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Stereotypes and Stigmas of College Athletes in Tank McNamara's Cartoon Strip: Fact or Fiction?

C. Keith Harrison, Ed. D.

University of Central Florida

Suzanne Malia Lawrence, Ph. D.

Azusa Pacific University

Michelle Plecha

University of California, Los Angeles

Scott J. Bukstein, Esq.

University of Central Florida

Neza K. Janson

University of Central Florida

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I student-athletes (N= 43) regarding stereotypical cartoons about athletes. A qualitative approach, which included a visual elicitation technique, was utilized by administering the Lifestyle Association & Representation of Athletes Scale (LARAS). The LARAS explored participants' perceptions of the following six specific concepts: a) academic support issues; b) academic progress; c) coaches as educators; d) professional sport aspirations; e) media identities, advertising, and representation; and f) cultural issues and recruiting. Five major themes emerged from participants' perceptions: Big Sport Business, Athletic Image, College Athlete Mindset, Realistic/False Representation, and Institutional Focus. Goffman's (1959) theory of social stigma and Loury's (2002) theory on racial stigma are related to the perceptions revealed by the college student-athletes in this study. Implications and recommendations for sport scholars and practitioners are provided.

College student-athletes have been stereotyped and labeled as “dumb jocks” since the early 1900's (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Popular culture, including images and messages conveyed by comic strip cartoons in newspapers and on the Internet, has perpetuated the stereotypes and stigmas concerning athletes. Cartoons function as powerful mediums that relay

messages in society, and have been read and enjoyed by all types of cultures for many centuries. Throughout the history of comic art, the power of cartoons has commanded viewer involvement, identification, and realism of the outside world (McCloud, 1993). Cartoons allow the viewer to focus on specific details, and encourage the viewer to use his/her imagination and incorporate his/her own experiences into a specific cartoon. Cartoonists typically have two primary aims. One aim is to influence the perspectives of their audience. The second aim is to entertain their audience. Similar to other storytellers, cartoonists “know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story’s characters” (McCloud, 1993, p. 25).

Cartoons typically evoke a behavior pattern or a social attitude among cartoon viewers. These conditioned and symbolic responses to social stimuli represent more than a mere verbal response (Lapierre, 1934), and can provide researchers with valuable tools to assist in understanding issues related to race and ethnicity. From the perspective of a cartoon viewer, cartoons can be very appealing and enjoyable in part due to the ability of the viewer to relate to the characters in a particular comic. On the other hand, for the misrepresented subject of the cartoon, comics are not always such a pleasant depiction and instead can be very troubling and disheartening.

Popular culture scholars and commentators have conducted only a few studies in which the images, text and meaning of cartoons were analyzed (Connors, 2005; McCloud, 1993; Wiggins, 1988). A historical and famous example of a disturbing comic was the Sambo Twins cartoons used in the 1900’s to depict African American boxers Jack Johnson and Joe Louis (Wiggins, 1988). The images in the Sambo Twins cartoons reflected a general doubt about the characters’ worthiness, and the cartoons consign the two characters to the social netherworld (Loury, 2002). The images in the cartoons compare two figures and exaggerate the physical appearance of the figures to make a point about their respective identities. Some of the exaggerated images in the cartoons are explained in detail by Wiggins (1988), who noted, “both fighters were portrayed during this three-decade era as savage, apelike figures with coconut heads, long arms, broad shoulders, narrow waists, and bulging muscles. Their faces featured thick, grinning, red lips, pearly-white buck-teeth, strands of nappy hair, and jet-black complexions” (p. 245). Wiggins (1988) also described how the boxers were displayed as ignorant and uncivilized. The characters in the cartoons wore loud, bright colored clothing and gaudy jewelry. They spoke in broken English and were depicted as chicken stealers and crapshooters. The cartoons also contained strong inferences that watermelon and fried chicken were the staples of the characters’ diets. Both of the men in the cartoons were actually very courageous and self-motivated during their boxing careers, yet they were ridiculed as being lazy, razor-toting, and fearful Sambos (Wiggins, 1988). The exaggerated depiction of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis in the Sambo Twins cartoons cultivated skepticism about the misrepresented persons as to whether they shared a common humanity with the cartoon viewer, thereby resulting in a racial stigma. The social meanings imputed into race-related symbols, including those contained in cartoons, can have profound, enduring, and all-too-real consequences. These consequences are not due to any race-dependent biological processes, but rather result from a system of race-dependent meanings and habitual social significations that can be more difficult to “move” than that proverbial, all-too-material mountain (Loury, 2002).

