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Stereotypes, Native Americans and Sports in the United States: A Tale of Two Teams.

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Année académique 2023-2024

Master en communication multilingue, finalité spécialisée en langues
des affaires

Abstract

The use of Native American imagery by American professional sports teams has long been supported by stereotypical representations of Native Americans. These sports portrayals often depict Native Americans as “People of the Past”, “Bloodthirsty Warriors”, and “Noble Savages”. While past research has already examined the effects and perceptions of these representations among both Native and non-Native Americans, to our knowledge, the potential correlation between the use and perception of stereotypes and the decisions behind a team’s rebranding has not yet been explored. In recent years, under pressure and protest, several sports teams have opted to change their imagery. Notably, the Washington R-skins rebranded as the Washington Commanders. Despite some teams acknowledging the racist nature of these stereotypical portrayals, many have resisted change. For instance, the Kansas City Chiefs, despite widespread controversy, have retained their name and logo. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, our study aims at answering the following question: “why, after almost a century of using a name and symbols considered controversial and offensive, did the Washington Commanders decide to review them while the Chiefs didn’t?” Using table analysis and survey data, we examine how the use and perception of stereotypes influenced the rebranding decisions of the referenced teams. Our findings reveal that the Washington R-skins’ rebranding decision was driven by the higher perceived offensiveness and public pressure related to their pervasive and severe use of stereotypical imagery. In contrast, the Kansas City Chiefs, with less severe and less offensive portrayals, did not experience the same level of pressure, making their rebranding less urgent despite general support for such a change.

Acknowledgments

Although this Master's thesis reflects my personal work, its completion would not have been possible without the support of many.

I would like to thank all my friends and family for their active listening and unwavering support.

I am deeply grateful to my partner for the invaluable confidence he provided and his strong understanding.

Special thanks to my supervisor, Katherine Opello, for her constant availability, precious guidance, and reassuring words of encouragement, which were crucial throughout the redaction of this thesis.

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1. Introduction

“The Washington Football Team’s nail-biter against the Raiders in Las Vegas on Sunday was fun to watch. But the best part of the game was what I didn’t have to watch. No Native American imagery misused as sports mascots. No drugstore Indian iconography. No racial slur passed off as a team name. No “R” word printed on jerseys or painted in big bold letters in the end zone. Instead, I saw my home team — with a new name, a new look and a refreshingly spirited new game. Stripped of the offensive 19th-century Native American stereotypes, the 21st-century Washington Football Team looked like a team I might be able to root for”.

- Milloy Courtland (2021, December 7).¹

Courtland’s words came after a long debate over the Washington Football Team’s imagery. For over fifty years, the professional sports industry, particularly the National Football League (NFL), has been scrutinized for portraying harmful stereotypes of Native Americans² under the guise of “honorable” intentions. Although the Washington Football Team (known as the Washington R-skins³ at the time) change its imagery to the Washington Commanders, the debate won’t be over until other sports teams also acknowledge the racist origins and detrimental effects of these stereotypical representations. Notably, the Kansas City Chiefs, often cited among the ongoing controversial teams, have retained their current imagery, in contrast to the newly named Commanders. Motivated by the ongoing controversy over whether or not the sports industry should continue to use Native American “representations” as symbols for their teams (and particularly the American professional sport teams), this thesis aims to better understand the decisions behind the imagery of two specific teams: the Washington Commanders and the Kansas City Chiefs.

¹ Milloy, C. (2021, December 7). *Washington Football Team’s new name, new look — and new game — means there’s a lot to cheer*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/wft-offensive-indian-imagery-gone/2021/12/07/a69f7bbc-577d-11ec-9a18-a506cf3aa31d_story.html

² In this study, the terms “Native Americans”, “Natives”, “American Indians”, and “Indigenous Peoples” will be used interchangeably to refer to Native Americans, despite their nuanced differences in meaning.

