

Special Section
BREAKING THE RULES

A Cavalier Approach to Public Relations: The Unconventional Image Restoration of LeBron James

Kathleen Stansberry
Cleveland State University

Jessalynn Strauss
Elon University

Abstract

In a widely panned 2010 television special, LeBron James announced that he would be leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers and “taking his talents to South Beach.” Criticized by many for exhibiting what was seen as uncouth and egotistical behavior, James and his personal and professional image were severely damaged by the fallout from the spectacle and subsequent posturing. After five years, however, LeBron’s image has recovered fully, and today he has the distinction of being one of the most popular athletes in the world. Using the theoretical lens of Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory, this case study examines how James bucked established strategic communication processes to rebuild his tarnished brand.

Keywords: sports marketing; image restoration theory; personal branding; LeBron James; National Basketball Association; social media

When basketball player LeBron James announced that he was leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers, he did so in a one-hour live broadcast on ESPN opaquely called *The Decision*. Horrified Cavs fans watched their hometown hero, who had grown from a kid in Akron to become a man almost universally known as the most talented active player in the NBA,

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announce that he was going to “take his talents to South Beach” (Abbott, 2010). The response from angry Northeast Ohio basketball fans was immediate and dramatic: people burned replicas of James’ #23 jersey in the Cleveland streets, a 10-story-tall billboard of The King that had dominated the downtown area was unceremoniously stripped away, and Cavs owner Dan Gilbert posted a scathing open letter to the team’s website calling James’ actions “narcissistic” and a “cowardly betrayal.”

While Cleveland’s reaction to James’ departure was not unexpected, the national response to *The Decision* was decidedly negative as well (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012). In the closing remarks during the July 14, 2010, episode of *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*, the sportscaster said:

LeBron James seems to think he needs a ring to change his life and secure his legacy. Maybe he’ll get one, maybe he won’t, but it’s probable that no amount of rings will ever remove the stench he wallowed in last week. LeBron may yet find that in the court of public opinion, just as putting on a tux can’t make a guy a gentleman, winning a ring can’t make one truly a champion. (HBO, 2010)

Four years later—having won two NBA Championship rings—James announced that he would return to Cleveland and rejoin the Cavaliers. Now one of the highest-paid athletes in history, James has secured lucrative endorsement deals for such brands as Nike, Coca-Cola, Samsung, and Beats by Dre wireless headphones, and his jersey has been the NBA’s top seller for a record six years running.

This case study looks at how James, using nontraditional image communication strategies, managed to redeem a severely tarnished image en route to becoming one of the most admired athletes in the world.

Background

“In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.”

– LeBron James

In 2003, LeBron James made the decision to forego his college eligibility and enter directly into the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft out

of high school. The expectations for the high school senior from St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio, were so high that he secured a lucrative sneaker endorsement deal before ever playing a game of professional basketball. When the self-described “kid from Akron” entered the NBA, his aggressive playing style and accuracy on the court made it immediately clear that he would live up to the hype.

To provide background for this case study, this section will seek to efficiently encapsulate two interwoven stories. The first, that of LeBron James, starts with the athlete’s meteoric rise to international fame as a high-schooler in the early 2000s. The second, many more years in scope, looks at the region of Northeast Ohio—specifically, the Cleveland/Akron area—paying special attention to that region’s unique relationship with its much-loved but oft-beleaguered sports teams.

LeBron James

In the summer of 2000, noted basketball commentator Dick Vitale labeled LeBron James as one of the top-five high school sophomores in the country. As LeBron continued to improve and his international profile kept rising, college coaches stopped recruiting him, knowing that his talent would propel him directly into the professional ranks. In 2003, LeBron James was drafted as the first pick in the NBA Draft. Just one day before, he had signed an endorsement contract with Nike that was valued more than \$100 million.

LeBron James, who was named the 2004 NBA Rookie of the Year, played six seasons for the Cleveland Cavaliers. With his help, the team reached the NBA Finals in 2007, the first time the team had done so since 1970. His impact on the Cavaliers, and on the city of Cleveland in general, was immense. Cleveland-area sports writers Pluto and Windhorst (2015) explained:

Talk to the people selling hot dogs and T-shirts, those who own the restaurants and nightclubs around the arenas—they all will tell you LeBron has made their lives better. Not just because he gives fans reasons to cheer, but he makes people happy. The team wins, he scores, fans buy stuff—and the vendors make more money than they did before they had The Guy that forever changed this franchise. (p. 4)

After the 2009-2010 NBA season, LeBron's contract with the Cavaliers expired and he became an unrestricted free agent. Cleveland tried to retain him on its roster, but, unsurprisingly, James was pursued by a number of other teams. LeBron's choice of a new team was highly anticipated, and he arranged to announce his next career move live on a special on the ESPN sports network.

