LeBron James “The Decision”: a critical analysis

By:

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Abstract:

This study will looked at LeBron James’ one hour television special “The Decision”, where he chose to leave his home town team the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Miami Heat. This study also looked at his decision in a generic participation frame to see if the artifact (“The Decision”) falls into the genre apologia. Upon the review LeBron James’ “The Decision” successfully fulfills the requirements to fall in to the genre of apologia, and apologia in team sport at that.
Introduction

June 21st 2012, LeBron James and the Miami Heat defeated the Oklahoma City Thunder 120-106 in Game 5 to win the Nation Basketball Association (NBA) championship (miamiheard.com, 2012). Finally the young iconic NBA player was able to acquire the one accolade that had eluded him for so long. LeBron James decision to leave his home town Cleveland Cavaliers was validated. It took James nine seasons to win the hardware, and those seasons were filled with the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. The previous year James and the Miami Heat lost to the Dallas Mavericks in 6 games in the NBA Finals, and James faced tremendous scrutiny for his bad play, his decision to leave his old team in his quest for a NBA championship, and his promise to win eight championships with the Miami heat (ESPN.com, 2011). The scrutiny weighed heavy on James. First, when asked about the villain role, which James undertook when he decided to leave his home town, he said “I’ve kind of accepted this villain role everyone has placed on me I’m OK with it” (thehoopdoctor.com, 2011, para. 5). Then a few months later, after the loss to the Dallas Mavericks, James was again asked about the villain role. James said, “It basically turned me into somebody I wasn’t, you start to hear ‘the villain,’ now you have to be the villain, you know, and I started to buy into it. I started to play the game of basketball at a level, or at a mind state that I’ve never played at before ... meaning, angry. And that's mentally. That's not the way I play the game of basketball” (espn.com, 2011, para. 13).

There were two major events that lead to a heavy fan scrutiny of James. First, was his decision to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers and turn his free agency into a nationally televised media event. Second, was when James first arrived in Miami and said on national television that the Miami Heat would win eight championships, a claim that many found to be egotistical (cleveland.com).
On Thursday July 8th 2010, LeBron James’ choice would devastate an entire city, illuminate the hearts of another, and impact National Basketball Association fans around the world. James’ decision to leave his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers and join the Miami Heat became a significant media event. James publicly broke the heart of his beloved hometown fans on national television during a one hour special held on ESPN titled “The Decision”, where he famously stated “This fall I’m going to take my talents to South Beach and join the Miami Heat” (The Decision, 2010). Cleveland, one of the most unlucky cities for professional sports franchises, was yet again heart broken. This time one of its own sons turned his back on the city on national TV. It would be like if Batman publicly stated, over national television, that he was leaving Gotham city to join forces with Superman in Metropolis.

James was like a superhero to the city of Cleveland, and now the man with the tattoo across his back saying “the chosen one” (Rosenberg, 2010), had chosen another team and left one out in the cold. There are videos that were aired after his decision of Cavaliers fans burning his jersey (Abbot, 2011). These videos truly show how much James meant to that community, once a hero then arch-enemy in a matter of seconds. This move James made tarnished the reputation of the young iconic player. Many believed that the way in which he chose to leave the Cavaliers on national TV, turning his whole free agency into a giant show, showed a deep lack of character. TNT Basketball analyst/ former NBA super star Charles Barkley went on to say “There would have been something honorable about staying in Cleveland and trying to win it as 'The Man’ ... LeBron, if he would've stayed in Cleveland, and if he could've got a championship there, it would have been over the top for his legacy, just one in Cleveland.” (espn.com, 2010)

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to take a look at the rhetoric of “The Decision”, LeBron James’s one-hour TV special interview broadcasted exclusively, in prime time on ESPN to determine how he defend his choice, help save his image, and win back the hearts of fans he had previously shattered through apologia.
Research question: Does “The Decision” successfully fulfill the required characteristics of the specific genre of sports apologia.