³ We refer to the team as the “R-skins” because the use of its official name is considered a racial slur (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

1.1. Methodology

Past research investigating the use of Native representations in sports have already measured the effects and perceptions of these representations among both Native and Non-Native Americans. However, to our knowledge, they have never explored the potential correlation between the perceptions of these stereotypical representations and the decision-making process behind a team rebranding. The aim is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the teams' imagery: "why, after almost a century of using a name and symbols considered controversial and offensive, did the Washington Commanders decide to review them while the Chiefs didn't?" Using quantitative and qualitative methods, we shall address this question by analyzing the two professional teams' use of Native imagery. In this regard, the following hypotheses will guide our research:

H1: We predict that more stereotypical symbols of Native Americans will be perceived as more offensive than others.

H2: We hypothesize that the Washington R-skins rebranded - changed their names, logos, and mascots, etc. - because these stereotypical representations were perceived as more offensive and harmful compared to those of the Kansas City Chiefs, which resisted attempts to rebrand?

H3: The rebranding of the Washington R-skins to the Commanders led to a notable shift in public perception, resulting in a measurable decrease in the perceptions of the Commanders' content as offensive.

H4: We hypothesize that the decision to rebrand is as much influenced by public perception and external pressure (sponsors, history, society, etc.) as by the use and offensive nature of the stereotypes themselves.

To validate our hypotheses, we will first present an analysis of the conceptualization of stereotypes, followed by a review of Native American stereotypical images in the US. Then, we will contrast and compare each team's portrayals of Native Americans to identify any recurrent pattern in their use of stereotypical images. If such a pattern is present, it would suggest that the perception of a stereotype – whether as more or less offensive – can play a leading role in the decision-making process behind a team's rebranding. In other words, the rebranding of a team might be more strongly influenced by the public response to a stereotype rather than the inherent nature of the stereotype itself.

In addition, we will assess the degree to which those teams' images and attitudes were collectively perceived as stereotypical, offensive, or appropriate. By doing so, we aim to determine whether the rebranding of the Washington R-skins to the Washington Commanders had an impact on public perceptions.

Thus, this thesis will combine an analysis of stereotypes and qualitative survey data (see Appendix 1) to provide a deeper understanding of the decision-making processes behind sports teams branding choices. Using a unique table based on academic research (see Tables, p. 31-33), we will analyze the two teams' use of stereotypes. We will then position this analysis in the historical and cultural contexts that might have influenced each team's branding decisions. Finally, we will use survey data to examine people's perceptions of the stereotypical images studied. We expect this combination of data will extend the applicability of the thesis findings and produce robust predictions about whether sports teams chose to rebrand.

2. Literature Review

2.1. An analysis of the conceptualization of Stereotypes: “What is a stereotype?”

2.1.1. Brief overview of the concept.

Before delving into the subject, think about one of the many social groups that constitute the diverse landscape of the United States. You might effortlessly picture how people from that group are like. This mental picture may be based on an oversimplified idea of the Native Americans as a whole – such as assuming Native Americans are primitive, brave, noble etc. Alternatively, you might recall specific examples of people from that group, such as an image of Yakari, which might remind you that Native Americans are also spiritual, connected to nature. By doing this thinking exercise, you have just demonstrated one of the oldest and most traditional conceptualizations of stereotypes, defined by Walter Lippman (1922) as the “pictures in the head”⁴.

Although stereotyping is not a new phenomenon, the formal empirical study of stereotyping only begun in the 20th century. Since then, researchers have been trying to provide a definition of this psychological concept and understand the formation of its cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. However, a universal definition in the scientific literature has failed emerged. With this in mind, this literature review will consist of three parts. This first part will be concerned with general information on the stereotyping process. Based on all the conducted research, the focus of this chapter will be to give a comprehensive analysis of stereotypes, their influence on perception, and the contemporary strategies to address bias and promote equity. A deeper understanding of stereotyping on Native American, and in the sport industry, will be carried out in one of the following sections (see section 3, *Stereotypical images of Native Americans in the US*). At the end, the aim of the literature is to create tables based on all the existing research to conduct further analysis of the use of stereotypes in our two sports teams: the Kansas City Chiefs and the Washington R-skins.

2.1.2. Stereotypes vs Prejudices

Studying stereotyping requires making a distinction between two concepts: stereotypes and prejudices. Prejudices and stereotypes are not new phenomena. Both have been extensively studied and discussed in various academic fields, including psychology, sociology, and human

⁴ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 5

rights law. By analysing these two *category-based*⁵ approaches, we will try to illustrate their holistic and complementary nature. Although stereotypes and prejudices are closely related, they are slightly different and do not have the same nature or implications.

