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### The NCAA's Optical and Philosophical Problem

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# The NCAA's Optical and Philosophical Problem

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**Abstract**

The NCAA has long been known for its use of specific terminology to perpetuate its brand. However, it has begun to go a step further in recent years as it is beginning to spin a visual narrative to go with its terminology. Examples such as the artifact used in this paper, the 2019 March Madness Tournament advertisement, spin a misleading tale that the NCAA is attempting to use to hide key realities about its handling of college athletes. This paper will specifically analyze how the NCAA tries to perpetuate the lives of their athletes as well as how the organization provides opportunities for people of color.

**Introduction**

As sports have become a more and more societally equal endeavor over the last half-century, a sort of phenomena has occurred. This phenomena is that many people have found a way to rationalize supporting people of color on their sports teams on game days and yet still hold deeply racist values the minute the final horn goes. The far more interesting aspect of this is that it goes far beyond the “expected” levels of this behavior.

When one introduces this type of sports fandom most sports-literate folk will immediately paint a picture of what they believe it to look like. Generally the image they will come up with is a Southern, White, American man cheering for his alma mater’s football team that is, at this point in history, approximately 57% black if not

higher.<sup>1</sup> While this is an obvious and correctly interpreted situation, the roots between racism and sports fandom are intertwined far deeper than Saturdays in the South in 2019 however that is the best place to start.

Sports and race have always been connected in a variety of different ways, they have both seemingly brought races together while also keeping them apart. This is one of the upmost senses where Collegiate athletics and specifically football is the best example. The image that comes across most strongly to most is that of an old white man cheering on his alma mater on Saturdays. This man is conservative, most likely supports the racist propaganda he finds on his various news outlets of choice and at the same time has no trouble at all cheering for the players of color that play for his alma mater. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with cheering for ones school there are several things wrong with the optics and the attitudes of this situation.

It is important to go back in time to properly understand the optics of this situation. The era of slavery in the United States brought over the ancestors of what is the majority of today's African-American United States citizens and this aspect has helped contribute to the strong feelings of superiority held by several predominately white American subcultures. This is the main aspect that is being searched for in artifacts from this topic, the sense of overlying racial beliefs transcending into the arena of not only college football fandom, but college football as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, D. (2015). College Football's Big Problem With Race. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4110443/college-football-race-problem/>

To truly understand all of the different factors at play in the topic of racism and college sports, one must go back into the history of the United States. The story starts out fairly simply with the slave trade to fuel the Southern States' plantation crop market in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which brought over a large number of Africans to the United States. Following this was the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, which then freed all of those African slaves and made them American citizens.<sup>2</sup> However, just because the President declared them citizens does not mean they were treated as such in the immediate future by anyone in the United States. While the treatment of African Americans was better in Northern States they were by no means equals and segregation laws in the South as well as other legal acts such as polling laws kept African Americans as second class citizens at best in the Southern United States.<sup>3</sup>

This all began to change for African Americans with the Civil Rights movement in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century as African Americans began to stand up for equal rights and representation in the United States. A landmark case in this regard was *Brown v. The Board of Education*, which declared that racial segregation in public schools, was unconstitutional.<sup>4</sup> This opened up a large amount of struggles involving the integration of first public elementary and secondary schools and then eventually

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<sup>2</sup> Editors, H. (2009, October 15). Civil War. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/american-civil-war-history>

<sup>3</sup> Segregated America - Separate Is Not Equal. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/segregated-america.html>

<sup>4</sup> Editors, H. (2009, October 15). Civil War. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/american-civil-war-history>

state run universities. The most notable case of struggle to integrate a university occurred at the University of Mississippi where riots erupted when James Meredith, a Black Air Force Veteran, attempted to enroll in the previously all-White university.<sup>5</sup> These riots were a clear indicator that American society had a long way to go in regards to race relations and race equality. As the Civil Rights movement continued it gained more ground as the Jim Crow laws were abolished and African Americans were assured that they would be granted a truly equal right to vote.

In today's America there are some that would argue that African Americans have now achieved equal rights and legally one could make a fact-based argument supporting this. However, under the surface there are numerous indicators that show otherwise. These indicators range from unequal housing opportunities<sup>6</sup> to exceedingly high incarceration rates to police profiling and brutality.

