

# The Research on the Communication Features of Michael Jordan's Documentary the Last Dance

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**Abstract.** As the well-deserved GOAT of the NBA, Michael Jordan and his Bulls team left the best of the NBA in the 1990s and also promoted the NBA to the whole world. But unfortunately, many young fans have never gotten the opportunity to see Jordan play though wearing Jordan's sneakers. The emergence of *The Last Dance* presented the audience with a most realistic Jordan including his many dark sides, and eventually achieved great success in the field of sports documentaries. This paper will use the example of *The Last Dance* to explore the characteristics of documentary film distribution in the network age, including how it has been successful and what still needs to be improved. These studies will be of great help to documentary filmmakers as well as any communication researcher. By looking at the narrative approach of *The Last Dance*, the hottest topics about *The Last Dance* on social media, the timing of *The Last Dance's* release, and *The Last Dance's* ratings in the Chinese market. This research found that *The Last Dance* used a relatively clever narrative technique that interspersed secondary thread and backstories with the main thread, and that *The Last Dance* also gained more attention by revealing an unknown side of Jordan, in addition, *The Last Dance* was released during the NBA lockout, however due to the timing of the Chinese television broadcast and political reasons, *The Last Dance* failed to sell well in the Chinese market.

**Keywords:** Communication features; Michael Jordan; Documentary.

## 1. Introduction

'*The Last Dance*' is a Michael Jordan documentary jointly created by ESPN and Netflix. There are 10 episodes, each of which lasts for one hour. It tells the story of Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player of all time and one of the most successful basketball organizations Chicago Bulls who had won 6 championships in 8 years. The documentary described the career of Michael Jordan in detail, from his competition with his older brother Larry Jordan in their childhood, to the last shot that he made in Utah as a Chicago Bulls player. In addition, the documentary emphasized and praised Michael's influence towards the development of NBA and the game of basketball, his mentality and toughness when facing one failure and another, his loyalty to the team and his dominance on the court. Besides, the documentary also described other core members of the franchise. Scottie Pippen, the greatest second player in the NBA and the best wingman of Michael Jordan; Dennis Rodman, one of the greatest rebounders and controversial stars in NBA history; Phil Jackson, one of the greatest and most genuine coaches in NBA history. Plus, the most appealing part of the documentary is the unpublished clips that over 500 hours and unknown backstories given by all sorts of related people. But on top of that, the documentary also depicted Michael Jordan's unknown side such as his severity to his teammates and his scandal of gambling.

In 1997, as preparation began for the 1997-98 season, Jordan and the Bulls granted an unprecedented access to a film crew for the entire year. There comes the source material of the documentary. In this way, thousands of hours of extremely valuable footage were filmed and recorded by the team and collected in the basement of the NBA. It wasn't until 2016 that the top authorized person of those footage, Michael Jordan, approached Jason Hehir and decided to turn this legendary story into a documentary in order to show young fans who had never seen Jordan play but loved him, they also discussed and decided that they should use the voice of the related person in Q&A situation to help the audience better understand the context. After a period of two to three years, 106 people associated

with Michael Jordan were interviewed by Jason and his team, even including former U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, who talked about their relationship with Jordan and Pippen respectively, the two main characters of the documentary.

In 2020, NBA was brought to a standstill due to the fierce situation of covid-19 epidemic. In this case where Americans suffered in the period without basketball, Netflix, the largest streaming media in the globe, decided to advance the launch of Michael Jordan's documentary '*The Last Dance*' from June 2nd to April 19th and filled the emptiness of the basketball fans' lives. In addition, the achievements of the documentary were rather outstanding, on September 20th, 2020, '*The Last Dance*' won the 2020 Emmy Award for the Most Outstanding Documentary in Creative Arts. Since its global broadcast on April 20, '*The Last Dance*' has set a new record for ESPN's all-time ratings, with each episode reaching a horrific level of more than 6.1 million viewers, while Jordan, who is already worth \$2.1 billion, said that the documentary's final share of all revenue will be donated to charity.

## 2. Literature review

Cao proposed that '*The Last Dance*' chose a unique time point which is Jordan's last and most difficult season in the second three consecutive championships, along with the background stories of other main characters, to make the most successful presentation of the characters [1]. Cao also proposed that the clips displaying the interviews between reporters and the main characters made the writer and a lot of reporters examine themselves [2].

NBA Special Issue proposed that Michael Jordan would dominate the league in any era due to his incredible athleticism, his great shooting ability, his perfect defense, his competitiveness and the softer defense in today's league [3]. Slam Dunk proposed eleven unknown stories about Michael Jordan. For example, the famous Flu Game was actually food poison caused by a delivered pizza. Michael had played as a superhero along with Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, and MLB, NFL double Hall of Fame member Bo Jackson in a cartoon called Pro Stars. The classic 'tongue out' came from Jordan's father James Jordan. Jordan donated all of his salary in his first season for the Washington Wizards to victims of 911. Jordan had to wear a number 12 nameless jersey because his jersey was stolen. Jordan was called 'magic Jordan' before becoming famous. Jordan and his Bulls team has never gone through three consecutive losses since November 1990. Jordan's best friend was his personal driver George Kohler [4].