Rationale

The reason this topic was chosen is quite simple. LeBron James is a global icon and he is arguably the NBA’s best current player. In 2011 ESPN rated him the number one player in the league, and James averaged 27.1 points per game, 7.9 rebounds per game and 6.2 assists per game. (ESPN.com, 2012) He played for a team in a city with horrible luck when it comes to professional sports. James was from Akron, Ohio. LeBron was the “light at the end of the tunnel” for Cleveland sports fans and then someone dropped a boulder around the cave’s opening and the light was gone (Leopold, 2010). But why would someone be viewed as a major villain for just leaving a team to play for another? Well, if you’re perceived as abandoning your team, you are perceived as a villain. If you had grown up in a region of the team you are playing for, you may be perceived as a villain. The more you say “I might stay, I might go, I just don’t know” you will be perceived more as a villain (TheMonkeyCage.com). Also, it doesn’t help that you left your team on national television.

In a world of sports where most players are criticized for only caring about the money and not the victories (latimes.com, 2012), LeBron James took a 15 million dollar pay cut to have a better chance to contend for an NBA championship. If he had signed with The Cleveland Cavaliers, James would have made 125 million dollars. Instead, he went to Miami for 110 million. LeBron James is just a man driven to get an NBA championship, but in the process he may have irreversibly tarnished his image. In a poll conducted by Sports illustrated in 2010, 65% of the voters voted James an “egomaniac” in the question asking “What do you think of how LeBron James handled a highly scrutinized free-agency process”. In another question “What is your view of LeBron now” 61% of voters voted “I had a positive view of LeBron before free agency but I’ve changed my mind”. Also in the question “Who is a bigger villain in Cleveland?” James took the cake with a whopping 74% of the vote. The surprising part his opponent in the vote was
none other than Art Modell the man who packed up and moved the City’s football team over night without telling anyone (Si.com, 2010).

The reason why I chose this as my topic is should the rhetoric of one man really be so detrimental to his own image when it is about where he will play basketball next season, and how a moment of apologia can turn into damnation from his fans. A man who took less money for a chance to win a championship is now being scrutinized by society and basketball fans as a whole, why is the rhetoric of LeBron James so important and how has he defended himself through apologia through his rhetoric.

Description of Rhetorical Act

“The Decision” aired on ESPN on July 8th, 2010, from 9-10 pm. The show led all other TV shows that night with a 7.3% in home television rating and reached as high of a rating of 9.6% from the time of 9:15-9:30 when James made his decision, which equates to roughly 9.95 million viewers. Also ESPN3.com had more than 300,000 viewers to see what choice James would make that is one of the largest audiences for a non-World Cup event (Kimball, 2010). Almost everyone wanted to see what LeBron was going to do and where he was going to take his talents. The Decision was held at a Boys & Girls club in Greenwich, Connecticut. The Decision Also helped raise over 6 million dollars that was donated to various charities (Cleveland.com)

The rhetorical act itself was predominantly an interview between James and ESPN’s Jim Gray, Michael Wilbon and John Barry, with a few videos that were played documenting James’s basketball career to date (espn.com, 2010). James was quoted saying in an interview with ESPN reporter Rachel Nichols on what he would do differently: James stated “If I could look back on it I would probably change a lot of it. The fact of having a whole TV special, and people getting the opportunity to watch me make a decision on where I wanted to play, I probably would change that. Because I can now look and see if the shoe was on the other foot and I was a fan, and I was very passionate about one player, and he decided to leave, I would be upset too about the way he handled it.” (ESPN.com, 2011 para. 20-22)

Historical Context
Noreen Kruse (1981) quotes Eldon Snyder and Elmer Spreitzer in her work apologia in team sport saying “The phenomenon of sports represents one of the most pervasive social institutions in the United States and its salience “can be documented in terms of news coverage, financial expenditures, number of participants and spectators, hours consumed and time sampling of conversation” (p.270). She also quotes Alfred Lunn in her work saying “the influence and prestige of sport in the modern world is comparable only to that of the church in medieval Europe” (p.270). So, in other words, sports mean a great deal to a society and its fans in the population. Kruse herself states “The world of team sport is a social construct, and sport exists for the fans as a kind of secular religion. Fans identify with particular teams, place themselves under the destinies of those teams, and designate team members as their surrogates. In this context, sporting contests are mythoreligious rites” (p.283).

When you look at the context of this artifact, it really is the context that made “The Decision” such a significant sports event it’s not just that LeBron James was and still currently is a great basketball player but can a city’s sports luck in terms or winning and winning championships get any worse than Cleveland. Cleveland sports fans misfortune began in 1987, in an AFC title game which is known as “The Drive”, in a game that featured the Cleveland Browns and the Denver Broncos. The Browns were up 20-13 with five minutes left in the 4th quarter when John Elway managed a 98 yard drive that ended with a touchdown with 39 seconds left on the clock the Browns would go on to lose the game in overtime (Mindzak 2011).