However, with all of this still occurring in America, there is one place that too many is the one equalizer in it all, the playing field. Sports seemed to always be slightly ahead of the curve in regards to racial issues. Jesse Owens, a black man, won multiple gold medals in front of Adolf Hitler at the Olympics in 1936. Well ahead of the Civil Rights movement. Jackie Robinson integrated professional sports in the 1940s, once again well ahead of the Civil rights movement. Sports are often championed as the great equalizer of opportunities but are they actually?

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<sup>5</sup> Ole Miss Integration. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ole\\_miss\\_integration/?Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ole_miss_integration/?Welcome)

<sup>6</sup> Christensen, K., & Fenno, N. (2014, May 28). Outcry over Sterling's remarks renew focus on housing bias lawsuits. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-shelly-sterling-housing-lawsuits-20140529-story.html>

This particularly becomes the case when we delve into the realm of Division I collegiate athletics, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to equal opportunity to play the sports, as noted earlier people of color

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the commercial produced by the NCAA for this year's March Madness Tournament and explore how the ad displays, communicates, and connects many of the issues that the NCAA has been charged with perpetuating, especially over the last five years. The NCAA has a serious problem in terms of both how they label the students who participate in intercollegiate athletics and how it correlates to the everyday life that these students endure. The specific terminology that this paper will explore at length is the terms "student-athlete" and "amateur" as they are often choice terms that the NCAA relies on.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The first concept that really helps frame the issue being explored is the concept of spectatorship and the gaze. Spectatorship is the concept of looking at where the spectator's view is from based on the image. In many images, both still and video, the spectator's perspective means a great deal. With this artifact being an ad for an organization, spectatorship becomes even more relevant as the spectator is the whole point of this artifact's creation.

The concept of Gaze theory is another important aspect of the conceptual framework for two key reasons. First, it is important because the artifact is almost entirely framed from reverse first person. This means that instead of looking through the character's eyes the spectator is looking at his eyes. This is where gaze theory comes in as the spectator spends most of the viewing time taking cues from his expression and gaze.

The theory that is most paramount to this analysis is the Myth theory. Myth theory is the theory that was first used by French philosopher Roland Barthes to describe the ideological meaning of a sign that is expressed through connotation.<sup>7</sup> According to Barthes, a myth itself is a hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings have specific meanings to certain groups.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Myth allows for an image or meaning that is actually connotative to appear to be denotative to those outside the specific group for which the artifact has meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes famous example of Myth theory is the front cover of a French magazine that had a Black soldier saluting the French flag. This case put French Colonial allegiance on a myth level in the general population as it seemed inconceivable, due to the cover that French colonies would ever be in rebellion.<sup>10</sup> A more modern day example would be something like a large oil company running an ad campaign detailing how they are taking steps to be environmentally friendly and

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<sup>7</sup> Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2018). *Practices of looking an introduction to visual culture*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 442

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid



making it seem as if they are doing as much good for the environment as they are damaging it when that is hardly the case.

This means that, in terms of this research and analysis, Myth theory provides an important scope into meanings of terminology the NCAA often employs in its advertisements. Myth provides the framework to expand from how the terms are defined by the NCAA to what they actually mean in terms of the constraints they place on student athletes.

All things together, the conceptual framework is built on Myth Theory with some aid provided by the theories of Spectatorship and Gaze.

## **Methods**

The method I used for this project will be a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is focused in the analysis of what goes beyond the words that are on the page. It was important that I used discourse analysis because this issue required exploring the ways in which this system is referenced by both sides of the imagery. There is the label of the “student-athlete” that must be explored in how it is used by the NCAA and how it is received by the players.

Discourse analysis works nicely with the conceptual framework of this paper as it ties directly in to exploring the aspects that create important context around the NCAA. This is important because, as it was stated earlier, myth theory makes up a large portion of the conceptual framework. Due to this it is important to use a type of analysis that allows for lots of exploration off to the sides of the main artifact, allowing for the necessary information to be gathered to apply to myth theory.

I will also be taking a look into the ad's target audience using discourse analysis to determine the impression the NCAA wants to make on this audience as well as the message it is trying to send about participating in collegiate athletics.

Additionally, it will be important to look closely at the relationships between the coaches, who are predominately white, and the players, who are predominately not. This part required a good deal of outside reading due to the fact that the ad naturally did not touch on this aspect of the relationship for more than a second.

### **Analysis**

Upon first viewing the artifact the main thing that most viewers should find off putting is the main character's facial expressions. Everything from the frequency of the smile, as it appears at odd times in the video, to the strangely blank expression on the athlete's face. This is alarming because the majority of the activities that the actor is doing are not activities that normally constitute a smile.