Wang proposed that Chinese sports documentaries are getting more and more involved to winter Olympics sports and female theme. However, compared to other famous documentaries, their topics are too simple, and their publicity are not considerably enough [5].

He proposed that the content of documentary marketing need to be more specific and more pluralistic, the strategy need to be facing the markets and correlating with media in order to improve documentary marketing in the new media era [6].

Wei proposed that documentaries in this era are presented more and more pluralistically, plus the strategy is more of a win-win business structure [7]. Liu proposed that there are more communication channels of documentaries and documentaries are becoming more real and deeper due to the exist of online medium. Meanwhile, documentaries have the value of humanistic spirit and the influence of the country [8].

Han proposed that the new international communication pattern of "state-led, industry-operated and multi-subject collaboration" is taking shape, while the discourse power of domestic subjects is being raised, the level of international cooperation and communication is being improved, and new media has become an emerging dynamic of international communication [9].

Song and Wang proposed that the current cultural documentaries have problems including lack of innovation, serious homogenization, vague profit model and evaluation system needs to be improved. In addition, the online communication of cultural documentaries in the new media environment presents a new characteristic, including the diversification of communication platforms, accurate pushing of big data, and the interaction promoted by WEB2.0 technology [10].

In conclusion, there are a lot of scholars studying the characteristics of Michael Jordan and the market of documentaries in this field, however, few scholars have studied the communication characteristics of documentaries. It is no doubt that this research is essential because better and wider communication of any product leads to better popularity and more consumers. Therefore, this paper will explore the communication characteristics of documentaries in the network era by discussing Michael Jordan's documentary *Last Dance*.

### 3. Methodology

This documentary has interviewed over 30 people related to Michael Jordan including his family members, his teammates, coaches, managers, his opponents and NBA executives in order to reproduce the events in the past more clearly. Plus, the images of the interview are applied to the documentary so as the audience can understand the situation vividly. In addition, the director of the documentary tends to spend longer time introducing members with a higher popularity. For instance, Steve Kerr was a considerably mediocre role player in his player career, however, after winning three championships as the coach of the Golden State Warriors, his proportion of the documentary accounted for half of an episode. Compared to other documentaries about Michael Jordan, *Last Dance* certainly have accomplished higher achievements due to higher quality of the image, abundant clips behind the scenes and the appearance of Michael Jordan himself.

### 4. Results

First of all, documentaries with dramatic elements or controversial topics tend to be more appealing today and the comments of current NBA players on social media could attract a large number of fans to pay attention to this documentary. For example, the director of *The Last Dance* introduced a lot of unknown characteristics of Michael Jordan and some of them could be a bit annoying, then NBA star point guard Damian Lillard posted that he would never do something like that on twitter which aroused a viral topic of conversation. Secondly, documentaries released in more opportune moment tend to get more attention. For example, *The Last Dance* was released during the time when NBA was brought to a standstill due to the epidemic, therefore, more NBA fans had to watch *The Last Dance* to fill their empty basketball heart. In addition, the narrative approach of *The Last Dance* is rather clever, with the 1997-1998 season as the main line and Michael Jordan's basketball career as a secondary line, interspersed with the backstories of various characters. For example, as the documentary introduces, in the 1997-98 season, Bulls star forward Scottie Pippen was at odds with the team manager over his salary and even asked the team to trade him, and right afterwards Pippen's character's backstory appeared for the audience to understand. However, *The Last Dance* has caused a far less sensational response in the Chinese market than in the United States. For instance, the first eight episodes of *The Last Dance* averaging 5.6 million viewers on ESPN and ESPN2, and only 2.66 million viewers on Tencent Sports.

### 5. Discussion

*The Last Dance* showed a darker side of Michael Jordan that people didn't know. First, his almost maniacal desire to win made him a tough guy in the eyes of his teammates, and he would often scold them in practice, even telling them not to pass the ball to a certain player at a crucial moment in the game or he would never get a pass from Jordan. Secondly, because of his excessive competitive nature, Jordan competed in almost everything, even taking part in gambling.

These various little-known flaws of Jordan excited a lot of audience, and many current NBA players accused Jordan of not being a good teammate on social media, while others said Jordan was a true leader because his prodding made his teammates evolve. These topics became more and more viral on social media, and more and more people noticed the existence of *The Last Dance* documentary because of these, and also many fans of current NBA players went to watch the

documentary because of their idol's point of view, which eventually led to the big hit of *The Last Dance*.

As *The Last Dance* shows, revealing the unknown and even controversial side of a character can reap more attention and conversation, especially if the character is a particularly positive and extremely successful premise.

In addition, the timing of the release of *The Last Dance* was also very clever: in April 2020, the NBA was forced to suspend its schedule due to the covid-19 epidemic, and basketball fans all around the world were left without a game to watch, feeling confused and empty about the current scenario. At this point, Last Dance director Jason Hehir and his team made a rather wise decision to move up the set date, making Last Dance the choice of most residents during a period when they were forced to be quarantined and had nothing to do due to the epidemic.