Stereotypes are “beliefs about another group in such terms as personality traits, attributions, or behavioural descriptions”⁶. These beliefs, that can be either positive or negative, “shape how people think about and respond to the group”⁷. Prejudices are not simply beliefs but “negative attitudes toward another group that express negative affective or emotional reactions”⁸. Compared to stereotypes, they are in themselves a full explanation for rejection as they “create and maintain hierarchical status relations between groups”⁹. They go further than stereotypes and carry an emotional component that can lead to discriminatory behavior. For example, consider the stereotype “Native Americans are devoted to their traditions”. Although this stereotype is arguably *positive*¹⁰, it could imply a negative attitude towards this community. Someone influenced by this stereotype could believe that Native Americans are not able to acclimatize to others’ customs and thus could use it as a justification of relocation.

However, although stereotypes and prejudices are distinct concepts, both have similar functional effects. They serve as cognitive images used to meet psychological, personal needs¹¹ and play an important part in the simplification of human interaction. According to Tajfel and Forgas (1980), the process of categorizing, implemented by stereotyping, “may help individuals create a positive identity and thus feel good about themselves”¹². People hold stereotypes and prejudices because these elements enable them to make sense of the world and feel as part of a group. By categorizing people as in-group or out-group, people create a sense of superiority which can enhance their positive self-identity. Nevertheless, because of their insidious

⁵ This type of approach will be explained in the following section: *The Origins of Stereotypes*.

⁶ Bar-Tal, D., Graumann, C.F., Kruglanski, A.W., & Stroebe, W. (1989). *Stereotyping and prejudice: Changing conceptions*. Springer.

⁷ Dovidio, J. F., Hewstone, M., Glick, P., & Esses, V. M. (2010). *Prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination: Theoretical and empirical overview*. Sage. p. 8

⁸ Bar-Tal, D., Graumann, C.F., Kruglanski, A.W., & Stroebe, W. (1989), *op.cit.*

⁹ Dovidio, J. F., Hewstone, M., Glick, P., & Esses, V. M. (2010). *op.cit.*, p. 8

¹⁰ Here the devotion to traditions is generally attributed to an entire ethnic group (Native Americans) without considering individual differences.

¹¹ This aspect of stereotype will also be further explained in the following section: *The Origins of Stereotypes - The Process of Categorization: A Cognitive Foundation*.

¹² Tajfel, H., & Forgas, J. P. (2000). Social categorization: Cognitions, values and groups. In C. Stangor (Ed.), *Stereotypes and prejudice: Essential readings* (pp. 49–63). Psychology Press.

character, both are also “overdetermined” which means that they are easy to develop but hard to change (Devine, 1989)¹³.

While stereotypes and prejudices have similar purpose and utility¹⁴, they both differ in terms of nature and implications. For our work, we will only focus on stereotypes and follow Allport, G. W. (1954) conceptualization of the term as “primarily images within a category invoked by the individual to justify either love-prejudice or hate-prejudice”¹⁵. As the aim is to study “the impact of professional sports on Indigenous Peoples' representations”, we won't review the behavior adopted by prejudiced people but on the ways in which the professional sports industry perpetuated their beliefs.

2.1.3. The Origins of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are deeply ingrained in human social interaction, emerging from basic cognitive processes. They are learned from a young age and help us make sense of the world. If you ask a 5-year-old who can be a firefighter, they will say that “men can” and if you ask them who can be a good nurse, they will tell you that “women can”.¹⁶ As they play a significant role in our social lives, understanding their origin is of paramount importance. To do so, we need to explore how they develop through, what Gordon Allport (1954) called, *the process of categorization*. Thus, we will unpack the rules and mechanisms of stereotypes through the examples of marine life via a prototypical schema of fish attributes.¹⁷

In the second section of this chapter, we distinguish individual stereotypes from collective ones and point out that stereotypes could be triggered automatically by individual experience or collectively by cultural influences. Stereotypes have cognitive, social and cultural foundations that are complementary and that can affect one another.