Additionally, the athlete seems to be almost floating through his day in this video, roaming about and generally looking without purpose. By using gaze theory we can conclude that the goal of the ad was to make the athlete seem to be getting a very full and enjoyable experience. However, if you look in closely at the gaze a different message can also be retrieved from the ad, one of submission. This is the case because of a number of alarming optical decisions were made in the course of the ad.

While the presentation of the main character is important on the surface level of the ad, the truly important analysis is beneath the surface of the NCAA. The

NCAA has a serious optical problem, compounded by questionable business ethics. As it was mentioned in the introduction there is a significant discrepancy between the percentage of minority collegiate athletes and the percentage of minority collegiate coaches.

This alone is an optical problem for the NCAA but it becomes even more so when one takes into account the percentage of athletic directors and school presidents that are minorities. This means that, due to the current structure of payment in NCAA athletics, a group of mainly white men are profiting off of the unpaid labor of a group that is more minority than white.

This brings us back to the ad and in particular to whom the spectators of this ad are. The intended spectators are not the athletes themselves or even the rich, money-laden coaches and school presidents. The intended spectator of this ad is the future generation of college athletes and their parents. This ad is selling them that college athletics is both fun, but also somewhat of a breeze. The athlete smiles his way through his whole day and seems totally content at the end of his day. He gets along seamlessly with classmates, teammates and his coaches, not a single bump in the road and that is a problem according to many former college athletes.<sup>11</sup>

Many former college athletes condemned this ad for a couple of key reasons and a few made rebuttal videos. The most common complaint amongst former athletes is by far how easy the athlete's day looks. In the ad the athlete doesn't seem to be rushing anywhere or to ever be hungry but as it was articulated in a Vice

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph, A. (2019, March 19). Former college athletes destroyed the NCAA's 'a day in the life' commercial. Retrieved from <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2019/03/ncaa-day-in-the-life-ad-reaction-athletes-college-twitter>

Sports article “4 Years a College Football Player” this is very far from the truth. As the article details, most days start with a morning weight lifting session that usually lasts a couple hours, this is often followed by either practice or meetings and then class will follow those things. This is not the end of the day however as athletes have either practice or meetings again which will then be chased by more class with the day ending in homework.<sup>12</sup>

The biggest difference between the two days, the one shown in the artifact and the one described in the article is in the treatment of the athlete, in the artifact everyone is lifting up this athlete when the sad nature is that the weight of real life expectation leaves this to be far from the case. Collegiate athletes are left in an interesting position as they are often met with envy or even distaste as many students often articulate the opinion that they are only there due to their athletic prowess. At the same time however

Another sticking point that many have with the NCAA is the way it goes about labeling its players, the NCAA uses the term “student-athlete” describe all collegiate athletes, a term that did not exist until about 50 years ago.<sup>13</sup> The NCAA coined the term student-athlete in the 1960s to help protect them from ever having to fairly compensate student-athletes. This term that the NCAA created was created under

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<sup>12</sup> Logan, A., & Harrison, L. (2017). 4 YEARS A FOOTBALL PLAYER: THE (UN)DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN THE EDUCATION OF BLACK COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYERS. *Race, Gender & Class*, 24(1/2), 65-80.

<sup>13</sup> Belzer, J. (2013, September 11). Leveling The Playing Field: Student Athletes Or Employee Athletes? Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbelzer/2013/09/09/leveling-the-playing-field-student-athletes-or-employee-athletes/#256d540152a1>

the stipulation that student athlete equates to being an amateur athlete. The interesting thing about this however, is how the term student worker on a normal collegiate student holds nowhere near the same level of power.

That brings us to our next point, which is that the NCAA's current policies essentially hold the athletes in indentured servitude. Collegiate athletes currently have absolutely no control over their likeness, not only when representing the university, but in any walk while in college life. The NCAA absolutely refuses to let players make money off of their likeness or even have things as simple as wedding registries<sup>14</sup>, all in the name of making sure all potential cash remains flowing to the universities. This all thanks to this term, which has grown into the concept of the student athlete.

It is important to also break down the terms "student athlete" and attempt to figure out if the NCAA is actually being honest with itself in terms of the alleged opportunities its ads claim players are receiving. The first part of the term is of course the word student and this is not by accident. Everything that can be found in regards to the NCAA making statements on its athletes is that they are unequivocally students first.<sup>15</sup> The NCAA insists upon this but is this actually the case?