Recent researchers have valued the analysis of cartoon content in their methodological approach. For example, Connors (2005) explored representations of presidential candidates in political cartoons and identified allusions made from aspects of popular culture. Political

cartoons are understood and appreciated by political insiders (Connors, 2005). Allusions are used in popular culture to assist readers in understanding the cartoon, but this only works as long as the readers understand the allusion being made. Connors (2005) concluded that there are drawbacks to the use of allusions in political cartoons because they can potentially create confusion or misunderstanding, and allusions can be fleeting in nature relative to current news and events.

Even with this recent cartoon inquiry, there remains a lack of research examining the text and the meaning of cartoons in the sport sciences. In particular, previous research has focused on the perceptions of student-athletes, with very few researchers investigating the effects of visual or photo-elicitation methodologies. Furthermore, to date there are no recorded analyses of student-athletes' perceptions of stereotypical cartoons about athletes. Both journalists and scholars have consistently displayed cartoon depictions of athletes in popular newspapers, magazines and journals. The depictions of athletes, who are often the underrepresented viewers (i.e., targets), have ranged from neutral to extremely negative.

McMahon (2001) reviewed the history of African American athletes at the University of Iowa in a book by Jack Bender titled *A Gallery of Iowa Sports Heroes: Five Decades of Cartoons*. In 2002, the *Physical Education Digest* contained a cartoon that depicted young weightlifters lifting the shortest weightlifter in the group off the ground while the coach watched. Hoffecker (2004), in *Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Journal*, featured a student from a college fraternity carrying a beer keg over to a party where athletic recruiting was taking place. Wahl (2005) profiled Illinois guard Dee Brown as a cartoon hero in a *Sports Illustrated* column, which displayed Brown surging into the open court with his hair braids trailing like action lines in a comic strip. More recently, Howard (2007) wrote a cartoon titled "The PGA Hillbillies" in *Golf World*, where he profiled the golfers Boo Weekley and Bubba Watson. Boo chews tobacco while Bubba attends Bible study group. Coakley (2007) has used cartoons extensively in his renowned textbook *Sport in Society* to extend concepts and theories related to culture and sport in society.

Primary researchers argue that the previously mentioned Sambo Twins cartoons (Wiggins, 1988), as well as images and text in some of Tank McNamara's cartoons, perpetuate harmful stereotypes about college student-athletes. Today's society is media-driven and the images and statements portrayed in different media forms have a profound impact. Some cartoon images and messages lead individuals such as college student-athletes into the mindset that these myths and stereotypes are indeed reality. Cartoons can more aptly be described as a vehicle through which key messages are relayed in the media. Since stereotypes will continue to exist, there will remain a demand for cartoons to play on these stereotypes.

In Simons, Bosworth, Fujta, and Jensen's (2007) study, college athletes reported being labeled with low intelligence, little academic motivation, and receipt of undeserved benefits and privileges. A decrease in athletic and academic performance is possible due to the stigmas and stereotypes placed on college athletes through the media. In the past five years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has attempted to tackle the issue by implementing various intervention programs and policies. As a result, current research has shown graduation rates of student-athletes are on the rise (Franklin, 2006; Sander, 2008). Despite increasing graduation rates, research demonstrates revenue sports (men's basketball and football) continue to fall behind, predominantly among the racial/ethnic minority players (Hyatt, 2003).

Hodge, Harrison, Burden, and Dixon (2008) posed an important question regarding "whether significant numbers of Black youth pursue athletic goals while neglecting academic goals" (p. 941). The goal choices of African American youth could be due in part to self-

stereotyping. According to Burden, Hodge, and Harrison (2004), some African American males engage in self-stereotyping and the stereotypical image of African Americans is that they are intellectually inferior, which could adversely affect their motivation toward academic achievements (Harrison, Harrison, Moore, 2002; Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004). African American student-athletes are often idolized for their athletic success on the one hand and they are often considered inferior in terms of academic ability on the other hand (Donnor, 2005; Kirk & Kirk, 1993; Hodge et al., 2008). Although previous research indicates student-athletes of color may neglect academics in place of athletic success, current research supports the growing trend of impressive graduation rates for African American student-athletes (Lapchick, 2009). More specifically, Lapchick's (2009) study not only considered the NCAA's Graduation Success Rates but also analyzed the Federal Graduation Rates, and claimed "African-American student-athletes, including revenue sport student-athletes, graduate at a higher rate than African-American males who are not student-athletes" (p. 2). The scope and purpose of this inquiry is to examine the targets' (i.e., student-athletes') perceptions of being stereotyped, to interpret the qualitative data using social and racial stigma theories, and to give athletes a voice as targets of cultural stereotypes represented in the medium of cartoons.