The next blow came to the city the very next year in another AFC title game against the same opponent the Denver Broncos, but this game is known as “the Fumble”. The Browns were down significantly early in the game, but roared back in the 2nd half. In the in the game’s final moments the Browns found themselves down 38-31 and they were driving for a potential game tying touchdown. With the ball on the Broncos eight yard line Browns running back Ernest Byner fumbled the ball the Denver Broncos recovered the fumble and they won the game. Two years in a row Cleveland fans were devastated but the bad luck would only continue (Mindzak, 2011).

The very Next year 1989 this time the Cleveland Cavaliers fell victim to Michael Jordan in a game five in the opening round of the playoffs this game is known as “The Shot”. With three seconds left on the clock the Cavaliers
were up 100-99 in an elimination game against the Chicago Bulls. It looked the Cavaliers were going to finally get over the hump. But then this basketball player named Michael Jordan turned the Cavaliers dream into a nightmare as he hit the shot as the clock expired to give The Chicago Bulls a 101-100 win, and Cleveland fans are yet again left with their hearts ripped out of there chest for a third consecutive year but this time it was in basketball (Mindzak, 2011).

Fast forward a couple years its 1995 and this time it was like Cleveland was abandoned by its team the Cleveland Browns. Team owner Art Modell decided to move the football team from Cleveland, Ohio to Baltimore, Maryland in 1996. Modell renamed the team the Baltimore Ravens, and to make matters worse the Baltimore Ravens won the Super Bowl four short years later in 2000, leaving the fans of the Cleveland Browns thinking oh what could have been. The city of Cleveland was given another football team in 1999, but this new age version of the Browns still have not been able to bounce back and get back to their winning ways the new Browns have had only two winning seasons in 2002 and 2007 since their arrival to the NFL (Mindzak 2011).

Then in 1997 and in 2007 the Cleveland Indians (the city’s baseball team) were the next team to check into heart break hotel. In 1997 the Indians lost in extra innings to the Florida Marlins in game 7 of the World Series, yet again another heart ache for the city of Cleveland. Then in 2007 the Indians blew a commanding 3-1 series lead to the Boston Red Sox, They went on to lose game 7 in the American League Championship Series or known as the ALCS. The Boston Red Sox would go on to win the World Series that year and left the City of Cleveland, yet again imagining what could have been (Mindzak, 2011).

More heart wrenching emotions were still to come to the fans of Cleveland sports teams. In 2007, the Cleveland Cavaliers finally made it over the hump and reached the finals. The only problem is then they were swept 4-0 by the San Antonio Spurs, putting a bitter ending to a sweet season. Then in 2009 and the 2010 seasons The Cavaliers had the best NBA regular season recorded only to be bounced out of the playoffs in disappointing fashion. They lost to the Orlando Magic in six games. The following year they lost to the Boston Celtics in 6 games, blowing a 2-1 series
lead (Mindzak, 2011). Then “the Decision”, their savior LeBron James leaves via free agency, on the cusp of a NBA championship and the Cleveland sports heartache continues.

When looking at in the context of a star player leaving a team for another during free agency, there is one other case that really comes to mind, and that would be with baseball player Johnny Damon. Damon left his team the Boston Red Sox for their arch rival the New York Yankees in free agency heading into the 2005 season. Damon signed a four year $52 million contract with the Yankees which proved to be the reason for Damon leaving; the Red Sox would not go over their three year contract deal, so Damon left. This move fueled the hate he felt from so many Red Sox fans. Damon didn’t do himself any favors in the public eye either when he made a public statement before the free agency period began saying he would never go play for the Yankees, I know there going to come after me but the money doesn’t matter (espn.com), which proved to be false by Damon’s actions following the statement. However, when considering LeBron James’s situation, his contract in regards to how much money it was worth was never a factor for him to leave Cleveland. It was all about the chance to win a championship.

