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Reaction Paper One

The article “Better Than Steph Curry and More Profitable Than LeBron James: An Analysis of LaVar Ball’s Agenda Building of the Ball Brothers” by Melvin L. Williams and Matthew J. Cotton provides audiences with details and data about the highly debated LaVar Ball, and how he has orchestrated his children’s careers to become a profitable business. Mr. Ball is the owner of Big Baller Brand and father to brothers Lonzo, LiAngelo, and LaMelo Ball, who all have careers in or associated with the NBA. In studying the characteristics of LaVar Ball’s speech within interviews, researchers tried to make sense of the man who media outlets have criticized countless times for the way he carries himself in the spotlight. Throughout the article, Williams and Cotton studied 50 interviews that occurred over thirteen months, where LaVar Ball was attempting to make a name for himself, his children, and his company. The article asks whether the forum that LaVar takes when conducting interviews is beneficial for his agenda for his sons and for the black culture as a whole. The research within “Better Than Steph Curry and More Profitable Than LeBron James: An Analysis of LaVar Ball’s Agenda Building of the Ball Brothers” is beneficial to the black community as it clarifies the agenda that LaVar Ball exploits to gain popularity for himself and his brand which may help others see the truth behind the interviews.

When being introduced to the key players and research that was being done to make sense of the LaVar Ball story, the article is clear about the priority questions. These questions are as follows:

- “Does LaVar Ball’s media message follow a process of agenda building when promoting Lonzo, LiAngelo, and LaMelo Ball?
- How does LaVar Ball use his media interviews to discuss inequities facing Black athletes in sports?
- Does LaVar Ball offer a positive counterstereotype to historic media representations of Black fathers in media interviews?” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 207).

These questions all build upon who LaVar Ball is as a person, and as a media figure. He consistently creates drama and rants about how his children are better than notable basketball figureheads in order to become more popular within the sports world. This popularity gains both his children and his brand a reputation that can produce wealth if handled correctly. This agenda building is a key discussion point in Williams and Cotton’s article in which they break down research to compare LaVar’s interviews to Lang and Lang’s (1983) six-step process of agenda building. Lang and Lang’s six-steps are “the press highlights certain issues, leading those issues to stand out; the amount of coverage and attention an issue receives varies based on the degree to which it stimulates issue salience for audiences; issues must be framed for audiences. Media must provide audience members with a general sense of an issue and its core meanings; the language media use to frame an issue can affect how an audience interprets an issue; the issue is linked to secondary symbols that nearly everyone can appreciate or identify; agenda building picks up speed when well- known individuals become involved” (Denham, 2004, p. 53 - 54). I believe that by including a researched process and applying it to LaVar Ball’s interviews, the outcome of the research was more fruitful than expected. Giving the researchers a reference and guide to compare LaVar’s messages was a good idea that allowed for deeper meaning to the

themes found from his interviews. Williams and Cotton provide the reader with enough statistical evidence to see LaVar's agenda for his business and his children.

The question "How does LaVar Ball use his media interviews to discuss inequities facing Black athletes in sports?" (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 207) is also a largely discussed point within the article. The researchers wanted to see if the agenda that LaVar Ball was offering was any better than the main forms of media that commonly isolate/degrade the black athlete. More and more, the media create plotlines in sport, and often we see black athletes being praised for their athleticism, not their intelligence. Media outlets create advertising that can be compared to the "animalization" (Latham, 2002, p. 12) of the black athlete in an attempt to produce a more interesting sporting event. By disenfranchising the black athlete, the media gets more attraction as "super human feats" are still not acknowledging the human essence within black athletes. Seeing if LaVar Ball is pushing the same message that the media does tells us the true nature of his agenda.

Another question analyzed within the article was if LaVar Ball was providing a positive message to the media in an attempt to counter the negative stereotypical image of black fatherhood. As LaVar Ball is a father of very talented basketball players, he is one of only a few with the ability to pave the way for a new social norm. When referring to black fatherhood and what it means to be a black father, the common thought within media today is that the majority are not positive role models, or are absent from their children's lives. "With the creation of the Big Baller Brand and his noticeable push for media coverage of Lonzo, LiAngelo, and LaMelo, LaVar presents a case study in Black fatherhood (...) worthy of scholarly investigation" (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 204). The reasoning behind studying the Ball family and its dynamics, including the relationships between father and sons, is a valid one as this family is one

of the most popular in the sports world. Narratives about the Ball family and their reign can have a deep impact within the black culture, as others could be molded by it, so making sure that it is sustainable would be interesting. Williams and Cotton express their concern with this, and came up with evidence that is informative about how the Ball family works, and how this might shape future generations. The analysis of LaVar Ball's interviews within the thirteen months gives critical information towards the hypothesis proof.