Social Stigma Theory

The current study is premised on the notion that college athletes in revenue sports, such as football and men's basketball, are stigmatized and stereotyped. Therefore, Goffman's (1971) social stigma theory is relevant. Goffman (1971) drew from the Greeks, who valued visual aids and originated the term *stigma*. *Stigma* refers to a bodily sign designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. Goffman's (1971) social stigma thesis articulates, "The problems faced by people with highly virtual social identities as disreputable or 'spoiled' - people carrying bodily marks (stigmata) that incline others to judge them negatively, but also people with less visible markings who live at constant risk of being exposed" (p. 60). The current study claims the college athlete as the stigma.

Goffman (1971) claimed society creates methods of categorizing individuals and the complement of attributes targeted to be ordinary and/or natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings, such as college campuses, tend to establish categories, labels, and stigmas of persons likely to be encountered there; in such settings the perceiver expects the opposite of the stereotype and stigma, and deals with anticipated others with little thought or counter-narrative analyses. Goffman (1971) further noted:

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of less desirable kind-in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and unusual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, and a handicap. It constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity (p. 3).

According to Goffman (1959), the stigmatizing attribute creates a taint or sense that outsiders are marginal to the dominant group or larger society, which creates fertile grounds for stereotyping and prejudice. Many times college athletes on campus are the strangers while outside of their athletic prowess context(s); they are considered different, unknown, and tainted because they receive what some consider to be undeserved privileges (Lawrence, Harrison, &

Stone, in press), and therefore they are stigmatized. The process of being stigmatized is pertinent to all college athletes, but even more salient for African American male college athletes (Melendez, 2008). These differences between African American and White American college athletes buttress the next section, which examines the racial aspects of stigma theory.

Racial Stigma Theory

Loury's (2002) recent analysis of racial stigmas in American society articulated the major tenets of racial stereotypes, racial stigma, and racial justice. Primary researchers contend racial stigmas are fixed and are proactive in contemporary social perception. Loury (2002) contended slavery was not the only significant event involved in creating racial stigmas. Loury (2002) claimed, "As we encounter one another in social place, we perceive the physical markings on one another's bodies and go to play our respective parts, enacting scripts written long before we were born. It is hard not to notice these racial signs, difficult not to be moved in any way by them" (p. 59). Loury (2002) explained people are confused when confronted by an individual who does not fit their categories or labels. Therefore, people seek an inoffensive way to solve confusion and to determine whether the individual thinks of himself/herself as being African American, White, Asian, or Hispanic.

Further, Loury (2002) extended Goffman (1971) in his analysis by contextualizing between an "identity constructed 'from the outside', via social imputations based on a person's physical presentation (i.e., college athlete), and an identity constructed 'from the inside', via the accumulation of facts specific to a person's biography (i.e., photo-elicitation)" (p. 60). These two identities, the virtual (i.e., athletes' perceptions) and actual (i.e., self-perceptions), can diverge systematically in the social experience of an individual. Then drama is implemented between the target (i.e., college athlete) and the observer (i.e., stranger/student), which is Goffman's key insight (Loury, 2002). The "drama" serves the empirical quest of the current study. Specifically, the present study examined the preconceived stigmas that college athletes (i.e., targets) face and also examined what is perpetuating these stereotypes.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore Division I college athletes' (N= 43) perceptions of stereotypical cartoons about athletes. An additional purpose was to investigate the ways in which race was or was not a part of participants' responses to stereotypical cartoons. The central research questions were as follows: a) What are college athletes' perceptions of stereotypical cartoons about athletes in the higher education setting? b) Do participants perceive the cartoon content as fact or fiction?; and c) In what ways was race a part of participants' responses to stereotypical cartoons about athletes?

Methodology

The current study utilized both the qualitative approach and the visual elicitation technique (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Qualitative analysis involves an immersion into the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships. Such an exploration begins by asking open-ended questions rather than by testing theoretically derived hypotheses (Patton, 2001).

Visual elicitation is an interviewing technique in which photographs are used to stimulate and guide a discussion between the interviewer and the researcher(s) (Snyder & Kane, 1990). This method has traditionally been utilized by anthropologists, and has been used little by sport science researchers (Curry, 1986). Sport and leisure scholars have used the technique (Bowling, 2002/2003; Curry, 1986; Gonzalez & Jackson, 2001; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; Loeffler, 2004; Snyder & Kane, 1990) and it is gaining in popularity. Acknowledging the salience of cultural artifacts and images in sport, the use of photographs is pertinent in order to study the attitudes and meanings people associate with sports (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2001). Snyder and Kane (1990) explained, "Photographs may be used as a research tool to evoke thoughts, reactions, and feelings from individuals about some aspect of social life" (p. 256). More specifically, in regard to the investigation of stereotypes, Cauthen, Robinson, and Krauss (1971) claimed, "The use of pictures is the best because it allows the most latitude in determining the content of the stereotype" (p. 105).