Literature Review

Apologia

Our first accounts of the strategy of self-defense can be traced back to 339 B.C. in Plato’s account of Socrates first formulated strategy for self-defense, which he called The Apology. In which Socrates outlines four generic elements for the rhetoric of self-defense which are: First, denial of the charges, second, disguised attack on the accusers, third, dissociation of the accused from other suspected classes, Fourth justification of the life mission of the accused (Cali, 1996 p.161).

B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel further this by identifying types of sub-genres and the different kinds of testimony in the genre of self-defense. They outlined four features in the rhetoric of self-defense: denial, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence. (Cali, 1996, p.161). According to Ware and Linkugel “Denial consists of the simple disavowal by the speaker of any participation in, relationship to, or positive sentiment toward whatever it is that repels the audience” (Ware, Linkugel, , 2003, p.276) In the bolstering part the speaker attempts to identify with something viewed
favorably by the audience. They also state “the presence of differentiation as an important factor in apologia is often signaled by accused’s request for a suspension of judgment until his actions can be viewed from a different temporal perspective” (Ware, Linkugel, 2003, p.278). The last factor in verbal self-defense is transcendence, Ware and Linkugle state “This factor takes in any strategy which cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object or relationship with some larger context” (Ware, Linkugel, 2003, pg280).

In Noreen Wales Kruse, “Apologia In Team Sport”, She reiterates the fact on what sports true value to a society they are. Kruse pulls from Eldon E. Snyder and Elmer Spreitzer’s work “Sociology of Sport: An Overview”, Snyder and Spreitzer note “The phenomenon of sports represents one of the most pervasive social institutions in the United States… Can be documented in terms of news coverage, financial expenditures, number of participants and spectators, hours consumed and time samplings of conversations” (p.271). Kruse also quotes Sir Alfred Lunn saying “the influence and prestige of sport in the modern world is comparable to only that of the church in medieval Europe” (p.271). Kruse really demonstrates how much sports mean to the world and individuals.

Kruse also touches on the ethics of team sports. The main points being winning is the most important thing and the team is greater than any individual. Kruse quotes legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi “Winning isn’t everything it’s the only thing” (1981, p.273). When It boils down to it sports is a competition one team wins one lose so really at the end of the day, the most important thing is being the team declared the victor. Kruse also points out “the ethic of team sport holds that the team is greater than any of its individual members” (1981, p.273).

Kruse Identified multiple circumstances in which an athlete’s actions lead to a speech containing apologia. The circumstance which was the most applicable to the LeBron James were, “Those who threaten team harmony violate the sport ethic by placing egocentric needs above the good of the group and by demonstrating lack of commitment to the organization” (Kruse, 1981, p.275), and “Whenever an Outstanding player leaves a team, fans also perceive a threat… but the desertion of a star athlete can also affect a team’s performance in a practical sense” (p.275) The case which Kruse signaled out for this circumstance was when Pete Rose left the Cincinnati Reds for the Philadelphia Phillies via free agency. Rose, who had played for the Reds for 16 years, claimed it was the lack of
money offered to him by the Reds which lead to his departure. He claimed that the management did not want him and pinned the blame on them. (p.276)

Cases In sports apologia

In a conference paper the student researcher looked at the Michael Vick case as a whole, looked at his speeches and pulled out techniques of image repair and apologia. The student researcher believes “apologia and image repair theories should be expanded to account for new cases involving sports figures” (Vick’s Apologia, p.3). The student reader points out that in a time where players negative occurrences off the field lead to stiffer penalties and “greater public and media scrutiny” there are more diverse conditions in which athletes must deploy a speech of apologia and image repair theory (Vick’s Apologia).

LeAnn M. Brazeal (2008) looks at the image repair strategies of Terell Owens when he was in a public battle with the Philadelphia Eagles over his contract in 2005 which ultimately led to him being cut by his team. Brazeal also reiterates the influence sports have on modern culture stating it is suitable that the “scholarly attention” has shifted towards athletes PR. Brazeal also points ways athletes might use image repair strategies. The ones applicable to the LeBron James case are evading responsibility, and different sets of strategies designed to reduce the offensiveness of the event, and they include bolstering the speaker’s image, and minimizing the importance or impact of the act” (Brazeal, 2006 pg.146)

