battles with the opposing team, something the audience cannot do. In the 1991 NBA championship commercial, we witness how Jordan engages foes on the court. Even when removed to the fictional cartoon world, Jordan also faces opposition. In the Looney Tunes commercial from 1993 (Nice Kicks, 2010), Jordan helps Bugs Bunny rescue stolen Air Jordans from space. He faces Marvin the Martian and other enemies who try to stop him, but he still uses his athletic prowess. In the end, he returns triumphant to his fans, bringing honor and glory.

In a figurative sense, Jordan also struggles against metaphorical foes: self-imposed limits and mediocrity. This is something consumers can emotionally identify with. In every commercial and ad, Jordan is pictured doing some impressive athletic feats that appear to defy physical

limitations. Through imagery and depictions of gravity-defying moves, impossible shots, and soaring dunks, Jordan pushes the limits of what's possible for his audiences, distinguishing himself not only from his opponents but from the idea of being ordinary altogether. For example, in a 1992 ad mentioned above (Weathers, 2021), Jordan, wearing his Air Jordans, performs a one-handed dunk, spinning in the air before slamming the ball in the basket. The emphasis is on his prolonged hangtime and aerial skills. Portrayals like this one frame mediocrity as the true enemy - not just missing a basket or losing a game, but settling for an average performance or accepting one's limits. Jordan is consistently positioned as the hero who refuses the constraints of external competition and the internal temptation to remain mediocre. While viewers cannot replicate his athletic ability on the court, the myth promotes a broader message that greatness comes from pushing beyond expectations, a value that consumers connect with. In this way, Jordan fulfills the heroic function of fighting the foe.

Second, Jordan provides a template of behavior to his audiences. Very few people have the skills to pick up a ball on the court, much less play at the NBA level like Jordan. However, the myth does not sell the idea of being a professional hooper, but the more general idea that anyone can break out of the limitations posed to them, regardless of the realm. If one buys the shoes, one can live out the greatness that Jordan embodies every day. In many of the ads and commercials, Jordan is explicitly shown as a role model. His audience wants to emulate him. In a commercial promoting the Air Jordan VI's, Mars Blackmon starts off holding Alladin's lamp (Maaloxman., 2007). When asked by the genie, Blackmon turns down cash and a new car in favor of transforming into Michael Jordan. "Look Mom, I can fly!" - he exclaims after the transformation is complete. The commercial illustrates the idea that everyone wants to be "like Mike" and do the things he can do. In another commercial and accompanying ad called "Flight

School,” Blackmon sells a course on how to be like Jordan (MJ23 His Airness Forever, 2018; Nike, 1991). “Learn how to increase your hangtime, learn how to wear really cool sneakers, learn how to sign lotsa autographs, learn how to stick your tongue out during the game.” The ad, although humorous, plays on the fact that audiences model themselves after Jordan. Altogether, these portrayals demonstrate how Jordan’s myth fulfills both dimensions of the hero’s function, combining the defeat of real and symbolic foes with the modeling of ideal behavior. In doing so, the brand transforms Jordan into a figure whose actions not only represent greatness but also provide a framework for audiences to strive towards that greatness, including, buying his shoes.

Martha

Like Jordan, Martha is the hero in her branding myth, but she provides a different type of heroism rooted in mythic rituals. As a hero, she fights with a foe and showcases idealized behavior for her audiences. Where Jordan’s foes are partly physical, Martha’s foes are entirely metaphysical. The first foe takes the form of chaos as exemplified in the disorder, ugliness, and inefficiency of everyday life. Again, this is something consumers can identify with. For example, in the frontier myth, the hero faces the chaos and wildness of the West and subdues it for the good of American society. Likewise, Stewart faces the things that ordinary people struggle with and triumphs over it with grace. A good example of this is a 2001 Kmart commercial titled “Space Force” (Retail commercials, 2020). In the commercial, Stewart, wearing full astronaut gear, introduces her new “space line” designed to create more room and expert organization solutions in the home. Although a play on words for the sake of the commercial, outer space has been conceptualized as a frontier in political rhetoric (Scobee et al., 2023). As a symbolic frontierswoman, Stewart confronts disorder and raw materials without fear. In the end, she heroically bestows what she has learned from that victory with her audiences. Additionally, she