Participants

Participants consisted of 43 Division I college athletes (N= 43) from four universities located in the following regions of the United States: West, Midwest, South, and Southeast. There were 29 males and 14 females who ranged in age from 18 to 22. Participants competed in the following seven sports: men's basketball, women's basketball, women's golf, women's soccer, women's tennis, men's track and field, and women's volleyball. The majority of the college athletes in the participant pool played football (n= 25, 58.1 %). Ten athletes (23%) were women's soccer players and three athletes (7%) were men's basketball players. There was one participant from each of the remaining five sports (women's golf, women's basketball, women's volleyball, women's tennis, and men's track and field). The racial distribution of the participants was as follows: 65.1 % African American, 27.9 % White, 2.3 % Asian, 2.3 % American Indian, and 2.3 % other.



Lifestyle Association & Representation of Athletes Scale (LARAS)

The LARAS was designed to assess college athletes' perceptions of athletes depicted in the selected Tank McNamara cartoons. The accuracy of the cartoon images was investigated through critical analysis of the personal and worldviews about the academic, athletic, and social issues that college athletes face. The LARAS contained twenty-seven cartoons, 58 quantitative questions, 15 qualitative open-ended items, and five demographic items for a total of 78 items. The LARAS included six different domains (see Appendix for in-depth description): a) *Academic Support Issues*; b) *Academic Progress*; c) *Coaches as Educators*; d) *Professional Sport Aspirations*; e) *Media Identities, Advertising, & Representation*; and f) *Cultural Issues & Recruiting*. Each domain presented cartoon(s) (i.e., number of cartoons varied) and prompted participants with both quantitative (Likert scale items) and a qualitative open-ended item.

Due to the abundance of data, the scope of this inquiry was on the qualitative open-ended item. The qualitative open-ended item was utilized to prompt college athletes to report their thoughts and perceptions surrounding the cartoon(s) as well as to report whether they thought the cartoon was fact or fiction. The open-ended item was the same for each domain and was simply repeated fifteen times in the LARAS. The open-ended item, which was strategically placed below the cartoon(s), read as follows:

Please describe your personal interpretation of the image(s) and cartoon(s) depicted above this paragraph and indicate in your statements whether or not you personally feel that the cartoon is a factual or fictional account of reality. If you have had a personal experience related to the cartoon image, please express this in addition to your general interpretation.

Procedure

Participants contributed to this investigation on a voluntary basis. Initially, participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality, and then read and signed the consent form. The administration of the LARAS was divided among the researchers according to the region in which the universities were located. Three trained researchers administered the LARAS to the participants. Participants were instructed to take their time and to complete the entire LARAS. Participants were allotted an hour to complete the LARAS.

Data Analysis

The written responses to the qualitative open-ended item were transcribed into a hard copy for data analysis. An investigative team was formed, which consisted of four individuals trained in qualitative research methodology, two of which were the primary researchers. The investigative team was utilized throughout the data analysis process. All of the members of the investigative team examined the entire data set.

Following transcription, each investigator read each of the transcripts line-by-line in order to get a sense of the college athletes' responses. This process is referred to as line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978). Next the process of "open coding" was utilized by investigators to identify potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text of the transcripts (Agar, 1996; Bernard, 1994). The process is also often referred to as identifying raw-data themes. The raw-data themes are quotes that capture a concept provided by the participant (Marshall &

Rossmann, 1999). The third reading of the transcripts by the investigators involved a *memoing* technique, which is utilized to record relationships among codes and/or raw data themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). There are three types of memos that could be employed. Code notes is the type the team used.

After code notes were recorded, the investigative team met to discuss the transcripts. The primary purpose of the meeting was to interpret and identify major themes. During the meeting, investigators shared and discussed their code notes. There were few incidences of inconsistent categorizations among investigators, which were resolved by discussions among investigative team members. Final decisions were made to accurately reflect the transcripts and to saturate the themes. Themes were derived from all of the transcripts and attempts were made to interpret commonalities among the thoughts described in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001). Primary researchers identified major themes across transcripts and support for each theme was located in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001).