In the evaluation Brazeal believed Owens did a good job “creating common ground” with the viewers by emphasizing his love for football and depicting himself as a “fighter in pursuit of a worthy goal” in doing so Brazeal believed Owens identified himself as a “heroic athlete”. Brazeal, however, believed Owens press conference to be the most damaging to his image because “it demonstrated that neither speaker understood the core values that are the life blood of American team sports. Even though American culture also values individualism and free enterprise, athletes should also show ‘loyalty, unity, affiliation, and the ability to place the good of the group above one’s interest”’. (Brazeal, 2006 p.149)

Sports world view of “The Decision”
In a case study author Robert Banagan (2011) looks at The Decision at an entirety from the viewpoints of LeBron James and ESPN. Banagan discusses how important James was to Cleveland, “In his first seven years in the league, James lifted the Cavaliers out of perennial mediocrity, turning them into a post-season contender and taking Cleveland all the way to the 2007 NBA finals. In doing so, his presence and efforts lifted the city’s national profile, got the franchise national television exposure and increased season ticket sales… In short, James was almost single-handedly responsible for the resurrection of a struggling franchise” (Banagan, 2011, p.158).

The hour long press conference known as “The Decision”, where James made his choice of what team he would play for, for the 2010-2011 season and beyond was viewed as a failure, with poor ethical values as it relates to sports journalism. Even though the broadcast raised $6 million in revenue for charity for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, it was still viewed as unfavorable. After “The Decision”, quotes surfaced from renowned sports journalists and media critics. Richard Deitsch of Sports Illustrated stated “The Decision is the worst thing ESPN has ever put its name on and it will take a long time for some viewers to get over it” (Banagan, 2011, p. 61), David Barron of The Huston Chronicle said “LeBron James hijacked ESPN, selling the network on an hour-long glorified infomercial preceded by three hours of breathless hype and numbing repetition” (Banagan, 2011, p.161). In Don Hohlmyers online ombudsman column on espn.com, Hohlmeyer indicated ‘The Decision was ‘an affront to humility, loyalty, moderation… and instead became a celebration of greed, ego and excess’, ESPN clearly had violated basic tenets of journalism” (Banagan, 2011, p.161).

Daniel A. Nathan discussed the importance of winning and the need for strong rivalries to enhance the NBA’s image. Nathan brought up the “NBA glory days” and pairs it to the 1980’s when Magic Johnson and Larry Bird had which “reinvigorated an epic rivalry” between the Los Angeles Lakers and The Boston Celtics. Nathan believed “the Bird-Johnson rivalry represented deeply entrenched cultural values and tensions” (Nathan, 2010, p.69). In short great sports rivalries are instrumental to the sports world and the popularity of the sport. In the Case of James leaving Cleveland to play with two other superstars ended the chance of any rivalries. Nathan also quotes Johnson saying “we weren’t about stats… we were about winning” when referring to Bird and himself. Together they were able to win
eight championships: Johnson with five and Bird with three (Nathan, 2010). James ultimately left Cleveland in pursuit of the evasive NBA championship

Methodology

This study will be looking at LeBron James’s media broadcast “The Decision” through the scope of generic criticism. When using generic criticism there are four main steps, selecting the artifact, analyzing the artifact, formulating a research question and writing the essay (Foss, 2009). Typically when analyzing an artifact with generic criticism there are three different approaches one can take. Those are generic description, generic participation and generic application (Foss, 2009). This study will be using generic participation when analyzing “The Decision”. This study will look to uncover whether LeBron James’s rhetoric in “The Decision” “participated” in the genre of apologia. When conducting generic participation there are three steps the critic applies “describing the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of an genre, describing the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of an artifact: and comparing the characteristics of an artifact with those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in the genre” (Foss 143).

The research question formulated for this study is: Does “The Decision” successfully fulfill the required characteristics of the specific genre of sports apologia. As stated by Kruse there are certain instances which call for apologia in team sports people who threaten team chemistry and disrupt “sport ethic” by placing their own needs above the team’s. James certainly disrupted the Cavaliers team chemistry when he bolted for Miami. He placed his own needs (desire to win a NBA championship) above that of the Cavaliers. Winning the championship would be much easier with the help from NBA all-stars Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh. Also, when a great player departs from his team, the fans take that as abandonment and the team will be negatively affected in a record standpoint in wins and losses. James’s departure from Cleveland also had an extra sting to it from him being from Akron, fans undoubtedly felt betrayed, not only did he leave the team that drafted him, he left the state in which he grew up. Also Cavaliers fans realized the harsh reality that there hopes to win an NBA championship left with James. The
Cavaliers record in the 2009-2010 season (James last year) was 61-21 and first in the Eastern conference. After James departure the Cavaliers dropped to 19-63 and they finished 15th in the conference (ESPN.com). Furthermore when individuals violate “ethical norms” that both the sports world and the rest or the world both hold, that persons reputation will be tarnished in the eyes of the fans and public. Kruse also states “people also believe that those who oppose society’s ethical norms reveal lack of good character (Kruse, 1981, p.278). James’s decision was viewed as unethical in two senses. First, he deserted his home town team; second “The Decision” as an entirety was viewed as unethical journalism, and many believed the broadcast should have never taken place (Banagan, 2011). Although James did not break any laws, he violated ethical norms held in society, the sports realm and the journalism world thus causing a negative backlash from the public.

