Michael Jordan Ruined Basketball: A Multilevel Growth Model of National Basketball Association Statistics

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Michael Jordan is generally considered the greatest basketball player of all time. With record setting accolades such as 10-time scoring champion, 5-time NBA MVP, and a 6-time undefeated Finals record where he retained the title of Final's MVP in each appearance, it is easy to see many have reached this conclusion. His persona and historic career had a profoundly positive impact on consumer behavior, from Nike whose revenue surpassed $1 billion for the first time upon the release of the “Jumpman” logo to Space Jam which garnered nearly a half billion between the box office and DVD sales. Additionally, the NBA benefited from Jordan's career with significant increases in television ratings, game attendance, and licensed apparel sales. By the end of his career, the aggregate “Jordan Effect” across all consumer markets was estimated at over $10 billion (Johnson et al., 1998).

Social Identity Theory has been posited as an explanation for many types of sport consumer behavior. Consumers seek an association or identify with successful teams and in return receive social benefits when comparing their team to others leading to an increase in consumeristic behavior. Carlson and Donovan (2013) uniquely adapted social identity theory with a human brand equity model extending this framework from the team to the individual athlete. As was the case with Jordan, the findings suggested the greater the prestige and distinctness of the athletes, the greater the consumer’s “athlete identity”. Athletes, as consumers of their own sports, may also develop an “athlete identity” by seeking an association with the league’s best player. This suggests athletes consuming basketball were / are likely to develop a “Jordan Identity” and may engage in on-court behaviors similar to Jordan effectively changing how athletes play the game. Put simply, athletes, like other consumers, want to “Be Like Mike”.

The purpose of this study utilizes this “athlete identity” framework to test the “Jordan Effect” on the game play of other NBA athletes with game play operationalized as basketball team statistics (field goal attempts, assists, steals, etc.). To control for other strong athlete identities and compare game play before, during, and after Jordan, a narrative review of NBA star players and the administrative state of the NBA was conducted to develop “eras”. The “Bird-Magic Era” (1980-89) establishes a baseline of game play proceeding the most prestigious “Jordan Era” (1990-98), after which the “Copycat Era” (1999-2007) and the “Big-Three Era” (2008-2017) follow, respectively. In each era the team statistic averages, tracked from 1980-2017, of every NBA team are regressed in a multilevel growth model with teams nested in time to determine the average and rate of change of that statistic. For example, teams in the Bird-Magic Era averaged 26.33 assists per game increasing at rate of 0.43 assists per year. The results reveal a drastic change to a guard-dominated game with nearly every basketball statistic in the Jordan Era significantly decreasing which dispels many commonly held assumptions about NBA game play over the years and in the context of league performance provide powerful sport management implications.