

ANTI-RACISM IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

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Chapter 7

Humble Beginnings: The Depiction of Black Athletes' Upbringings in Commercials between 2016 and 2019

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Abstract

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick sparked a movement that called for an examination of many institutions, including advertising and marketing, for their racially insensitive content. Yet, in 2019, LeBron James highlighted how commercials still contain racial microaggression in the way they depict Black athletes' childhood. Building on previous literature, this chapter explores how Black athletes are portrayed in television commercials by examining the “humble beginnings” trope, which perpetuates the narrative that Black people come from undesirable backgrounds known as the ghetto or slums. It identifies and analyzes five commercials that aired between 2016 and 2019, of which all contain Black athletes (both U.S and non-U.S. born). It uses a theoretical framework that includes the White gaze, colorblindness, and tokenism to analyze the forms of racial microaggression in the commercials. The study found that the sample of contemporary commercials tended to depict Black athletes' upbringings in a ghetto (or slums) context. It argues that this 1) speaks to the racist lens of White-dominated marketing companies, 2) discredits the impact of institutional and systemic racism on Black people, and 3) labels “successful” Black athletes as a model for meritocracy, thus criticizing “unsuccessful” Black people in the process.

Keywords: race, sports, Black athletes, commercials, media

Over the past 30 years, significant academic focus has been on the depiction of Black athletes in the media, specifically in sports advertisements (Andrews & Silk, 2010; de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2020). This research revealed that racial stereotypes are often used when portraying Black athletes and their experiences. By providing a basic framework of stereotypes, sports advertisements influence how society views Black athletes. Beyond just stereotyping athletes, these depictions reinforce, and at times exacerbate, racist beliefs about Black people more broadly. They can also affect how Black athletes, people, and communities view themselves (Adams-Bass, 2014).

One recurring stereotype presented in commercials is the idea that a Black athlete's upbringing inherently involves a lack of financial resources, family support, and opportunities outside of sports (Sailes, 2017; Andrews & Silk, 2010). For example, in the 2019 Nike commercial “Beginnings,” National Basketball Association (NBA) player LeBron James criticizes the prevalence of these stereotypical stories by stating, “We always hear about an athlete's humble beginnings: how they emerged from poverty or tragedy to beat the odds [. . .] the stories of determination that capture the American dream” (Creative Videos, 2019). I refer to this characterization as the humble-beginnings trope, but other names have been ascribed to it over the years. Andrews and Silk refer to the narratives of Black people who made it out of “the hood” as the trope of “determined individualism” (Andrews & Silk, 2010, p. 1638). These narratives contribute to the misconception that all Black athletes overcame a difficult and impoverished upbringing and other characteristics associated with the “ghetto.” Leonard (2006) argues the obsession with the ghetto started with the rise of Black urban films during the 1990s hip-hop movement. Andrews

and Silk (2010) further the discussion, stating, “Today, it is now possible to discern a ghettocentric logic pervading the multiplicity of elements that constitute commercial basketball culture: It has become the game’s default promotional mode” (p. 1634). Even commercials with Black athletes from outside the United States (U.S.) feature narratives on the athletes’ upbringings that include similar characteristics associated with a more global form of the ghetto or “slums.” Based on the literature, the ghetto is described as a neighborhood or geographical area that contains a variety of characteristics, such as an over-representation of Black and Brown people, building congestion, little greenery, old and decrepit tenements, brick buildings, vacant lots, poverty, crime, abounding and nonconforming land use, liquor stores, and nightclubs. Slums share many characteristics with the ghetto, but slums are often positioned in international (i.e., non-U.S.) geographical areas and contain dirt roads and fields, minimally clothed people, shed housing, and outdated technology.