When researching the topic of LaVar Ball and how he conducts himself within the media, Williams and Cotton wanted to do a critical analysis of what the man did when interviewing. Reviewing his messages would allow the researchers the opportunity to see further into the Big Baller Brand, along with the Ball family dynamics. The two researchers decided to use critical discourse analysis of 50 televised interviews of LaVar Ball. These interviews often showed him alone or with one or more of his sons, however Mr. Ball always did the talking for the family. "Critical discourse analysis recognizes the power of language and how it can contribute to oppression and be used for liberation" (Fairclough, 2003). When looking into the language of LaVar Ball, his messages need to be looked at in a way to isolate core meanings, then create a thought pathway reviewing each interview. Defining and making note of key messages within LaVar Ball's interviews can lead to deeper meanings of his agenda and can be compared to how they either added or rejected biases stated in the author's primary questions.

As the researchers watched, examined, and made note of LaVar's messages, they were going to need a system to really allow them access into the big picture of the subject's agenda. The researchers wanted to locate themes that would help define the messages LaVar would say in interviews. These themes would follow "six steps outlined by Clarke and Braun (2014): (1) familiarize yourself with the data and identify items of potential interest, (2) generate initial

codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review potential themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) produce a report” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 209). Creating themes would make the studying of LaVar Ball’s messages easier, as the researchers could then break them down. Through the analysis, the researchers assigned quantitative values to qualitative thematic findings. Assigning numbers to these themes identified what LaVar was passionate about, and pointed out evidence that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. The research that the authors did when collecting, evaluating, then processing the data from the 50 interviews allowed the readers to understand and evaluate what LaVar Ball wanted to gain from talking with the media. The addition of quantitative metrics throughout the research process allowed evidence to be shown in various ways throughout the article, including easy to understand percentages. Having quantitative findings could reveal patterns in LaVar Ball’s interviews, and his agenda would become clearer to the audience. What might be missed in this method is how the actions and words were received by the audiences of those interviews. Only assumptions can be made in this area.

Upon the completion of research and gaining evidence to support the answers to their research questions, Williams and Cotton were sincere when evaluating LaVar Ball’s themes and messages held within them. When analyzing LaVar Ball and his creation of an agenda, “whether intentionally or unintentionally, LaVar’s interviews followed all six steps of Lang and Lang’s agenda-building process. Adorned in Big Baller Brand apparel for all 50 examined interviews, he used braggadocious language, carefully constructed symbols, and public feuds with well-known athletes and celebrities to promote his sons” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 210). While interviewing, LaVar could have been there to only promote his sons, but he pushed his brand into the spotlight and created drama to incite popularity to the interview. Focusing on the issue of

LaVar Ball creating an agenda for profit from both his brand and children, the researchers found that LaVar heavily referenced Lonzo to start his feuds and gain popularity from them. “Of the three brothers, LaVar discussed Lonzo and his athletic career in 42 of the 50 examined interviews (84%), which significantly outweighed those interviews where LaVar discussed LiAngelo (7 of the 50 [14%]) or LaMelo (12 of the 50 [24%])” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 210). As Lonzo was the son most famed and poised to go pro in the National Basketball Association, it makes sense that LaVar would push that son heavily, as he could use that achievement to promote his brand and profit from it. The constant detailing of percentages and use of themes consistently gives the audience of the article a thought to grasp on to, provoking thought about the subject with quantitative proof.

Another finding of the research and examining interviews was that LaVar answered all questions related to his sons’ careers and appeared without them in 40 of the 50 interviews examined (80%)” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 210). This statistic allows the reader to see how LaVar values his own words over the words of his sport star sons, stealing their spotlight to promote himself. The article references LaVar’s dominance of the Ball family image to create wealth for the Big Baller Brand. This exploitation from the patriarch of the Ball family helps explain how LaVar’s agenda is being produced and what he aims to gain through his many interviews.

It was widely known before this article that LaVar Ball would talk up his children in a way to cause controversy. During the research, it was discovered that LaVar Ball pushed for Lonzo Ball in a productive way for the narrative of the black athlete. “LaVar shared personal stories of Lonzo’s academic accolades, childhood basketball games, family values, and teenage mistakes, which portrayed Lonzo not only as an athlete with great promise but also as a well-

mannered son and brother” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 212). By pushing this message, LaVar defied the stereotypical talk about a black athlete. This is productive for the whole of the athletic black community as it shares a story of a well-adjusted black male being both a good basketball player and man. However, he also would call out other athletes and celebrities to feud with over Lonzo Ball’s athleticism, which stirs up controversy and gains media time. This was another calculated move to push LaVar’s agenda and raise awareness for his brand rather than focus on supporting his child’s career.