So, it was a wise move to properly choose the release period by observing the status of commercial competitors as well as judging the audience's demand, which could gain higher attention and airplay.

The narrative approach of *The Last Dance* is rather subtle. The first episode of the documentary introduces the main story line - the 1997-98 season - in which Jordan and his Bulls were chasing their sixth championship in eight years, which is also the final year of this championship team as GM Jerry Krause promised it would be the last season for head coach Phil. The first episode also introduces the first phase of Jordan's basketball career - his college career and first two years in the NBA - during which Jordan grew into a star and wowed everyone with his extraordinary play.

The second, the third and the fourth episodes introduce Jordan's best partner Scottie Pippen, the grungy rebounder Dennis Rodman and Phil Jackson, one of the greatest coaches in history. Meanwhile the timeline moved forward as Jordan and his Bulls lost to the bad boy Pistons three years in a row until Phil came in the fourth year and brought in the triangle offense and Jordan finally won his coveted Larry O'Brien Trophy in his seventh year in the NBA.

The fifth and sixth episodes introduce the last two titles of Jordan's first triple crown as well as the Dream Team's performance in the Olympics. During this period Jordan established himself as the best player in the NBA and brought the NBA to the entire world. These two episodes are also interspersed with an introduction to Jordan's business value and his unknown darker side.

The seventh to tenth episode records the story of Jordan's retirement at the peak to switch to baseball and then returned to the NBA to win three more titles. There were classic scenes like the flu game and the last shot, but also the fact that Jordan retired due to the loss of his father.

In general, *The Last Dance*'s narrative approach is amazing for the main line is interspersed with various character backstories.

However, the ratings of *The Last Dance* in the Chinese market were far short of expectations. There are objective reasons for that. First of all, in the Chinese market, the live broadcast time slot of *The Last Dance* is on weekday mornings, which is a bit awkward, and Tencent Sports only opens the viewing rights of this documentary for free during the live broadcast time, while watching on-demand requires being a member of Tencent Sports. But even for the 5th and 6th episodes released during the May Day holiday, the number of plays was still only 1.79 million and 1.57 million. In fact, in the first 8 episodes of *The Last Dance*, only the first episode was broadcasted more than 5 million times, and the rest of the episodes failed to exceed this figure.

Secondly, for the hilarious passerby fans, one of the major selling points of the documentary before it started was the more than 10,000 hours of footage compiled by director Jason Hehir and his team, which also included 500 hours of behind-the-scenes footage of NBA Entertainment following the Bulls throughout the 1997-98 season, a portion of which almost no one had seen. But after the official launch, this part of the never-before-released footage is not so long, such a psychological gap is one of the reasons for the documentary's "high start and low end".

In addition, it is difficult for the younger generation of fans to resonate with *The Last Dance* for they have never seen Jordan and the Bulls' games, and can only watch them through highlights and fragmentary clips to build an impression of the man and the team.

Before the release of *The Last Dance*, another highly regarded sports film was *Leap*, about the Chinese women's volleyball team. Although affected by the covid-19 epidemic, this film was not released for the time being. But for Chinese audiences, the Chinese women's volleyball team and the spirit of women's volleyball can always evoke memories and resonate with them no matter what time of the year. While Jordan and the Bulls were at their peak when the NBA was just entering the Chinese market, fewer people still watched the games live, and it is now more difficult for young fans to have a deep obsession with Jordan.

In addition, *The Last Dance* was released at a time when the NBA and the Chinese market were in a delicate period. On October 5, 2019, Houston Rockets general manager Morey made erroneous statements involving Hong Kong, causing dissatisfaction from all walks of life. Subsequently, several sports media announced the suspension of event broadcasts and information coverage of Morey and the Rockets, and several Chinese sponsors terminated their contracts with the Rockets.

In the role of multiple factors, "*The Last Dance*" failed to "sell out" in the Chinese market.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dissemination of documentaries in the Internet era is related to whether the controversial topics of documentaries are attractive enough to merit discussion, the choice of documentary release time, the narrative approach of documentaries and the special circumstances of different regions as well as audience sentiment. While some of the features of *The Last Dance* helped him gain more attention, there were also some factors that contributed to its failure to sell well. First, *The Last Dance* revealed the most curious side of the audience - Michael Jordan's darkest side, which turned into one viral topic after another with the addition of social media. At the same time, the release of the documentary was timed to use the NBA's forced lockout and the nation's home quarantine, resulting in less market competition and more public attention. In addition, *The Last Dance* utilizes a rather shrewd narrative technique of interspersing secondary line and character backstories with the main line to give the audience a clearer and more intuitive understanding of Michael Jordan's legendary story. However, *The Last Dance* failed to sell well in the Chinese market, as it was broadcasted live during the working hours of the Chinese audience, the NBA was boycotted by Chinese TV stations for political reasons, and only a small portion of the audience had seen Jordan live and had deep feelings for Jordan.

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