The television event, titled *The Decision*, ran for 75 minutes. About 30 minutes in, LeBron famously announced he would be joining the Miami Heat, which had already signed star players Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh (see Figure 1). The special was broadcast live from the Boys and Girls Club of Greenwich, Connecticut, and raised a total of \$6 million for that charity and several others, most of which came from ad revenue during the special.



Figure 1. Excerpt from the ESPN special *The Decision*, where LeBron James finally names the Miami Heat as his next team. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#) (Source: Associated Press YouTube channel).

Almost immediately, *The Decision* became the target of angry criticism. Much of this anger came from the Cleveland area, where almost 400,000 people watched the special, according to Nielsen ratings (The Nielsen Company, 2010). Nationwide, nearly 13.1 million people tuned into *The Decision*.

James played four seasons with the Miami Heat, during which time the team won back-to-back NBA championships in 2012 and 2013. James also won a gold medal with the U.S. Olympic Team in 2012. Although he left the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2010, James continued to be active in the Akron community, growing his LeBron James Family Foundation and becoming an active voice in addressing a number of important social issues such as education and mentoring for underprivileged youth. Although the foundation's fundraising dipped in the year that James left for Miami, within a few years it was once again flush with donations, with much of the funding coming from James himself.

In 2014, LeBron James opted out of the final year of his contract with the Miami Heat and on July 1, he became an unrestricted free agent. Ten days later, he published the essay that brought joy to Northeast Ohio; in the first-person missive titled simply, "I'm coming home," James announced his intention to resume his position with the Cleveland Cavaliers (James & Jenkins, 2014).

Northeast Ohio

LeBron James' rise to international stardom might have been accelerated if he had been drafted by one of the NBA's high-profile teams in New York or Los Angeles instead of starting his professional career in Cleveland, but his talent was such that he likely would have flourished as a player anywhere. The real impact of that night in 2003, when LeBron became a Cavalier, would be on the team itself and the region of Northeast Ohio where it was located. In a region that had not seen a professional sports championship win since the Cleveland Browns won the 1964 National Football League (NFL) title, James was heralded as the savior of Cleveland.

It is telling that Wikipedia has a separate page titled "[Cleveland Sports Curse](#)," with detailed sections on the city's NBA, NFL, and Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. In 2010, sports writer Jim Folsom described 20

disappointing sports moments in the city's history, each one more heart wrenching than the last (Folsom, 2010). Cleveland's sports teams have had some success, but the losses have outnumbered the wins for many years in Cleveland, and the Cavaliers—along with the NFL's Cleveland Browns and MLB's Cleveland Indians—have been the source of many a Cleveland sports fan's disappointment and frustration.

The greater Cleveland area, including James' hometown of Akron, about 40 miles away from Cleveland, has had its share of hard times off the playing field(s) as well. Geographers Warf and Holly (1997) refer to Cleveland as "a fascinating example...of the manifold ways in which the periodic long-wave restructuring brought on by the changing global economy has played out within the unique context of northeastern Ohio" (p. 209). Cleveland is a classic example of a boom and bust economic story. Throughout the 1800s, Cleveland evolved as a manufacturing center and, as the railroad expanded, a hub for transporting goods. Once the first headquarters of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil, Cleveland thrived as a production center for iron, steel, motors, and machinery, as well as consumer goods such as meats, clothing, and paint.

But Cleveland's early economic success came at a price. In 1969, oil and debris from a manufacturing plant poured into Cleveland's Cuyahoga River and caught on fire; this metaphor of the "burning river" became forever linked with Cleveland's environmental deterioration (Adler, 2014). Cleveland's population would deteriorate, too: 165,000 people left the metro area between 1970 and 1980, and the city itself lost a staggering 24% of its population during that time (Warf & Holly, 1997). As manufacturing jobs consolidated and shipped overseas and the Iron Belt turned into the Rust Belt, Cleveland became littered with abandoned factories and blighted housing.