In the investigative steps of the generic analysis, first, I will describe the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of a genre. Second, I will describe the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of artifact. Third, I will compare the characteristics of an artifact with those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in the genre.

Analysis

The analysis will consist of three parts in the generic participation approach. I will describe the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of a genre. I will describe the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of artifact. Then I will compare the characteristics of an artifact with those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in the genre.

Part I

The first part of the analysis in the generic participation approach I will describe the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of a genre. So the genre at hand is apologia which can be further broken down to apologia in team sports.
There are perceived situational requirements in the sports world that will call for an athlete to give a speech of apologia. Some of the perceived requirements are: players who threaten the well-being of a team disrupt sports ethics by putting their own needs and desires above the teams. This practice is viewed as egotistical and eccentric for in team sports no one player is greater than the team. Also when a star player leaves a team that he/she play for the fans of that team takes it as a threat. The fans feel hurt and abandon, and can view the player as un-loyal. Another requirement is when a player is distinguished for not playing to the best of his or her abilities, which is a slap in the face to the fans, the organization and the sport itself. Moreover whenever an athlete disrupts ethics held by the world of sports and the world outside of it the athlete’s scrutiny will be much harsher because not only will he/she receive criticism from sports fans, he/she will also receive criticism from the general public as well.

One technique the athlete can take when he or she is delivering a speech of apologia is an attempt to link themselves with specific attitudes, beliefs and behaviors pertaining to the sport. In doing so the athlete attempts to show the fans or the public that he/she are not egomaniacal and realize how important the game and its morals and ethics are. When defending their character athletes typically only do it when it is quite apparent to the rest of the world that their actions were unjust. However, when an athlete disrupts sports ethic, he or she can win them back by demonstrating good character and performing concrete actions like being a good teammate.

When it comes to the substantive and Stylistic strategies of apologia, I will be using Ware and Likugel’s factors in the rhetoric of self-defense, which are denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. In denial the speaker will dissociate themselves with the action that repels the audience, this does not have to be the main action itself that the speaker denies but it could be just one negative aspect of the action in which the audience views unfavorably. The next is bolstering in which the speaker tries to identify themselves with something the audience holds in high regards, like trust, honesty and hard work. Following that is differentiation, in this factor the speaker would like for the judgment to be held till the future, and for the action to be looked at from another perspective. The last factor is transcendence and that’s where the speaker tries to tie an action, fact, or belief to a bigger greater picture. So he/she will just look like he/she were one small stepping stone in something that was much more complex than just them.
Part II

The next part is looking at perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies and organizing principles of the artifact in this case which is, “The Decision” by Lebron James. So first let’s look at the situational requirements, in James last season in Cleveland, he and his Cavaliers were defeated in six games by the Boston Celtics, a series in which James was scrutinized for maybe not giving one hundred percent in the team's final two blowout losses.

Following the surprising exit from the playoffs the speculation began of where James will go, with the majority of the sports writers thinking James would return to Cleveland. ESPN and James’s representatives at CAA sports worked out a deal which would broadcast James’s free agent decision on ESPN in an hour long special called “The Decision”. ESPN and James ream negotiated the following terms for the broadcast. One, Broadcaster Jim Gray would host the segment; two, The network would yield one hour of live airtime and donate all advertising revenue to the boys and girls club of America; and three, ESPN would produce the entire show and pay for production cost.