Table 1- *College Athletes' Perceptions of Cartoon Images Major Themes: Descriptive Percentages of College Athletes' Transcripts*

N = 43

Theme		Percentage	Quotes
Big Sport Business	0	70%	<i>"This is true because coaches will say whatever to get a recruit to come to their school."</i>
Athletic Image	8	65%	<i>"I feel this is a fictional cartoon. The coaches don't care as much as they say they do when it comes to your grades. As long as you're eligible and win, they get paid."</i>
College Athlete Mindset	7	63%	<i>"I feel that this is true to some extent with most athletes because a lot of us are concerned with our education."</i>
Realistic/False Representation	7	63%	<i>"It's sad but it's true some places it happens like that."</i>
Institutional Focus	6	37%	<i>"This is an example of the NCAA and how many rules they have. Sometimes it's not for the worst but it does help me in some ways."</i>

Note: Please keep in mind that participant transcripts ranged from 5 responses to 15 responses, and participants wrote anywhere from two sentences to an entire paragraph for each response. Each of the transcripts included several key concepts that coincided with the five major themes in this study. Very few participant

responses coincided exclusively with only one theme. As a result, the percentages do not add up to 100% and the N does not equal 43.

Finally, utilizing the themes that were previously identified, transcripts were coded by the primary researchers. Codes are assigned to contiguous units of text and act as tags to mark off text in order to later retrieve and index (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Codes associated with each theme were identified in each of the transcripts in order to determine the number and percentage of participants who responded within each of the major themes (see Table 1) (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), computer-assisted programs offer assistance in coding qualitative data. The ATLAS software program is a powerful software package utilized for qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual data. ATLAS was utilized to verify and assist with the accuracy of determining the number and percentage of participants who responded within each of the major themes. The ATLAS data analysis was consistent with the investigate teams' coding procedures.

Results

Five major themes emerged from participant (n= 43) responses to the cartoons presented in the LARAS: *Big Sport Business*, *Athletic Image*, *College Athlete Mindset*, *Realistic/False Representation*, and *Institutional Focus*. The length of participant responses ranged from two sentences to an entire paragraph. Each of the participant responses included several key concepts, which coincided with the study's major themes. Very few participant responses exclusively coincided with only one theme. The following sections will outline the specific themes and give direct quotes from some of the participant responses. At the end of each of the sections there is an indication of the number and percentage of the participants who reported responses coinciding with the major theme of the section.

Big Sport Business

The first theme, *Big Sport Business*, involved participants' thoughts about the world of sport revolving around money. This theme described participants' recognition of various policies and attitudes in intercollegiate athletics, including: a) the exploitation of athletes; b) the coaches' recruiting game; c) the "winning at all costs" attitude; d) high dollar advertising contracts; and e) the various concerns surrounding eligibility of college athletes. Participants were aware of the business aspect of college athletics. Consider these examples:

The cartoon represents the overt exploitation of the new D-I college athlete. Pro teams are more concerned with a player's ability to "perform" on the field, than "perform" in the classroom. (07)

This would happen today, because most coaches only care about winning. (31)

This is an example of people that have money already trying to get more by getting someone else's. Advertising companies try to make a lot more money by getting athletes to endorse their products. Here's another example of companies using athletes to endorse their product so that it can sell more. (30)

I think coaches care more about eligibility than graduation rates. (09)

70% (30/43) of participants mentioned the tactful business strategies utilized by administrators in intercollegiate athletics (see Table 1).

Athletic Image

The second theme, *Athletic Image*, described participants' recognition of various stereotypes, portrayals, images, and expressions in intercollegiate athletics. Participants recognized and commented on the following topics: a) "dumb jock" stereotypes; b) media portrayals/images of athletes; c) the Black athlete image portrayal; d) the adulation of athletes; and e) athlete participation in taunting and celebrating. Participants were aware of the image and reputation of athletes. Consider the following comments:

I feel this cartoon is racist as shit. It is bad enough that we are branded for being athletic (dumb and being just an athlete, which robs us of any other attributes) but it is apparent that from being called an athlete society wants to brand us 100% this or that yet I am a man. A full man composed of all the gifts and ambitions that God gave me. (06)

In some cases this might be factual but in my own case this is fictional to me because every person of color I know knows how to read. (05)

Everyone knows that in order to compete in any business in America we (minorities) must be willing to make certain sacrifices. We are the greatest actors on the planet. They (society) are only going to allow so many Iversons, Sprewells, running back for the Colts guys who really stand up and say I will not conform. We understand this all too well. If you ever want to last, compete or make an impact you had better be willing to at times deny yourself, act a little less Black, make Whitey feel comfortable around you. (06)

Because professional athletes wear a certain shoe, many people want to emulate that and wear and do what their hero does. As an athlete, you have to protect yourself at all times. I feel as though people try to be your friend just because you are rich or have some type of fame. (08)

I think the celebration rule is culturally biased towards African Americans and the penalty should be less strict. (40)

It's a Black man that everybody knows who he is and what it is he does. They already despise him, they won't even meet him halfway. (10)

65% (28/43) of the participants were concerned with the way in which athletes are stereotyped, portrayed, and idolized (see Table 1).