Burning rivers, crumbling cities, and unemployment: This was the corner of Ohio where LeBron James grew up, and home to the fans whose spirits he had lifted as a member of the Cavaliers from 2007-2010. This was also the population that felt most keenly disappointed and betrayed by his decision to leave the Cavaliers for the Miami Heat. But Ohioans were not the only people whose opinions of James were affected by his decision. His overall popularity plummeted as the move to Miami and *The Decision* television special were widely criticized, threatening the value of his

personal brand and the empire of endorsements that he had built during his tenure in Cleveland.

Theory

James' decision to join the Miami Heat, an athletically strong and financially secure team, was an entirely logical step for an ambitious professional athlete seeking to advance his career. However, as Benoit (1997b) wrote, "the key question is not if the act was *in fact* offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous" (p. 178). After the infamous telecast of *The Decision*, James' Q score, which is a measurement of familiarity and appeal, plummeted from 35 to 16. Henry Schafer, executive vice president of the Q Scores Company, told a Miami newspaper, "It was the biggest decline I've ever seen that was not criminally related" (Davis, 2013). The Q Scores Company reported that its surveys showed LeBron was the sixth most disliked sports personality at the time, behind Michael Vick (arrested for facilitating a dog-fighting ring), Tiger Woods (an admitted serial adulterer), Terrell Owens (accused of spitting in an opponent's face during a football game), Chad Ochocinco (arrested for domestic battery), and Kobe Bryant (accused of sexual assault in a widely publicized case) (Rovell, 2010).

Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1995) outlines five categories of image repair strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. *Denial* refers to the process of denying an act occurred or denying involvement in the offensive act. Attempting to shift blame is related to the strategy of denial and can be quite effective when the accused is truly not at fault. *Evading responsibility* has five subcategories: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. This strategy involves taking responsibility for an action while also pointing to extenuating circumstances to justify the offensive act.

The strategy of *reducing offensiveness* is among the most complex and has six subcategories: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Individuals may engage in bolstering by describing positive characteristics or by discussing positive acts they have performed. Minimization is the process through which an act is reframed in order to make it seem less offensive than it originally appeared. In differentiation, a person distinguishes his or her act by

comparing it to other similar but more offensive actions; in doing so, the original act may be seen as less offensive in comparison. Transcendence is the process of placing the act in a more favorable context. The strategy of attacking an accuser involves calling into question the credibility or motives of the source of the allegations. Compensation is used when the victims of a questionable act are reimbursed or otherwise compensated.

Corrective action is the process by which a person pledges to remedy a situation by either restoring it to its original state or engaging in some other activity that will prevent the situation from occurring again in the future. Finally, Benoit described the strategy of *mortification*, when an individual admits fault, apologizes for an action, and asks for forgiveness.

Prior research on the use of image repair by professional athletes has looked at strategies employed in press conferences (Frederick, Burch, Sanderson, & Hambrick, 2014; Sanderson, 2008), in online discourse (Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2015), and in combinations of the two (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Schmittel & Hull, 2015; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). While image repair strategies, when properly used, can be effective in repairing athletes' images (e.g., Michael Phelps; see Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011), they can also be detrimental if improperly implemented (e.g., Roger Clemens; see Sanderson, 2008). Using a combination of traditional and social media, exemplified in the case of cyclist Lance Armstrong, can prove especially effective in image repair for athletes (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Sanderson, 2010). Brown and Billings (2013) found that sports fans are more likely to engage with athletes and sports teams on social media (versus traditional media) during crisis situations.

Certain strategies are more successful than others in the repair of athletes' damaged images. For instance, third-party bolstering can be effective, but only when the third parties are credible (Glantz, 2010; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Strategies that attempt to evade responsibility are unlikely to be helpful in repairing the images of athletes (Glantz, 2010; Sanderson, 2008); similarly, strategies that shift blame or attempt to portray the athlete as a victim may not be effective (Frederick, Burch, Sanderson, & Hambrick, 2014; Schmittel & Hull, 2015).

Brown et al. (2012) conducted an experiment shortly after LeBron James moved from Cleveland to Miami to see what image repair strategy tactic would be most effective in improving James' reputation. Results of the experiment showed that participants overwhelmingly responded most positively to mortification. These findings were unsurprising and supported by previous research (Benoit, 1997a; Grano, 2014; Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Walsh, & McAllister-Spooner, 2011) that showed mortification is an effective image restoration strategy, particularly for celebrities and sports personalities. The researchers had not expected the finding that the apology strategies of both blame shifting and bolstering did nothing to improve participants' view of the athlete and instead actually had negative effects on James' image (Brown et. al., 2012).