In answering the third question as to whether LaVar Ball offers a positive counterstereotype of black fathers, it is shown that Mr. Ball has achieved this goal. He was there for his children, avoiding the stereotypical absent father trope that the media pushes. However, LaVar decided to live through and profit from his children instead. “LaVar admitted to exploiting his sons on Sports Center Featured: Ball or Fall, methodically detailing how he conceived the idea of “having three boys,” “picking a tall athletic woman” as his wife, and training his boys for basketball fame” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 221). If the admitting of focusing on his children in a way that restricts their free will or over controlled their action for his own profit, then LaVar created a new way of thinking that other black fathers may see and be attracted to trying. By focusing on having basketball players before birth, LaVar limits his sons’ creative choices and therefore hurts their overall quality of life. “The Ball brothers’ athletic careers were central topics in all 50 interviews, but they only appeared in 10 of the 50 examined interviews (20%)” (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 221). By silencing his sons, LaVar Ball continues to push his agenda to profit himself and the Big Baller Brand.

Throughout the investigative study, the research conclusions found within the 50 interviews allowed the researchers to answer the three major questions introduced. Through their

quantitative and critical discourse analysis, the research proved valid conclusions that were strongly backed by statistical evidence. In my opinion, I feel the researchers did a good job in finding common themes throughout the interviews that help them to have strong conclusions in their research.

When reading through this piece of research, I was taken aback when reading about how the media misrepresents and generalizes the black athlete. When diving deep into cultural backgrounds about why we enjoy sport, we can see they “attract large and passionately devoted audiences, are relatively cheap to produce, represent human drama at its finest, display the limits of the body in real time, (and) provide us with carefully crafted narratives of heroes and villains” (Jackson & Andrews, 2012, p. 10). The beauty of sport can be drawn from the skills of those who work hard and put their bodies through challenges to achieve a goal. Athletes should be just that, but the media makes money through creating plotlines and drama to sell TV time and other forms of product. This action takes the focus off the sport, and can put it in areas it should not be, such as generalizing the black athlete. This article does a great job of introducing, analyzing, and describing why LaVar Ball is unwarranted to be taking the actions he has within the interviews he has appeared in. By giving the spotlight to LaVar, the media is taking it away from very talented Lonzo, LiAngelo, and LaMelo Ball as basketball players. The feuds and drama that get brought up may give popularity to each of the Ball brothers, but it has nothing to do with playing the sport itself; it is simply about profit. Whether it be LaVar, the media, or possibly the Ball brothers getting paid from increased popularity, publicity gained by feuds does nothing to put the focus back onto the sport that got them popular in the first place.

“Better Than Steph Curry and More Profitable Than LeBron James: An Analysis of LaVar Ball’s Agenda Building of the Ball Brothers” by Melvin L. Williams and Matthew J.

Cotton really allowed me to sink my teeth into relatively current events in the sports world. The article did a great job at outlining the Ball family, especially LaVar, and how they have come to fame. As the researchers did this, they showed that the actions of LaVar Ball spoke as loud as his words, showing that he was there to make money first and to support his children's careers second. Even with the Ball brothers playing in the NBA, LaVar found a way to profit by creating his own brand and signing his children to it. By popularizing his children's basketball skills, he is actively advocating marketing to line his own wallet. Many fathers want the spotlight to fully be on their children if they excel at a certain activity. LaVar Ball actively grabs this spotlight away from his athlete sons to speak for them, or limiting their time in the media to make sure that his agenda is heard. The researchers have statistical evidence to highlight this: "(10) interviews lasted a total of 51:37, and Lonzo (20:48), LiAngelo (0:12), and LaMelo (0:25) spoke significantly less than LaVar (31:42)" (Williams and Cotton, 2019, p. 221), the authors give us detailed evidence that LaVar is currently stealing time away from his deserving sons, to promote and entice others to invest in him. Overall, evidence that the patriarch of the Ball family is fighting for his own agenda, not his three basketball playing sons, is made clear with the research done by the article.

Through the analysis done by Williams and Cotton, I affirm that LaVar ball is not acting in the best interests of his sons, but pushing an agenda in which he is able to profit off the careers and skills of his children. This will lead to an understanding in which the black community will be able to sense and avoid this behavior with future generations, as the article makes it abundantly clear that LaVar Ball is not a man to idolize.

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