The style of the broadcast in “The Decision” was a one-on-one interview with Jim Gray held in an auditorium of the Boys and Girls Club in Greenwich, Connecticut. James and Gray took center stage with the presumable kids of the club as the audience in the background. James seems tense during the interview uncomfortable almost as if he is about to deliver some difficult news, which was announced about 6 minutes into the broadcast. The overall length of the program was an hour long but the interview process in the auditorium took about ten minutes and consisted of 29 questions, but none no greater than the one asking where he would play, where James in turn responded “In this fall I’m going to take my talents to South Beach and play for the Miami Heat” (ESPN.com)

The defining principles of the artifact are James was picking a new team through live television broadcast; the team which he picked was the Miami Heat, which was a shock to newly ex-team, the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Part III
How does “The Decision” fit in apologia? First, purely off of circumstances requiring apologia especially apologia in team sports, “The Decision” fits perfectly. You have a NBA superstar, the best player in the league leave his hometown team the Cleveland Cavaliers, a city that has had arguably the worst sports luck for major cities, for greener pastures in the South Beach region. And the last memory James left to the fans was a blowout season ending loss in which James was questioned about how hard he was playing.

James without a doubt devastated the harmony of the Cleveland Cavaliers when he decided to leave, and the betrayal of the fans was felt tenfold from the fact that James was from Akron. In terms of a win loss record, the Cavaliers fans got to witness their team go from first in the league to last in just one off season. James in a way violated ethical norms held in both the sports world and its counterpart. The way in which James broadcasted his decision was viewed as egotistical, and the sports journalism itself was viewed as unethical.

The public viewed James decision to leave Cleveland as a betrayal, except for Miami Heat fans of course. Also In the sports world James not only felt scrutiny for leaving Cleveland, he was bashed for taking the easy way out. James violated one of the true transcendental properties of sport, competition. The fact that James who is supposed to be the best player in the NBA, had to go to Miami and join two more all-stars and create a super team to win a NBA championship, was wild. Most people in the sports world viewed it as James taking the easy way out.

When taking an in depth look at the interview there are responses and underlying themes that can account for all four factors in Ware and Linkgule’s rhetoric of self-defense. First, denial, James did not out deny the fact that he was leaving Cleveland, he denied the fact that he was abandoning them, and he was denying the future speculations for how he felt about the Cavaliers. He also denied the claims that he was not giving his full effort against Boston, you can see this when Gray asked “How do you explain this to the people in Cleveland?” James responds “I mean, it’s heartfelt for me. You know, it’s hard to explain, but at the same time my heart, in the seven years I gave to that franchise, to that city, it was everything. I mean, those 20,000 plus fans that came out every night we played, and they seen me grow from an 18 year old kid to a 25 year old man. And I never wanted to leave Cleveland. And my heart will always be around that area. But I also felt like this is the greatest challenge for me is to move on.”
James is told the fans of the Cavaliers and people of Cleveland he gave everything he had, loves the city and the team. When James states “I never wanted to leave” it implies there are other outside factors which caused him to leave Cleveland thus it was not entirely his fault for leaving Cleveland.

James bolstered himself a few times in different factions during the interview as well. When asked “What was the major reason for leaving the Cavaliers?” James responded “I feel like we have a great chance of winning and winning for multiple.” In the world of professional sports one thing remains supreme, winning is everything. You can break it down any way you want to, but winning is the most important. James is trying to identify himself with winning to the audience. For James it’s not about the money, fame and girls it’s about winning and not only winning but winning NBA championships.

James again bolsters himself in two aspects when asked, “ever want to go through this again” (pertaining to the NBA Free agency process)? James responded “This is tough. This is very tough, because you feel like you've let a lot of people down. You've raised a lot of people's expectations also. But it was a tough decision, because I know how loyal I am. And one thing my mother told me when I was going through this process and what ultimately helped me make my decision is you have to do what's best for you and what's going to make you happy at the end of the day, because no one can live with the consequences or anything that comes with your decision besides you. And once I heard that from my mother, the person that I always look to for guidance, it was easy” (ESPN.com). First, James identifies himself with loyalty, which is contradictory to his most recent previous actions; and second, he identifies himself as a family man with his comments about his mother. The audience can look at this response and think James has good ethical backgrounds he listens and respects his mother’s decisions and is still looking for her approval even though he has already accomplished so much.