However, since Andrews and Silk’s (2010) study, Colin Kaepernick and the Black Lives Matter movement have made a significant push to end systemic and institutional racism in the U.S. and globally. As a result, several companies and marketing agencies have committed to changing their advertisements to be more inclusive. This has led to an increase in the number of socially acceptable marketing or “woke” commercials (de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2020). This change was an attempt to appeal to young, educated consumers by appropriating aspects of political activism and seemingly relevant in order to maximize financial gain (de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2020). Although there has been a concerted effort to appeal to the political views of Black people, the attempt to avoid racist stereotypes in commercials has proven to be more challenging, especially the deeper microaggressions that perpetuate false and negative beliefs about Black people (e.g., the humble-beginnings trope). Part of the difficulty in addressing this issue is the implicit and unconscious belief held by Whites that these stereotypical depictions of Black people are accurate and indicative of most Black people’s upbringings. Thus, even though there has been progress in eliminating stereotypes in commercials, was LeBron James correct when he said commercials still promote the Black athlete’s humble-beginnings trope?

This essay attempts to answer this question by building upon previous studies that suggest there is a trend in sports commercials that reinforces the narrative of Black people coming from undesirable backgrounds, known as the ghetto or slums. In this chapter, I examine contemporary commercials and identify how Black athletes’ upbringings are depicted to better understand this misrepresentation in the media. I also analyze the significance and impact of these representations on the way we understand Black life and experiences. Finally, the chapter provides tools for understanding and critiquing sports commercials and their role in perpetuating stereotypes while offering suggestions on how to do anti-racist marketing that uses appropriate representations of Black athletes.

Literature Review

Across various industries, there has been a quantitative increase in the representation of Black people in advertisements over the past 50 years. For example, Pollay et al. (1992) found that, compared to 1955, Black models were four times more likely to appear in cigarette commercials in 1965. This increase is also reflected in commercials portraying Black athletes. Blacks are more likely than Whites to be depicted as athletes, and Black athletes are more likely than White athletes to appear in advertisements (Dufur, 1997). However, with the continuous yet small increase in representation, quality becomes more of a concern. Scholars suggest that Black athletes are negatively stereotyped in advertisements. For example, in an article titled “Skill in Black and White: Negotiating Media Images of Race in a Sporting Context,” Daniel Buffington (2008) studied how college students perceived race in sports and sports-related media. Buffington outlined several stereotypes that are used to describe Black and White athletes and the differences between them. For example, Black athletes are often viewed as natural athletes with superior physical skills, such as speed, jumping ability, and strength, while White players are praised for mental skills, such as hard work, teamwork, intelligence, and leadership (Buffington, 2008). The article concluded that these stereotypes impact the perceptions people have of Black athletes as well as

Black athletes' perceptions of themselves.

Some scholars, such as Dufur (1997), argue that Eurocentric race logic contains preconceived notions or stereotypes of Blacks that are readily available in advertisements. These marketing efforts are utilized to attract and appease viewers. He explained the process of licking in these advertisements, whereby media producers engage in “manipulating images into forms that tap into viewers' preconceived notions, allowing the viewers to place the image into their social world and move instantaneously to further interpretation” (Dufur, 1997, p. 347). Some commercials attract viewers by displaying things that are familiar to a targeted audience. In Bristor, Lee, and Hunt's (1995) study, titled “Race and Ideology: African American Images in Television Advertising,” key findings revealed aspects of objectification in commercials where the focus was not on the athlete's identity and skills beyond sport, but rather on what they can do as athletes. Additional findings showed that famous brands such as Nike targeted African American youth from urban environments by using mostly young Black athletes in commercials and urban-ghetto settings (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995).

Since the rise of hip-hop and urban films, a common trend in commercials has been placed on Black athletes in urban environments or ghettos. According to studies, the ghetto is a geographical space that is dominated by Blacks, dilapidated, and dangerous. In the American psyche, it is a terrible place that residents want to escape but where some people are forced to live because of their economic status (Griffin, 1979). In the article “Basketball's Ghetto-centric Logic,” David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk (2010) highlight the way common stereotypes in commercials involve Black athletes' perceived ghetto upbringing. Andrews and Silk (2010) specifically focused on the depiction of Black male basketball players in Sports Illustrated advertisements to understand “basketball's prevailing ghetto-centric logic” along with the “mobilization of a Black Urban Imaginary” (p. 1627). The authors explain how the language used, imagery portrayed, and stereotypes presented in sports commercials, specifically for the NBA, influence public perception of the African American community. They argue these tropes set the athlete apart from the urban space, which makes the commercial and the message more consumable for a White audience. The authors concluded that this stereotype could damage Black people because only these characteristics are associated with Blackness as opposed to positive characteristics or even a broader range of environmental and personal descriptors (Andrew & Silk, 2010).