College Athlete Mindset

The third theme, *College Athlete Mindset*, depicts participants' focus surrounding specific issues such as academics, how they are treated, professional sport aspirations, and alternative plans to play professional sport. Participants recognized the significance of academics (Martin & Harris, 2006), as the following comments illustrate:

Factual, a lot of athletes are not ready mentally or physically for the next level. Because they can't handle college. If you cannot go to class and make, at least decent grades, how can you handle the expectations and financial load of the next level? It starts and begins in the classroom and the mind. (42)

I think athletes are taking school a lot more important. Especially the closer you get to being drafted because you never know if your going to get hurt. That's how a lot of guys feel after they don't make it. (11)

The following comment provides insight about how athletes are treated:

This is totally not true and I hate hearing the fairy tales of how we are treated. If we are treated good I haven't experienced it yet. (01)

Some participants realized athletes' aspirations of competing on the professional level, as illustrated by the following comments:

I thought this was a funny cartoon. I think it's fictional but funny. Players look towards football more than academics since football pays for their schooling. Every football player in college has the aspirations of being drafted. That's just the way it is. (09)

Honestly, athletes care more about football than academics. After they decide how good the football team is they then look at the academics. The cartoons are very true because all athletes dream about going pro. They are very disappointed and heartbroken when they don't. (14)

Another participant acknowledged his athletic career would end eventually:

After playing this game for so long and going through the ups downs of it getting hurt, wakening up sore, and seeing different things you see the importance of that degree. Because I don't want to play this sport forever. (29)

63% (27/43) of the participants mentioned specific issues that are a part of college athletes' mindsets (see Table 1).

Realistic/False Representation

The theme *Realistic/False Representation* consisted of participants' expressions as to whether the cartoon depictions were realistic or false scenarios. Some participants reported the representations as factual, as the following comments illustrate:

I think it's true. As much as we are told how important school is for our future, we are here for one reason, football. Anything more from you educationally is a bonus for the coaches. (11)

This is very true because many people only recognize you when your getting awards. (14)

Some other participants viewed the scenarios as fictitious.

This is very untrue, if you're a top candidate you will still be considered an elite prospect. (13)

This is false because recruiters don't want to talk school, while on the playing field. (43)

I feel that the cartoons are a little exaggerated. Athletes are not in any way what the cartoons express. A student athlete has more responsibility than just a regular student. (28)

63% (27/43) of the participants reported the cartoons as either factual or fictitious (see Table 1).

Institutional Focus

The theme *Institutional Focus* involved participants' interpretation of university and NCAA rules, practices, educational emphasis, and support. Participants understood the role the NCAA plays in collegiate athletics. Consider these examples:

This is an example of the NCAA and how many rules they have. Sometimes it's not for the worst but it does help me in some ways. (22)

This is a very realistic depiction of a possible scenario from a player's standpoint. It is possible to find yourself in limbo awaiting the word for the powers that be (professors) and the NCAA is just demanding just that ridiculous in their admittance and retention of it's athlete-students. (05)

One participant referred to the persuasive tactics that universities utilize to attract quality athletes:

Today, a lot of players are being persuaded to attend universities by selling "pipe dreams." Now some programs could definitely mold players into good professionals at the next level, but that should not be the focus for coming to an institution. (42)

Another athlete recognized the illegal practices that occur in intercollegiate sports:

When I see these pictures. I think about all the illegal things that go on in college athletics. (30)

The following participants expressed their concerns about the support the institution provides for college athletes:

They care about other sports, but they don't even have athletic dorms anymore. Sometimes athletes take it for granted that they'll get drafted. (20)

They don't write the paper they give you an outline. (29)

Participants expressed strong concerns regarding the primary intentions and policies of universities and the NCAA, as 37% (16/43) of the participants mentioned university or NCAA practices (see Table 1).

Discussion

This study examined Tank McNamara's cartoons and the research on stigmas and cultural stereotypes placed upon college athletes. Primary researchers also focused on the degree to which race was a factor in these stereotypes.