But LeBron James did not employ mortification strategies during his time as a member of the Miami Heat or in the communication campaign surrounding his return to Cleveland. Often brash and consistently unapologetic, James broke many of the rules laid out by Benoit for redeeming a damaged reputation. However, once he returned to the Cavaliers, James' popularity rebounded from the precipitous drop it took when he went to the Miami Heat.

Strategy and Tactics

Image Restoration Theory is based on two key assumptions: Communication is a goal-directed activity and maintaining a positive reputation is a primary goal of strategic communication (Benoit, 1997b). While LeBron James' communication strategy has proven successful in rebuilding a positive reputation, his branding decisions have often run contrary to established best-practices. Early in his career, James' communication strategy diverged from the typical path of a high-profile professional athlete. In 2005, James fired Aaron Goodwin, an established sports agent who had ushered James through his transition from high school phenomenon to professional basketball player, and started his own Akron-based marketing company.

James founded LRMR Innovative Marketing & Branding with three of his childhood friends. The company is headed by CEO Maverick Carter, who grew up with James in an underprivileged area of Akron. When LRMR was founded, Carter was just 24 years old and his experience in the world of

sports marketing consisted of an 18-month stint as an intern at Nike and an unfinished sports management degree at Western Michigan University. Critics roundly panned James' decision to place his brand in the hands of an inexperienced friend (Taddeo, 2010), and the disastrous broadcast of *The Decision* seemed to justify widely held concerns about James' decision to break away from a traditional sports marketing team.

At LRMR, the phone is answered with a chipper, "Hello LRMR. We love Akron. How can I help you?" This professed love of Akron, and the deep roots LeBron James has in Northeast Ohio, are at the heart of both his damaged brand and his image restoration process. Had James announced his decision to leave the Cavaliers to pursue a championship ring with the Miami Heat in a less public manner, he likely would not have suffered such a dramatic blow to his image.

However, in 2010, Northeast Ohio was the underdog and LeBron James the hometown hero poised to save his city. During *The Decision*, LeBron James said that Miami would "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." In doing so, he was implicitly saying that he was leaving in part because he could not win in Cleveland. In the eyes of many fans, the King of Cleveland orchestrated a public spectacle to announce that he was abandoning the loyal Rust Belt community that had nurtured him for the sunnier, trendier, and more affluent society of southern Florida.

Despite evidence that mortification would be the most effective strategy to rebuild LeBron James' image (Brown et. al., 2012), the power athlete did not engage in apologetic behavior. In fact, during a press conference after a difficult loss to the Dallas Mavericks during the 2011 NBA finals, James hurled a clear rebuke to Cleveland fans.

All the people that were rooting on me to fail, at the end of the day they have to wake up tomorrow and have the same life that they had before they woke up today. They have the same personal problems they had today. I'm going to continue to live the way I want to live and continue to do the things that I want to do with me and my family and be happy with that. (McKee, 2015, p. 92)

Philanthropy Efforts

Named one of the 10 most charitable athletes in the world by DoSomething.org (Smollins, 2015), James has focused his philanthropic efforts largely on projects in the Cleveland/Akron area. Despite the seemingly adversarial relationship the young player had with his hometown fans, James' influence in Northeast Ohio continued during his four-year tenure with the Miami Heat. He maintained ownership of a sprawling property in a suburb of Akron and his young sons attended school in Ohio. In 2004, he founded The LeBron James Family Foundation (LJFF) to positively affect the lives of children through educational and co-curricular activities. One of the hallmarks of the LJFF is the personal nature of the relationship between its founders and the low-income students from the Akron area who participate in LJFF programs (Mitchell, 2014).

In 2011, James launched Wheels for Education, which became the flagship project of the LJFF. Each year a new class of at-risk third graders from the Akron city school district joins the Wheels for Education program, where students receive guidance, mentorship, and extracurricular opportunities designed to engage them in educational opportunities and support them through graduation (Vardon, 2014).