2.1.3.1. The Process of Categorization: A Cognitive Foundation

As Allport stated in his seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), “the human mind must think with the aid of categories (the term is equivalent here to generalizations)”¹⁸.

¹³ Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(1), p. 15

¹⁴ they both help individuals navigate social complexities and maintain group identities.

¹⁵ Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

¹⁶ Bigler, R. S., & Liben, L. S. (2006). A developmental intergroup theory of social stereotypes and prejudice. In R. V. Kail (Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior* (pp. 39–89). Elsevier Academic Press.

¹⁷ The illustration of this cognitive process through the examples of marine life have been inspired by a bird classification seen through the course of DEGAND E., LFIAL1560: *Linguistique générale: sémantique et pragmatique*, UCL, 2020-2021

¹⁸ Allport, G. W. (1954). *Op.cit.*, p. 20-23

This fundamental cognitive process, that simplifies our complex social world, cannot be avoided as “orderly living depends on it” (Allport, 1954). It provides us a framework for understanding, as much as predicting, behaviors and events. To function as a human being and react actively, one must constantly categorize the reality around them. If you cannot quickly categorize the snake into the category of “dangerous” reptiles, you may have a problem. This process operates based on a comparison between the *object*¹⁹ we want to categorize, and a *prototype*²⁰ defined by ourselves, derived from our experience. This categorization in terms of prototypes is psycho-experimental as it has been established by psychologists who based their theory on experiments. Among these experiments, we find the *Goodness-of-examples rating*. This refers to a linguistic experiment involving a series of vegetables (carrot, broccoli, endive, cucumber, etc.) considered as good examples of the category. During that experiment, evaluators had to classify these vegetables on a scale from best to worst example. The aim was to identify the best example for the vegetable category, *the prototype* (Eleanor Rosch and colleagues (1973, 75, 78).

Following Allport’s (1954) and Georges Kleiber’s (1990) approaches, the principles and limits of the *prototype theory* can be defined as follows:

1. *The Formation of Clusters for Efficient Behavior*. Every day, we encounter a million of occurrences. To manage this multitude of events and act accordingly, our minds create *clusters*²¹. This process enables us to respond quickly, and with high probability, to any scenarios.
2. *A Prototypical Structure and Fuzzy Boundaries*. Categories are organized around a central prototype (*goldfish*), which represents the best example of that category. The closer to the center an item is, the more it belongs to the category. While the centered items are thus very good representatives of the category, those at the periphery, although they still belong to the category, are poor representatives. Their peripheric position implies that they are close to another category. This ambiguous structure can lead to the misclassification of certain items. Since a whale shares several common properties with fish, one can miscategorise it as a fish - “a whale is a fish” - although it is a mammal.

¹⁹ Here object refers to any perceivable entity (alive or not).

²⁰ The best representative of a category and the one on which we base the categorization.

²¹ Here the term refers to large familiar categories.

3. *Based on Family Resemblance and a Holistic Classification.* The members of a category share a family resemblance rather than a strict set of common properties. The process of categorization does not operate analytically but holistically (*Gestalt*²²). Following this Gestalt approach, an item is categorized based on its similarity with a prototype rather than on a checklist of necessary and sufficient conditions. The process of categorizing is more about the whole picture rather than the individual parts (Kleiber, 1990). This similarity-based process is also influenced by the context which can change the meaning and the categorization of items. If someone mentions *the concept*²³ “fish”, we will all have an image of a fish which may be different from one person to another (depending on our individual or collective, cultural representation of that item). Most Western peoples may have an image of a goldfish in mind while Amazonians may think of Piranhas as they are more accustomed to that kind of fish.

4. *Characterized by an Emotional and Ideational tone?* As mentioned by Allport (1954) in his definition of stereotypes, a category is not a stereotype²⁴. While a category is a neutral grouping of similar items, a stereotype is “an exaggerated belief associated with a category [that] often exists as a fixed mark upon the category”. Although categories are mainly “intellectual”, they also carry an emotional tone (stereotypes) that affects our attitudes and behaviors toward the items. For someone who had a fish as a child, the concept *fish* might evoke positive feelings (friendly, joy, affection, calm, etc.), while for someone who had a negative encounter with the concept, a *fish* might be synonym of discomfort, disgust, fear or even danger. This nuance is also valid for ethnic categories. “Not only do we know what [Native Americans] means, but we may have a feeling tone of favor or disfavor accompanying the concept”²⁵.