There are countless sound bites of collegiate coaches discussing the need for their players to "do their job" and act with professionalism, but this flies directly

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<sup>14</sup> Wells, A. (2019, April 04). Virginia SG Kyle Guy Can't Start Wedding Registry Because of NCAA Regulations. Retrieved from <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2829547-virginia-sg-kyle-guy-cant-start-wedding-registry-because-of-ncaa-regulations>

<sup>15</sup> <https://tah.oah.org/august-2016/the-job-is-football-the-myth-of-the-student-athlete/>

against the term with which the NCAA labels athletes. When one looks deeper at the day in the life of a collegiate athlete it becomes increasingly harder to buy the NCAA's student first mantra. As detailed by many student athletes in response to the artifact itself student athletes usually start their day with their sport and then from there their day is sports centric with academics mixed in, not the other way around.<sup>16</sup> This is an area where Myth Theory is a perfect application as the NCAA insists in its messaging that athletes are students first but the overwhelming evidence argues the contrary.

This then should fly directly in the face of the NCAA's claims on the students being there for the academics but this also goes a couple steps deeper. First, there is the sticking issue that these athletes lack the same liberties that other college students are granted. The first and foremost of these is that athletes are not allowed to add a job to make money while playing a sport at the institution. This would then seem to imply that the university employs the athletes however the NCAA insists that this is not the case.

In terms of the pure visual aspects of the artifact, there are a couple of key aspects that contradict the realities of the life of NCAA athletes. The first of these aspects is the cheerful lightheartedness that the ad seems to take on. While athletes do experience joyful moments they certainly do not last the whole day, nor do they usually embody these aspects in their programs. These programs are often run like professional sports teams and as far as the coaches are concerned that athlete is at

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<sup>16</sup> Logan, A., & Harrison, L. (2017). 4 YEARS A FOOTBALL PLAYER: THE (UN)DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN THE EDUCATION OF BLACK COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYERS. *Race, Gender & Class*, 24(1/2), 65-80.

this school for the sport, not for school.<sup>17</sup> The second visual that is misleading is that the ad implies visually that all student athletes are beloved and feel totally comfortable on their collegiate campuses. This unfortunately is not the case, this is both due to the sentiment amongst some students who believe athletes are only there for their athletic abilities<sup>18</sup> as well as the unfortunate racial disparity between collegiate campuses and their athlete populations.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond that there is significant evidence to suggest that many athletes, especially in the major money earning sports, are funneled into majors that work around their sports schedule, this means that unlike your average college student these athletes do not have the same say in their major or their academic path.<sup>20</sup> This is an additional aspect where Myth theory can be applied as the NCAA insists it provides a full academic experience for student athletes.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the most important aspect to understand is the direct correlation between the NCAA's messaging and terminology and myth theory. This is illustrated both throughout the ad which is the artifact of this paper as well as its numerous on the record defenses of its policies.

Myth theory is the concept that there can be added meaning to an image through connotation.<sup>21</sup> This means that an image can have additional mean to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Roberts

<sup>20</sup> ibid

<sup>21</sup> Sturken & Cartwright, p.442

people that are aware of additional context in regards to an issue. Examples of this permeate through political and state journalism, especially in the pre-internet era, as print publications were the main if not only provider of news. A textbook example of myth theory in action would be the usage of a colonial soldier saluting an Empire's flag on the cover of a magazine to illustrate patriotism.<sup>22</sup> The difference of this image would be held in the fact that the people in the know would realize that this was an attempt to misrepresent the actual colonial feelings of loyalty to prevent dissent from connecting and rebelling.<sup>23</sup>

Myth theory applies to the artifact in a couple of key ways. First and foremost myth theory can be applied in regards to the NCAA's attempts to misrepresent the student athlete experience, especially in regards to the sport to academics balance of an athlete's day. This is because the NCAA is desperate to legitimize its created term of "student-athlete." To those unaware the athlete illustrates the wonderful opportunities available to students who excel in athletics. To those more aware of the situation, it is an attempt by the NCAA to cover up the exploitation and ownership of student athletes for the years they attend these institutions. This has been shown in a number of ways over the past 10 years but the main ways include control of all profits generated by athletes as well as full control of the athlete's likeness and non-sport related enterprises.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, this ad by the NCAA is the latest attempt by the NCAA to put a smoke screen that prevents the public from truly understanding the level of control

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Wells



that the organization has on its athletes, while the organization still manages to label them as non-employees. It is a perfect application for myth theory because these artifacts require an in depth look for one to understand their hypocrisy.

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