The current study found that college athletes admitted to some self-stereotyping. Burden et al. (2004) arrived at similar results concerning Black male athletes, however the research participants in that study were general students and not college athletes. Burden et al. (2004) claimed people are simply jealous of college athletes. The theme of jealousy was also revealed in Lawrence et al.'s (in press) study where they examined students' perceptions of a day in the life of a student-athlete. More significantly, college athletes reported being "pimped," which is also known as exploitation (Byers, 1996; Edwards, 1983; Hawkins, 2001); therefore, current findings confirm existing literature on the exploitation of college athletes (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). College athlete participants in the current study disconfirm the stereotype of athletic privilege and make a case for proving other participants (general students) in previous studies (Hawkins, Lawrence, Mintah, & Harrison, 2007; Lawrence et al., in press) wrong, as the following participant response illustrates:

They use you until they are done with you. It's like when a kid gets a new toy he plays with it until it breaks and once it breaks he forgets about it. That is the same thing coaches and institutions do. (04)

Based on the majority of themes in the current study, college athletes connected with the cartoon elicitation and recalled some similarities to the comical images and the social stigmas and stereotypes that are placed upon them in regards to their actual experiences. In fact, 63% of

participants reported the cartoons were either factual or fictitious, which indicates strong opinions. Findings indicated athletes do value their education, which was evident in the *College Athletic Mindset* theme. However, the most stable result was college sport is a *Big Sport Business*, with revenue being the most important factor followed by academics. Thirty-seven percent of participants attributed the business aspect of sport to the NCAA or the college institution they attended.

Results also indicated college athletes are aware of being negatively stereotyped, and 65% of participants expressed concern irrespective of race. Introspective of race, the theme of *Athletic Image* was evident. The specific topics of concern were the “dumb jock” stereotype, media portrayals/images of athletes, Black athlete image portrayal, adulation of athletes, and athlete participation in taunting and celebrating. In terms of personal and social agency, college athletes were fully cognizant they are “pawns” in the larger game of capitalism, commercialism, and big-time university athletics (Zimbalist, 1999).

Most importantly, this study gave college athletes a voice—an opportunity to express their viewpoints and personal feelings. Some participants were offended by the cartoons and refuted certain assumptions based on their responses. Consider the following quote:

I am offended by this, athletes do get help, but no work is done for us. Not all athletes are “dumb jocks.” (41)

Loury (2002) suggested “the forming of generalizations based on superficial physical traits by decision-making agents with the power to create facts can have politically profound and morally disturbing consequences” (p. 21). The cartoonists and the general public are arguably the decision-making agents who shape and internalize certain stereotypes. Many of the stereotype-producing cartoons were very disturbing to numerous college athletes in the current study. The cartoonists have the potential to relay powerful allusions to their readers. According to Connor (2005), readers do not always understand the allusions being used in cartoons and allusions can cause the reader to be confused or to misinterpret. Accurate images of college athletes, especially ones about academic prowess, need to be presented on a more regular basis (Harrison, 2002; Lawrence et al., in press; Martin & Harris, 2006). Current participants supported this claim. Consider the following comment:

There are also a lot of athletes that are concerned with receiving their degree, it’s just not publicized enough. (42)

In terms of race, 51% (22/43) of participants mentioned race in their responses, with a total of 47 responses on race. Many of the comments that focused on race crossed all the major themes of the study; however, the *Athletic Image* theme emerged with many racial comments. Comments included references to the Black “dumb jock” stereotype (Harrison, 2002), the Black male psyche of aspiring “to go pro” (Hodge et al., 2008), and minorities having to make huge sacrifices (Melendez, 2008). Consider the following participant response:

I am still not digging how black athletes are the object of attention with many of these “education” seminars, but I do realize the impact of many of our athletes of color are expected to carry. It’s funny how society does not take any time or considerable effort to cultivate, educate or provide any other real and tangible opportunity for our black men but society has no problem then turning around and holding us accountable to properly direct their children. Is it me or is that crazy as hell? Just because we take the money we are now somehow transfigured? In an instant we go from threatening because we are Black and “uneducated”, more athletes to role models for this country’s youth all for signing on the dotted line. (05)

Goffman focused on “the information the stigmatized convey about themselves in mixed contacts with normals, on their attempt to project or protect the self they believe they have, and on how ‘we normal’s’ respond to their discredited features and encourage their adoption of a good adjustment” (Freidson, 1983, p. 359). Goffman’s point is the stigmatized (college athletes) try to protect themselves and the “normals” or perceivers want to see the stigmatized (college athletes) succeed. College athletes (the stigmatized) attempt to earn their degrees, which were confirmed by current data, and this attempt automatically satisfies and surprises the perceivers. Participants realized earning their degree would provide them with something to fall back on if they do not play sport professionally, which was clearly evident in the theme *College Athlete Mindset*. Although research provides conflicting findings on the academic performance of college student-athletes, the general consensus is student-athletes participate as often or more often as their non-athlete peers in effective educational practices, which has been confirmed by Comeaux and Harrison (2007), Kuh (2001, 2003), Kuh et al. (2007), and Umbach et al. (2006).