also struggles against societal views on domestic labor. Stewart elevates the household labor she does, designating it as a worthwhile pursuit. In the book series, *Good Things with Martha Stewart Living*, Stewart prefaces that she desires to give tips and advice on how to handle everyday life well (Stewart, 2001), which for audiences may include using her products to achieve that desired result. Through her efforts, Stewart triumphantly displaces common societal standards on what is important and valuable in her heroic narrative.

As a hero, Stewart also provides a template for behavior. She does this in two ways: providing examples for lifestyle and rituals. Closely tied with fighting the foe, Stewart gives an example for audiences to follow in taking care of their household. By showcasing and sharing her own lifestyle, she demonstrates what is possible. Again, audiences can transform their home into an organized and pleasing atmosphere through her knowledge and products. Like Jordan, she also challenges mediocrity and the limits of what someone can do, especially the homemaker. Consumers connect with the values that Stewart herself embodies as the heroic figurehead of her brand.

Stewart also demonstrates how to preside over a sacred ritual time in a way that is memorable. As mentioned in chapter two, rituals are important parts of culture, through which we enact our values. Through her products and the guidance in her books, magazine, and show, audiences have the opportunity to adopt the knowledge Stewart endows to society. The brand as a whole supports the memorable moments that consumers experience. For instance, in her Holiday book series, Stewart shares crafts, decor and tablescapes, and recipes for the Christmas season. In the intro at the beginning of volume four (2000), Stewart even talks about specific rituals by name, and how these suggestions can make celebration times “extra special” (p. 9).

With a branding representative to follow and a heroic model to emulate, the audience can imbue the same importance and significance into their rituals as Stewart has in hers.

Summary

This chapter examined a large sample of marketing materials from the Jordan brand and the MLSO brand through a rhetorical criticism lens. Despite contextual limiting factors such as race and gender discrimination, Michael Jordan and Martha Stewart were able to develop popular and socially significant brands based on their own mythic heroism. For Jordan, his myth involved a superhuman, otherworldly being who wins on the court and in culture. For Stewart, her myth involved a wise, benevolent guide who is the master of the household, rituals, and good things. The myths of their brands fulfill a problem-solving function in society through what they accomplish, and the products that aid them in those accomplishments. And lastly, as the heroes of their brand, Jordan and Stewart serve as examples who conquer opposition and model desirable behavior, inspiring audiences to achieve similarly in their own lives.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Summary

Existing since early times, myths are constructed stories that help communities communicate cultural values and interpret events, making the world more understandable. Myths also solve societal problems that cannot be solved through rational means. The problem-solving function has three dimensions of sense-making, justifying actions, and providing a code of conduct. This functional utility extends to multiple industries. In a marketing space, myths can be used to build strong brands that drive the sales of products. As a multicomponent structure, myth lends narrative, time, place, archetypes, and a heroic main character to the brand, which contributes to the overall brand image and reception. Specifically, the hero, who represents the brand, allows consumers to emotionally connect with the brand, inspiring them to emulate the hero's example. Altogether, mythic branding can be an effective marketing strategy because not only does it provide consumers with compelling structure, it also has the potential to grow a brand beyond ordinary significance. Connecting brand to myth allows the heroic representative to solve issues that society faces. In the case of the Jordan brand, Jordan and his shoes break the mold for what's possible, encouraging audiences to strive for more than average in their own lives. In the case of the Stewart, she endows knowledge and examples of order and beauty for audiences to emulate in their own homes and ritual times. Both brands are examples of mythic branding that adds to the developing body of knowledge on mythic theory and its utility in atypical contexts.