The focus on poverty is particularly common in the depiction of Black upbringings. In the article “It's Gotta be the Shoes,” Wilson and Spark (1996) found when Black youth are represented in shoe commercials, they are consistently positioned as emerging from poverty. However, this study also suggests a narrative often follows this stereotype that Black athletes use their physical abilities to escape their challenging upbringing, thus perpetuating the stereotype that Black people are physically strong but intellectually weak. In a comparative study, Czopp (2010) found that Black student athletes were discouraged from setting and completing academic-related goals due to racial stereotypes associated with their intellectual abilities, particularly in comparison to White student athletes. Czopp explained how Black student athletes are told to partake in behaviors that are “natural” to them, which may ultimately have a negative effect on them. The impact of this insidious stereotype on Black youth across various socioeconomic backgrounds is highly problematic, to say the least. These depictions suggest that Black youth have a greater chance of being successful through sports than in academics, which is statistically inaccurate and improbable. Perpetuating these unrealistic expectations furthers inequality by relegating Black youth to sports and entertainment (McKay, 1995).

Research Study

This essay focuses on a sample of contemporary athlete commercials to examine how the media reinforces racial stereotypes of Black athletes' upbringings by positioning them in a ghetto or slum context. A textual-analysis research method was utilized for this research to analyze the commercials (McKee, 2001). Textual analysis is “a way of gathering and analyzing information in academic research” by “asking new

questions and coming up with new ways of thinking about things” (McKee, 2001, p. 140). An extensive search of commercials was conducted by reviewing various online commercial lists and groups for each year, such as 1) the best sports commercials, 2) commercials with the highest-grossing athletes, 3) the top social justice–related sports commercials, 4) commercials from the top apparel brands (e.g., Nike, Under Armour, Puma, Adidas, etc.), and 5) commercials that aired during top sports matches (e.g., the Super Bowl, the NCAA men’s Final Four, the NBA Finals, etc.). Several commercials were selected for this study based on a set of criteria: 1) included real athletes or fictional athlete characters, 2) depicted a younger version of an athlete, real or fictional, and 3) aired between 2016 and 2019, to account for the events sparked by Kaepernick’s kneeling protest in 2016 and the 2019 “Beginnings” commercial, starring LeBron James.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses a set of concepts and theories to analyze the depiction of Black upbringings in the selected commercials. The concept of racial microaggressions, first theorized by Chester Pierce (1969), is used as a lens for identifying subtle forms of racism that exist in the commercials. According to Sue (2007), racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (p. 271). While they seem to be isolated and minimal, the accumulation of experiences with racial microaggressions can impact the well-being of Black people (Sue 2010). Under a so-called “post-racist” society, microaggressions emerge as the predominant articulation of racism (Sue 2010). The concept of microaggression allows for an analysis that recognizes the changing forms of racism that increasingly work through surreptitious ways (Sue 2010).