Conclusion & Future Recommendations

This study has limitations, which were previously addressed in the methodology section. The LARAS is quite lengthy, as it contains six different domains and 27 cartoon images. College athletes were informed of the length of the data collection process before they voluntarily participated. Nonetheless, a larger number of college athletes should be surveyed for future related studies. Additionally, more representative sample populations and the use of random research designs would strengthen some of the generalizations about college athletes’ perceptions of cartoon stereotypes.

There is a need for additional research on student-athlete attitudes, perceptions, and expectations, especially in regard to utilizing photo-elicitation methods to produce meaningful responses. In addition, this is the first glimpse of research to date that has adopted a visual method using cartoon images that depict stereotypes of college athletes to examine student-athletes’ perspectives. Moreover, future research studies should examine stereotypes and stigmas of female student-athletes, student-athletes who participate in non-revenue sports, and student-athletes from other ethnic groups. Future research in this area would help inform the scholarly community of an unknown element of negative labels and stereotypes in organizations within sport and outside of sport, and may lead us to an answer as to how to stop the perpetuation of the stereotypes.

More specifically, cartoon imagery should not be singled out as a solitary variable and causal agent that informs the public about college athletes. On the contrary, cartoon imagery should be analyzed as one component of a larger canon of representations of college athletes in film, advertising, and other new media forms that use athletic identities to both promote and shape attitudes about these highly visceral commodities (Harrison, 2002). Practitioners in the intercollegiate environment should also intervene by using examples that contain negative or critical imagery about college athletes. For example, one of the primary researchers in this study used a negative cartoon depiction about male athletes during a critical-thinking exercise with an entire Football Bowl Subdivision team.

Finally, social discourse and popular rhetoric suggests that in terms of diversity issues, “time will heal all wounds.” Time may heal some wounds, however the label and phenomenon of the “dumb jock” continues to grow and it is not being challenged in a systematic way (Sailes, 2000; Simons et al., 2007). One way to challenge the “dumb jock” stereotype is to depict broader

realities about college athletes in society. Depictions should include new cartoon strips in the daily newspapers and on the Internet that *cultivate different and counter-stereotypical images*. At a minimum level, the current study enabled the “voice” of the college athlete to be heard and addressed cartoon stereotypes that were both factual and fictional. The current study contributes to the literature on college athletics, sport sociology, and sport management. The unique method of facilitating a cartoon elicitation with college athletes revealed data that is timely, relevant, and provocative in terms of understanding the viewpoint and perceptions of college athletes about the stereotypes many of them face on a daily basis. The present study has provided new data on the perceptions of college athletes and has opened the door for future studies to utilize the photo-elicitation method to further understand how college athletes perceive and respond to stereotypical cartoon imagery.

Note: *Participant statements were transcribed verbatim irrespective of grammatical syntax and offensive language, and do not reflect the perspectives, opinions or attitudes of any of the authors of this article.*

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APPENDIX

Content of the Tank McNamara Cartoons

Please see <http://news.yahoo.com/comics/tankmcnamara> for a visual example of the long-standing cartoon strip. Due to copyright permission requirements and the pricing structure for each cartoon, the authors of this article were only able to include one of the cartoons. Therefore, the following offers a description of the cartoons that were included for each domain in the study.

a) *Academic Support Issues*: These cartoons depict content that represents college athletes as ignorant during tutorial sessions on campus.

b) *Academic Progress*: These cartoons depict content that represents college athletes earning grades that are barely at the minimum requirement of a “C” average.

c) *Coaches as Educators (or non-educators)*: These cartoons depict content that represents college athletes in terms of their interaction with coaches, and these cartoons also portray the coaches’ corresponding attitudes about academic performance.

d) *Professional Sport Aspirations and Career Transition*: These cartoons depict content that represents a college athlete distraught after finding out that he did not get drafted to the National Football League and is now dealing with the reality of needing to find something to do for the rest of his life.

e) *Media Identities, Advertising, & Representation*: These cartoons depict content that represents a professional athlete promoting a product; the images of this athlete focus on his brawn, size, strength and intimidating physical appearance.

f) *Cultural Issues & Recruiting*: These cartoons depict content that represents two college coaches fabricating why a high school recruit should attend their university on an athletic scholarship.