5. *Effort Minimization using Prototypes.* “Are human beings naturally lazy?” questioned Claudia Hammond in an article for the BBC²⁶. Based on her article, the answer is no. However, the use of prototype in the categorization process is the perfect example of the humans’ laziness. For a maximum of cognitive effects generated by a minimum of

²² It is the image that we will unconsciously use to represent an item (see the following example of the fish concept and its cognitive representation based on someone’s culture).

²³ “It is all of the knowledge possessed by an individual about a category of objects or events.” Anglin, J. M. (1977). *Word, Object, and Conceptual Development*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, p. 3

²⁴ Allport, G. W. (1954). *Op.cit.*, p. 191-192

²⁵ *Id.*, p. 21

²⁶ Hammond, C. (2020, June 3). *Are humans naturally lazy?* BBC. online: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200602-are-human-beings-naturally-lazy> (page visited on May 27th, 2024).

cognitive efforts, “our mind tends to categorize environmental events in the “grossest” manner compatible with the need for action”²⁷ (Allport, 1954). The problem is that these generalizations often lead to a form of prejudice and discrimination. Considering all the Indigenous Peoples as “savages” to simplify our way of living has negative and major repercussions on these communities.

6. *Rational vs Irrational Categories*²⁸. Categories can be rational, based on substantial evidence, high-probability predictions and experience, or irrational, influenced by cultural norms and emotional biases. These two types of categories coexist, with irrational categories often leading to the persistence of unfounded stereotypes, prejudices²⁹ (Allport, 1954).

“Just look at them. Don’t you see that they are different in an objectionable way? I am not prejudiced. Their unpopularity rests on a well-deserved reputation”.³⁰

The Prototypic categorization theory illustrates one crucial aspect of the foundation of stereotypes, the cognitive one.

“[...] the formation and use of social stereotypes cannot be properly understood without a careful analysis of the cognitive functions they serve”³¹ (Stangor, 2000).

According to Allport (1954), this process, on which lies stereotype formation, is at the very basis of normal prejudgment. By minimizing our cognitive “load”, it enables us to efficiently adjust to our environment and guides our behavior through generalizations. To explain to someone what a fish is, you wouldn't mention a moonfish as a stereotype. Although they meet *the necessary and sufficient conditions*³² to be part of the fish category, they are not cold-

²⁷ Allport, G. W. (1954). *Op.cit.*, p. 21

²⁸ This aspect of the categorization process will be further developed in the following section *Individual vs Collective/Cultural Dimension*.

²⁹ *Id.*, p. 22

³⁰ *The Well-deserved Theory*, mentioned by Brems (2016), is based on the idea that if your stereotype cannot be explained by indisputable fact that justify a hostile behavior rather than a benevolent one, then your justification for stereotyping is “a mask for prejudice”. Brems, E., & Timmer, A. (2016). *Stereotypes and Human Rights Law*. Cambridge: Intersentia, p. 87-88

³¹ Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *Stereotypes and Prejudice: Essential Readings*. Key Readings in Social Psychology. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, p. 58

³² They live in the water, use fins for movement, gills for breathing and have scales (see Putnam’s stereotype theory to understand the role of the NSC in the stereotype formation). Putnam, H. (1975). *The meaning of “meaning”*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

blooded and thus, do not meet the *frequency conditions*³³. In other words, since a moonfish is not the best representative of the fish category, it shouldn't be used to portray it.

Within-category stereotyping and its homogenization effect.