Limitations

There were several limitations within the scope of this thesis. The first limitation is the time range of the selected artifacts. Considering that the late 80's through early 2000's preceded

the era of social media, the analysis of this thesis looked much different than an analysis of more current examples of mythic branding. This analysis was restricted to print and traditional media, which were limited in amount. Thus, the conclusions drawn from the analysis have a somewhat limited application to current marketing and branding, since social media takes up a large part of marketing strategy in the present day (Li et al., 2021).

A second limitation also regards the time range of the analysis. This thesis only examined the years between the official launch of the brands and stopped short of the brands experiencing considerable scandal. In 2004, Martha Stewart went on trial for insider trading. She was convicted and served five months in federal prison (Cutler, 2024). Jordan's retirement also caused quite a stir, especially after leading the Bulls to three NBA championships for the first time in franchise history. In 1994, after the death of his father, Jordan retired from basketball altogether, choosing to fulfill his dreams of baseball instead (Hehir, 2020). Even after returning to the Bulls in 1995 and winning three more NBA championships, he retired again in 1999. For a third time in 2001, he came back as a player, this time with the Washington Wizards. Concentrating on mythic principles and branding over a broad analysis that included crisis communication and reputation management allowed for a more focused analysis suitable for the length of this thesis.

Another limitation is mythic criticism itself. There are bounds of applicability to mythic branding, especially as the context of the brand evolves. One such context, which applies to the situation of both Jordan and Stewart, is when the brand expands past the hero and evolves to be different or more than the original mythic storyline. During their prominent years in the 90's, Jordan and Stewart were closely associated with what they were doing in the current culture. For Stewart, she continued publishing books, airing her show weekly or daily, and launching new

products. For Jordan, he predictably played one basketball season after the other, winning games and making records while wearing the newest Air Jordans. However, Stewart no longer has a TV show and no longer launches new products to the extent she did formerly, and Jordan has been retired for over two decades. The newest consumers of Martha Stewart's domestic knowledge or the newest wearers of Jordan sneakers may not have even been alive when they were foremost in culture in the 90's and early 2000's. Consumers understand them in a new context. Jordan sneakers are seen as a retro icon style (Goh and Schube, 2025), and Stewart is better known in popular culture for her current collabs with Snoop Dog (Logan, 2024) or Harper's Bazaar (2021). The question becomes, how does myth in branding hold up when the myth becomes bigger, or removed, from the hero?

Further research

These limitations also suggest several areas for further research. With the current use of social media, it would be enlightening to examine newer brands that have existed on social platforms from the beginning. In this same vein, analyzing mythic branding in current influencer brands could also expand the scope of the theory. For instance, Tseng and Wang (2023) speak to the rapid increase of social media influencers launching their own product lines, fully marketing the brands as extensions of themselves. Examples of this include Rhode Beauty from Hailey Bieber, SKIMS from Kim Kardashian, and Djerf Avenue from Matilda Djerf, among many others. Traditional celebrities and entertainers (but with considerable online presence) have also followed this trend, selling their own products, based at least partially on some aspect of themselves: Fenty Beauty from Rihanna, Rare Beauty from Selena Gomez, and Ccred from Beyonce. As these brands evolve over time connected to these notable figures, it would be

interesting to watch if they apply mythic qualities as a branding strategy as Jordan and Stewart did.

Another notable aspect of mythic branding to explore is how the theory fares during a crisis. As stated in previous sections, the analysis of this thesis was limited to the years prior to Stewart's significant legal battles and Jordan's first, controversial retirement from basketball. However, scandal is a common occurrence with any brand, and it would be beneficial to understand how myth theory interacts with the humanness of a hero who makes mistakes.

These suggestions for further research would add to the body of knowledge on mythic branding, enriching the research on an understudied aspect of both myth theory and marketing strategy

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