When students in the Wheels for Education program transition to the sixth grade they enter the Akron I PROMISE Network (AIPN) where they remain until high school graduation. The more than 200 members of the I PROMISE program must perform well academically and engage in community building projects in Northeast Ohio. In return, they are rewarded with product donations from LeBron's many endorsement partners, the opportunity to attend special events with superstar athletes, and personal notes of encouragement from James. James was awarded the H. Peter Burg Award in 2015 by the Akron Chamber of Commerce in 2015 for his leadership and commitment to serving Akron youth. As James stepped forward to receive the award, he was surrounded by I PROMISE program participants wearing t-shirts printed with the words "Just a Kid From Akron," a phrase LeBron has frequently used to describe himself in press interviews and marketing pieces.

In 2015, James announced a partnership between his foundation, the University of Akron, and JPMorgan Chase to ensure that students under his mentorship will have the opportunity to earn a college degree. James stated that he plans to spend more than \$41 million to provide any student in the I PROMISE program that graduates from Akron Public Schools and meets yet-to-be-determined testing, attendance, and community-service criteria with a full scholarship to the University of Akron (Vardon, 2015).

James has also been a longtime supporter of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and, through a partnership with Sprite, has been involved in the renovation and rebuilding efforts of Boys & Girls Clubs facilities across the country. After transforming a club in East Akron that James himself frequented as a child, the Boys & Girls Clubs renamed the facility the LeBron James Clubhouse.

Despite the study by Brown et al. (2012), which indicated that bolstering would likely have a negative effect on James' image, promotion of his charitable efforts has been an effective image restoration strategy. It is possible that bolstering was effective in this case because LeBron also engaged in a form of compensation: Even when James was living and working in Miami, he concentrated his philanthropic efforts in Northeast Ohio and continued to give credit to Akron and his Northeast Ohio upbringing as a contributing factor in his professional success. Even before announcing his return to the Cavaliers, James proved through his continued identification as "just a kid from Akron" and commitment to community development work that he cared about the Cleveland/Akron community.

The Return of a Hometown Hero

James declared his free agency from the Heat at the end of June 2014 and remained silent for the first 10 days of July. Rumors swirled about his intentions, building anticipation for his announcement. In contrast to his (inter)nationally televised special *The Decision* in 2010, LeBron James announced his intentions to return to the Cleveland Cavaliers in a bylined article titled with three simple words: "I'm Coming Home" (James & Jenkins, 2014).

Sports Illustrated's Lee Jenkins, who co-wrote LeBron's essay announcing his decision, broke the story on Twitter at 9 a.m. on a Friday morning linking to an open letter from James that had been posted to the magazine's website. The release of this message was carefully coordinated across James' social media accounts, with posts simultaneously appearing on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter shortly after Jenkins released the story. Jenkins' tweet, along with two tweets about James' return from sports network ESPN, were eventually retweeted more than 100,000 times. A sentiment analysis of the Twitter chatter during the five-hour period following the announcement showed that the response to James' announcement was overwhelmingly positive. The three terms that appeared most frequently in tweets mentioning James during that time were "good luck," "welcome home," and "love."

LeBron's letter, which was dictated to Jenkins (Rosenthal, 2014), was "everything that the original *Decision* wasn't" (Chase, 2014). The letter allowed LeBron to explain in-depth his decisions throughout his career and was every bit as introspective and personal as the 2010 *Decision* was public and theatrical. The letter opened with a clear expression of James' connection to the greater Cleveland area saying, "Before anyone ever cared where I would play basketball, I was a kid from Northeast Ohio. It's where I walked. It's where I ran. It's where I cried. It's where I bled" (James & Jenkins, 2014).

While still a far cry from an apology, James' letter did reference the sense of betrayal many Cavaliers fans felt when he joined the Miami Heat. In an attempt to explain his actions, James used the strategy of transcendence to position his four years in Miami as a necessary move for his professional and personal growth.

If I had to do it all over again, I'd obviously do things differently, but I'd still have left. Miami, for me, has been almost like college for other kids. These past four years helped raise me into who I am. I became a better player and a better man. I learned from a franchise that had been where I wanted to go. I will always think of Miami as my second home. Without the experiences I had there, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing today. (James & Jenkins, 2014)

By comparing his four years as a member of the Miami Heat to the traditional four-year college process, James reframed his move away from Northeast Ohio by likening it to a far more acceptable experience.