The theory of the White gaze is also used in this study. It argues that White people see and interpret images of Black people differently than Blacks (Pailey, 2020; Yancy, 2013). For example, the beliefs about the ghetto or the upbringing of Black people are often viewed differently by Blacks than the mostly White marketing executives who create and approve commercials. But it cannot be overlooked that some Black people internalize White racial logic and its underlying assumptions, which can cause them to subconsciously subscribe to this harmful belief as well. The White gaze is a concept that appeared in the works of intellectuals, such as Toni Morrison, who attempted to reject racial tropes about Black people (Pailey, 2020). However, there have been many other scholars who have used different terms to describe the way European White colonizers possess blind spots that exist within a White-supremacist ideology that positions Whiteness as normal and universal (Coulthard, 2004, pp. 14-15; Feagin, 2013; Mbembe, 2017; Feagin, 2013; Mills, 1997; Hall, 1980). Philosophy and race professor George Yancy (2013) described the White gaze in an editorial concerning a young Black boy killed by a White police officer. He explains, “This officer had already inherited those poisonous assumptions and bodily perceptual practices that make up what I call the ‘White gaze.’ He had already come to ‘see’ the Black male body as different, deviant, ersatz” (Yancy, 2013, p. 1). This is an accurate example of how the White general public often engages in microaggressions by misinterpreting, misappropriating, or projecting false assumptions about Black people and their upbringings. The White gaze ignores institutional and systemic racism and believes success comes to a young Black athlete once they have escaped the problematic Black ghetto, which they are able to do because of their individual desire.

Critical race theory’s (CRT) critique of colorblindness is also a tool of analysis used in this study. Colorblind ideology is centered on the belief that it is most beneficial to ignore racial or cultural/ethnic bias when seeking to address discrimination. It downplays the importance of cultural identification, views White European experiences as normal, and fails to acknowledge the experiences of racial and ethnic groups who have been marginalized (Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Rucker & Richeson., 2021; Hofhuis, Zee, & Otten, 2016). Color blindness is another microaggression connected to traditional Western values, such as meritocracy and individualism (Williams, Skinta, & Martin-Willett, 2021). But the criteria by which merit is rewarded “are often a reflection of the norms and values of the majority group

and are thus inherently biased against the minority group” (Sommier, Sterkenburg, & Hofhuis, 2019, p. 5). It does not account for the unique way social norms—created to benefit and support the majority—impact minority groups by protecting the existing status quo and inequality. The color-blind ideology demands that minority groups assimilate into the norms and values of the majority (Sommier, Sterkenburg, & Hofhuis, 2019).

Tokenism is another concept used in this study to analyze how Black athletes are portrayed as objects of manipulation to socialize viewers in ways that perpetuate Black inferiority. It is a process of inclusion that accepts individuals from disadvantaged groups into more-advantaged groups, albeit in very limited instances (e.g., superstar Black athletes versus entire Black communities). The token individuals are symbols of individual success and represent what others from minority groups can achieve. Tokenism is another microaggression that gives the impression that this mobility is available to all individuals. But capitalism has created a racist caste-like system that continues to deny masses of Black people from economic and social progress. The stereotypes are reproduced to satisfy, placate, or appease majority groups and maintain inequality with no true intention of advancing the success outcomes of minority groups beyond a few exceptions. It is a mechanism that maintains inequality and reinforces the features of the dominant group. Tropes, such as humble beginnings, are repeatedly used to degrade Black communities and criticize those who do not make it out of the ghettos and slums. The White gaze, color-blind ideology, and tokenism concepts are utilized as theoretical lenses to analyze commercials and the racial stereotyping that exists within them.

Findings

Five commercials met the criteria of this study. Four selected commercials starred at least one professional athlete, including Serena Williams, LeBron James, Kevin Durant, and others. A total of seven athletes were examined: one Black American woman, four Black American men, and three non-US Black athletes.

Table 1. Selected Commercials

Title	Company	Year	Director	URL
“Want It All”	Nike	2017	F. Gary Gray	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNB2aigymkE
“The Moment of Truth”	Crypto.com	2019	Calmatic	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sk_52aI_W1M
“To the Greatness of Small”	Alibaba	2018	Unknown	https://dailycommercials.com/alibaba-greatness-small-olympic-winter-games-2018/
“Dream Crazy”	Nike	2018	Wieden+Kennedy	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lomlpJREDzw
“Rise, Grind, Shine, Again”	Nike	2018	Lost Planet, New York	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQSiiEPKgUk

Overall, the study found that the selected commercials depicted Black athletes' upbringings, both U.S. and international, in ghetto environments. Several commercials show a young version of a Black athlete surrounded by low-income houses and large brick buildings that feature fire escapes and window air conditioners. Bikes and skateboards can be seen scattered about an urban backdrop. In the commercial “Want It All,” groups of Black people can be seen congregating on porches and stoops throughout the neighborhood, which is often seen in Black low-income areas because of the communal nature of the group and the scarceness of air conditioning in the summer, which causes people to assemble outside of their houses. “Dream Crazy” is the only commercial to feature a Black woman, Serena Williams, and references her upbringing in Compton, California, which is often classified as the ghetto and associated

with drugs, gangs, and poverty (Agustinus & Simanjuntak, 2021; Pryle & Palmer, 2018; Sides, 2004). It is the only reference made to her upbringing.

Across all commercials with Black athletes, there was a conspicuous dearth of well-resourced training facilities. Several younger Black athletes in some of the commercials were shown playing basketball on inner-city street courts as opposed to a well-maintained indoor or outdoor facility. In the commercial “The Greatest of Small,” a young Black athlete is using inline skates to train for hockey when one of the worn-down wheels comes off. Many of the commercials show young Black athletes using training methods that require little to no resources. One commercial shows a young basketball player running up a street with a large incline, which appears to be his training process. Even the young international Black players are placed in poor environments, which reveals the international pervasiveness of Black stereotypes regarding socioeconomic status. Some are shown playing their sport on dirt and run-down fields. While the young Black athletes are shown in slums and ghettos, the commercials often show their older selves playing at the professional level after scenes of them training hard. These images suggest the Black athletes’ hard work and rigorous training were the reason for their escape from the ghetto.

White Gaze

Although there has been a strong push for systemic and institutional change after s protest, sports commercials continue to perpetuate racist microaggressions and undertones that reinforce negative stereotypes about Black people. Consistent with previous studies, the commercials in this study are heavily attuned to the mainstream White gaze (Andrews & Silk, 2010). One reason for this consistent finding is that marketing companies are led by White people unfamiliar with the Black athletes’ diverse experiences and are more prone to making commercials that reproduce racist stereotypes (Zhang, 2017). The White gaze is invested in the myth that Black athletes, and Black people broadly, originate from “bad” socioeconomic environments and reinforce the trope of the humble beginning. In turn, it assumes White people come from (comparatively) “good” environments (read: safe, nuclear-family oriented, and higher socioeconomic status). The latter can only be true if the former is also. Thus, the White gaze privileges Whiteness and devalues Blackness. Stereotypical images of Black athletes in commercials uphold a larger ideology of White supremacy by perpetuating a racist social order. In addition to White people being the intended audience, the White gaze shapes the commercials and positions White people as an authority on Black athletes’ upbringings. The projected narrative is not viewed as a depiction but rather as a social fact. Even though Black people are directing more commercials, that does not disqualify the advertisements from reinforcing the White gaze. Two of the commercials in this study, “Want It All” and “The Moment of Truth,” were directed by Black people. This exemplifies how Black people can and do perpetuate racial stereotypes about their racial group. With expectations of the White gaze looming over Black directors and their colonized minds coloring their perspectives, they also hold some of the same tendencies as their White counterparts.

The belief is that consumers heavily influence how commercials are shaped (Bourdieu, 1984). The way commercials in this study have been framed by the White gaze is a reminder that White people are not only the main producers but also the intended audience (Sandell, 1995). Often, when White people interpret images of Black athletes in commercials, it is through a lens of Whiteness or an ideology of White supremacy which associates Black people with degrading stereotypes. These commercials do not try to impose desires on people; instead, the producers understand viewers’ existing beliefs about Black athletes and their upbringings and attempt to align specific commodities with these beliefs (Miller & Rose, 1997). Therefore, commercials make the commodity more attractive to White viewers by perpetuating the belief that all Black athletes are from the humble beginnings of ghettos and slums.