James further bolsters the family image when Gray asks “You told me she had a major influence when you called her this morning. You didn't believe the reaction she had would be the one that you got. Could you share with us what she said to you this morning?” James responds “Absolutely. Like I said, when I called my mother I thought I would hear a different reaction. When she her reaction was it was a great move, because she felt it was going to
ultimately make me happy. It wasn't about being in Miami. It wasn't about playing alongside Chris, playing alongside Dwyane, who she believes are two great basketball players, because she loves the game. But she felt it was going to make me happy. When I heard that from my mother, it was like it was the relief that I was looking for throughout this whole process."

James bolsters himself one other time when asked “The three of you will share now the spotlight and the limelight. And in many ways you're going to Dwyane Wade's team. He's been in Miami. He's won a championship. How do you think you'll be able to fit in and possibly not be the headliner all the time?” and James responded, “For me it's not about sharing. You know, it's about everybody having their own spotlight and then just doing what's best for the team."

You know, at this point D Wade, he's the unselfish guy here. To be able to have Chris Bosh and then LeBron James, to welcome us to his team, it's not about an individual here. Because if that was the case, D Wade wouldn't have asked us to join him, or we wouldn't have asked him if it was okay to come down there. It's not about individuals. It's about a team, and that's what this game is about.” James identifies with the true belief in team sports, it's a team. He is saying he is not greater than the team, and in a way he is being humble.

Next James differentiates himself in turns by stating” Like I said before, I feel like it's going to give me the best opportunity to win and to win for multiple years, and not only just to win in the regular season or just to win five games in a row or three games in a row, I want to be able to win championships. And I feel like I can compete down there.” When asked “why” he joined the Mimi Heat. If you look at it from James perspective it was a great opportunity for him to accomplish the only other thing he had been scrutinized for, winning a championship. James is saying don’t judge me just yet, let’s see what you have to say six years down the road and I've won four championships

For transcendence there is not just individual response for. However, when you look at the response as a whole you get the underlying tone that James leaving Cleveland was just a small part of the big picture, which is to win a NBA championship. James main goal was to win a NBA championship and his leaving Cleveland was just a small
step in the staircase that would lead to James first championship. The big picture was the NBA hardware and James feared he would never get to hold it in a Cleveland Cavaliers jersey.

So the artifact which is “The Decision” certainly belongs in the genre of apologia. Not only does it fall in circumstances requiring apologia, the components of James response meet that of the four key factors of rhetoric of self-defense outlined by Ware and Linkgule.

Evaluation.

The findings of this generic participation approach to answer the research question, yes, “The Decision” successfully fulfill the required characteristics of the specific genre of sports apologia. Though during “The Decision” James never officially came out and said he was sorry to the Cleveland fans, in a way he was justifying the reason for him leaving Cleveland to the public so he would not feel so much backlash. However, that did not work out well for James. There is one interesting point that gets overlooked by the public eye that should be in there focus. “The Decision” as a broadcast media event was viewed as an epic failure, even though it raised $6 million dollars for the Boys and Girls clubs across America, can something that provided so much good really be viewed an “un-ethical” or “un-just”?

This study has a few limitations. First it only looks at “The Decision”, it does not look at the actions that have taken place since then to help repair LeBron James image to the public. In this study “The Decision” is only viewed through the lens of apologia. This event can also be evaluated through an arrogant spectacle stand point in rhetoric. Also “The Decision” can be looked at from an ideological perspective of the move being a good business decision. Even though he took less money from a contract, “In Miami he can make the market work for him” (Tracy, 2013, p.3). James is estimated to rake in about $40 million in endorsement deals alone. “This was an amply advised adult, fully conscious that his ‘talents’ were just that- his own, to take wherever he wished – making a wise business decision and outraging NBA owners to such an extent that they tried to prevent such a thing from happening again”. (Tracy, 2013, p.3)
For future research there is a variety of paths stemming from this study. First and a part two looking at all the actions that have taken place since “The Decision” that either helped repair or further tarnish James image. I feel that this is only part one to a two part project. Also there are a plethora of examples of current sports athletes that require a speech of apologia that can be compared to James’ “The Decision”. The genre of apologia in team sports I feel is still strongly unchartered, and with the clout that athlete’s and sports hold in society and culture today, I feel that as scholars we must turn an academic eye to athletes and their speeches of apologia to further understand if there are techniques that are the most successful. Are underlying themes of which we have missed?
References