The public's response was immediate as online conversation about LeBron's move erupted in a social media firestorm. LeBron's 2014 letter was as widely praised as his 2010 *Decision* television special was criticized. Entertainment personalities, sports figures, and even James' former teammates on the Miami Heat expressed congratulations on Twitter (Daniels, 2014; Litman, 2014; Zinser, 2014). While James' redemption wasn't immediate, it was definitely jump-started by a well-crafted missive and a low-key distribution that contrasted sharply with the high-profile television special of *The Decision* four years prior. As James and Jenkins (2014) wrote, "I'm not having a press conference or a party. After this, it's time to get to work."

In the year since LeBron James announced his return to Cleveland, he has ramped up his social media efforts and provides fans with an intimate view into his personal and professional activities through frequent tweets, Instagram uploads, and Facebook posts. Outside of a self-imposed social media blackout during playoff season, James publishes a steady stream of content and regularly engages with fans through online channels. James' image management process over the last several years focused on community engagement activities and low-key messages shared through controlled distribution channels.

Conclusion

Throughout his professional career, LeBron James' public relations strategies and tactics have been anything but conventional. But, inarguably, they have worked. LeBron's decision to leave the Cavaliers for the Miami Heat in 2010 caused his popularity to plummet, according to the Q score measure of celebrity popularity (McMenamin, 2015); he did, however, retain lucrative endorsement deals in spite of this popularity drop (Rovell, 2010).

Since returning to Cleveland in summer 2014, LeBron's popularity has risen steadily, as exhibited by Q score ratings that rose steadily from 16 (after the move to Miami) to 25 in February 2015 (Tuchman, 2015) and

29 in June 2015 (McMenamin, 2015). In October 2014, James took the top spot on *Forbes* list of most valuable sports brands, replacing longtime powerhouse Tiger Woods (Ozanian, 2014). Still active and arguably one of the best players in the NBA, LeBron James and his legacy are already being compared to that of legendary figures such as Michael Jordan (Hughes, 2014).

LeBron James' public relations strategies have broken many of the rules of traditional image repair. His use of a small public relations firm founded by a high-school friend bucks the trend of using established sports agents and firms for public relations purposes. When his move to the Miami Heat, and the accompanying TV special announcing the move, angered so many sports fans in Cleveland (and elsewhere), he chose not to follow traditional image repair strategies such as mortification, responding defiantly to criticism. Although research indicated that the image restoration strategy of reducing offensiveness would be less effective than mortification and could perhaps even damage James' reputation further (Benoit, 1997a; Brown et. al., 2012), the sports star relied on bolstering and transcendence to rebuild his sullied image.

The context of James' situation was certainly unique. It's unlikely that this case would have played out in the same way if James had been from a prosperous area in New York, or if he had been drafted by a traditionally successful team like the Los Angeles Lakers. Moreover, James' actions during the move to Miami and the subsequent return to Cleveland—his unapologetic pushback against critics and his wholehearted embrace of Northeast Ohio, even during the time when he was playing for the Miami Heat—tapped into a crucial element in contemporary public relations: authenticity. If James had apologized, as traditional image repair strategy would have dictated, it may have damaged the authenticity of his persona and ultimately done more harm than good. From foregoing a college basketball experience to eschewing an established sports marketing agent for representation by a trusted friend, James' career decisions have often diverged from the conventional path. But for a man accustomed to defying expectations, James' unconventional choices and support of a downtrodden hometown have become vital parts of his personal brand.

Discussion Questions

1. LeBron James' reputation took a major hit after his televised special *The Decision* aired on ESPN. How might James have handled the announcement that he would be joining the Miami Heat in a way that would have been less detrimental to his personal brand?
2. James is widely regarded as one of the most talented active players in the NBA. How does his talent on the basketball court affect his off-court image? Do you think he would have seen the same reputation recovery if he had not excelled professionally during his four years in Miami?
3. How has the increasing use of social media changed the way athletes build relationships with their fans?

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KATHLEEN STANSBERRY, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of public relations and social media at Cleveland State University. Her research examines the development of influence within health-based online communities and looks at ways public relations practitioners can effectively engage publics using social media. Email: k.stansberry[at]csuohio.edu.

JESSALYNN STRAUSS, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the School of Communications at Elon University. Her research interests include public relations, corporate social responsibility, nonprofit organizations, the casino gaming industry, and the history and culture of Las Vegas. Email: jstrauss2[at]elon.edu.

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