The White gaze often views Blackness as an object of fascination and fear. It conceives Black bodies as “symbolic representation and fantasy” and constructs “stereotypical images and societal barriers” to cope with the anxiety and desire (Harris, 2008, pp. 45–46). The ghetto symbolizes the challenging and

dangerous experiences of Black people that many White people wish to safely consume yet, in reality, avoid at all costs (i.e., White flight). Depicting the Black experience in the context of the ghetto connects White sports fans to a perceived “authentic” Blackness (Andrews & Silk, 2010).

If advertisement executives and companies wish to truly rid the commercials of this racist reproduction, they would need to consult with Black people who are knowledgeable of racial issues at play in media depictions and include these individuals in prominent roles in creating commercials to recognize and avoid racial blind spots. Additionally, commercials should be produced from a more subversive gaze that is the opposition to and moves beyond the binary approach of Black images to move it outside the social structures of capitalism. This would allow for a more nuanced and complex depiction of Black athletes’ upbringings.

Colorblindness and the (African) American Dream

The findings also highlight how commercials often focus on the intense training of young Black athletes. It suggests the devotion and work ethic of Black athletes are the reasons for their success and, conversely, the laziness of other Black people is the reason they are stuck in humble conditions. It ignores the impact of institutional and systemic racism that hinders the success of many Black people. None of the commercials identify any form of racism as a challenge for young Black athletes. Doing so would acknowledge that racism exists and profoundly impacts Black people’s experiences and life outcomes—and that getting out of the ghetto isn’t simply a byproduct of individual effort. Using a color-blind shield allows Whites to avoid being deemed racist while still participating in and benefiting from subtle forms of racism. Sociologist Abby L. Ferber claims, “Color-blind racism is part of the defense of a culture of privilege and contemporary White supremacy” (Ferber, 2007, p. 14). She argues that White supremacy credits inequality to the deficiencies of Black people and culture. In other words, individuals, not race or racism, are to blame for their shortcomings.

A color-blind lens also counters the public success of Black professional athletes by ascribing them a non-Black identity. Michael Jordan is an iconic athlete and a revolutionary in the athletic-marketing industry. Journalist and sports historian William Rhoden describes Jordan as a “dream come true for the NBA” (Rhoden, 2010, p. 204). The NBA, Rhoden explains, was trying to figure out how to take the style and showmanship of the growing Black population in the NBA and leave behind their “inconvenient” Black features. Michael Jordan became the poster boy for the ideal behavior of Blacks in sports. The NBA, and other marketers, bottled his smooth style of play, muscularly lean body, youthful look, and kind smile, and they sold it to America for a great profit. The key for the NBA was to promote Jordan's great athletic prowess while silencing his racial identity.

Before commercials can be deemed void of racial insensitivity, they must acknowledge the institutional and systemic racism that affect Black people. In addition, it cannot be forgotten that advertisements are often a response to the demands of the consumers. Therefore, as the Black experience becomes more commercialized, consumers must demand non-racist representations and reject commercials that contain racist stereotypes. Beyond simply being non-racist, successful efforts to transform perceptions of Black athletes’ upbringings must also ultimately undermine the White gaze and challenge White supremacy (Yancy, 2013).

Tokenism

By showing Black athletes growing up in the ghetto and ultimately succeeding in reaching their goals, these commercials promote the belief the American dream is accessible to anyone who shows persistence, work ethic, discipline, determination, and faith in themselves. The success of the Black athlete who makes it out of the ghetto or slums helps secure the narrative that the ghetto is bad. These athletes worked extremely hard to escape it by participating in a profession with the possibility of large financial

gain. The commercials are using the Black athletes as tokens to show Black athletes working hard by training intensely at their sport to gain sporting success, which is associated with the financial gain of escaping the ghetto. The tokenist biography authorizes a person from a marginalized community to be celebrated on the condition that their story is framed in neoliberal and capitalist terms (Cloud, 1996). They prove the American dream is possible for Black people (Creative Videos, 2019). By not including the racism that hinders the masses of Black people around the world, it blames oppressed people for their failures (Cloud, 1996).

This comes in contrast to the old belief that Black athletes are naturally more athletically talented than Whites. One of the effects of tokenism is the pressure of a double-edged sword: “simultaneously a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility” (Frontiers, 1999). Black athletes are used as examples of “successful” Black people, based on their exceptional work ethic, and used as a measuring rod for other Black people. But when compared to their White counterparts, their success is solely attributed to their natural athleticism, and they should therefore “shut up and dribble” (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995; Martin, 2018). Though the commercials in this study avoid the trope of the Black brute by not presenting images of Black athletes possessing overemphasized or animalistic characteristics, they completely ignore the physical attributes that contribute to the success and survival of many of the athletes, such as height and speed. This survivor narrative within the humble-beginnings trope gives sole credit to the individual athlete for pulling themselves up by their bootstraps through hard work. In turn, this bootstraps viewpoint obscures Black people's collective oppression and individualizes the blame placed on Black people who remain in the ghetto (Cloud, 1996). The narratives of Black athletes using only their hard work to escape the ghettos and slums ignore the racist systemic and institutional oppression and discredit hard working Black people who remain in the ghetto for many reasons.

Suggesting that sports are one of the only ways for Black people, particularly boys and men, to escape poverty has a tremendous impact on society and Black people (Sandell, 1995). It is true that more Blacks have reached the professional level of sports in the late 20th and early 21st centuries compared to previous eras. However, feeding into the idea that sports are the only way out of the ghetto or slums has resulted in some Black athletes coming from the ghetto or slums and reaching success. Many other Black athletes in ghettos attempt to do the same in hopes that they, too, will reach success but fail over 99% of the time. The White capitalistic ideology intends to maintain inequality by presenting Black people who have overcome the challenges of the ghetto to show that it is possible and to avoid overplaying the narrative that oppression does not allow Black people to find collective liberation. Often, when tokenism is placed within the humble-beginnings trope, it is used to criticize Black athletes as being ungrateful. Black athletes are said not to show enough gratitude to their team owner and sometimes American “freedom” for their position in professional sports, given their assumed upbringing in the ghettos and slums.

When depicting Black athletes' upbringings in a way that shows images of Black athletes who became successful in sports, it is important to spotlight those who have become successful outside of sports. This concerted effort would help expand the images and perceptions of Black athletes. In addition, acknowledging the truth regarding the low success rates for Black athletes making it to the professional ranks of sports is also important in creating commercials that do not leave Black youth feeling disillusioned. Finally, it would also be beneficial to highlight the positive impact that Black communities have on the success of many of its youth. This would show how success comes through individual determination and a community of transgenerational work.

Conclusion

There is a stronger attempt to be more racially inclusive and diverse by having more Black people represented in sports advertisements. But as Andrews and Silk (2010) observed in the early 2010s, there is still a tendency to depict Black athletes' upbringings in a ghetto context. Showing Black athletes in the ghetto or slums perpetuates an existing stereotype internalized by many White people. While White

people are not the only audience of these commercials, using these racial microaggressions suggests they are the target audience. The current social structure makes these types of racial stereotypes valuable to marketing because it affirms an existing belief. Black athletes are used as tokens to show the American dream is for everyone, regardless of race and meritocracy, and is not a myth but a reality—even for Black people. But by not acknowledging systemic and institutional racism, the color-blind argument becomes focused on individuals instead of the masses of Black people hindered by it. The perpetuation of these stereotypes by the media is important in maintaining the social structure that continues to oppress Black people as a collective. So, although Colin Kaepernick sparked a global movement that caused marketing companies to question how Black athletes are represented, their response could only be strategically finding ways to appease the outcry while maintaining the current social order. To have a liberating representation of Black athletes' upbringings in commercials, they must show the diversity of Black experiences, place them in the context of a larger and connected Black community, and acknowledge the truth about sporting success and institutional racism. From 2016 to 2021, Procter & Gamble released a series of commercials developed using a majority-Black cast and crew (Procter & Gamble, 2022). They not only avoided the racist microaggressions that are present in many other commercials, but they also addressed the racism that surrounds the experiences of Black youth. This may signify a change in how Black people are represented in the media. At the very least, it provides more data for additional research.

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