Having unpacked the categorization process, we now shift our focus to its activation and application from a social perspective. Given the research hypothesis, and for the critical analysis of the two cases of study, it is of paramount importance to study the impact of this cognitive phenomenon on a social target (Indigenous Peoples). Thus, following Hugenberg & Sacco's analysis on the influence of social categorization on the person perception and face memory, we will outline what they consider to be "the most important and ubiquitous effects of social categorization"³⁴, homogenization. The acknowledgement of the categorization's homogenizing effects emerged when researchers started to consider stereotyping as a within-category process rather than a category-based one. Indeed, traditional theories of stereotyping have largely conceptualized it as a category-based phenomenon, where individuals' perceptions of social groups, particularly *outgroups*, are characterized by a high degree of homogeneity. In this framework, members of an outgroup are uniformly stereotyped and thus considered as interchangeable: "[...] the merciless Indian savages."³⁵ This perspective prevailed until the beginning of the 20th century when researchers, such as Hugenberg & Sacco (2008), began to study how variations, among individuals within the same social group, could influence our perceptions. Based on the observation that some individuals are better representatives, more prototypical of their group than others, Hugenberg & Sacco (2008) concluded that a differentiation between the members of the category itself should be made. This shift from category-based to within-category stereotyping highlights the complexity and the importance of considering individual-level variations within the stereotyping processes.

³³ The ones shared by most of the fish (the common knowledge that we have on fish).

³⁴ Hugenberg, K., & Sacco, D. F. (2008). Social categorization and stereotyping: How social categorization biases person perception and face memory. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2/2, Miami University, p. 7

³⁵ This statement included in the Declaration of Independence illustrates Thomas Jefferson's description of American Indians and demonstrates the reductive generalizations of those peoples that was prevalent among American leaders. Here, Jefferson doesn't make a distinction between the peoples from that outgroup. He considered all Native Americans as "merciless savages".

2.1.3.2. Individual vs Collective/Cultural Dimension: A Personal, Social, and Cultural Foundation.

The individual approach to stereotyping: a primary and personal foundation.

According to Stangor (2000), in recent research on stereotyping, there is a prevailing assumption behind the characterization of stereotypes. Stereotypes are perceived as “individual rather than social constructs, [that could] be explained in terms of biases in information-processing strategies alone, without recourse to [...] collective phenomena”.³⁶ However, two complementary views can be used to conceive stereotypes, and examining both is necessary to fully comprehend the stereotyping process.

As seen through the prototype theory³⁷, “Stereotypes can be thought of as the characteristics that are mentally associated with a social category label in long-term, semantic memory” (Stangor & Lange, 1994). They are stored in our memory as cognitive representations, prototypes. To this storage stage, Stangor (2000) adds two other general approaches explaining “how information about social group is represented within memory”: *group schemas*³⁸ and *exemplars*³⁹. This manifestation of stereotypes occurs at an individual level in the sense that they are “represented within the mind of the individual person”.⁴⁰

This individual approach to stereotyping is only held by one or a few people within society.⁴¹ It suggests that “over time, people develop beliefs about the characteristics of the important social groups in their environment”. According to scholars like Fiske & Taylor (1991) and Markus & Zajonc (1982), these beliefs (stereotypes) are learned and modified through the information individuals gather from direct interactions with members of other social groups. Individuals base their response to outgroup members on their interactions with them. This assumption implies that there might be, what Stangor called, *a kernel of truth*⁴² to every

³⁶ Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *Stereotypes and Prejudice: Essential Readings*. Key Readings in Social Psychology. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, p. 57

³⁷ Comparable to the social categorization process.

³⁸ Group schemas are collections of beliefs about the characteristics of a social group. In contrast with the group prototype, they don't offer a mental image of the group best representative.

³⁹ They are the memories held by people on specific individuals whom they have previously encountered (Smith & Zárate, 1922). Unfortunately, among these memories, the negative and minority ones are particularly easy to remember as there are fewer of them. This process of easily remembering the negative behaviors and the minority groups associated ones is associated to what Mullen & Johnson called, *The Illusory Correlations* (Mullen & Johnson, 1990).

⁴⁰ Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *op.cit.*, p. 64

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁴² It implies that amidst misinformation or exaggeration, there is “a core truth or fact that forms the basis of the statement or situation”. A stereotype always contains a type of truth, the problem is when it paralyses its own image. Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *op.cit.*, p. 7

stereotypes. However, as expressed in the prototype theory, although a stereotype (as the best representative of a category) is partly “accurate” for many members of that category, we need to consider the homogenization effect. In their seminal study, D. Katz & K. Braly (1933) highlighted that “almost any characteristic can become attached to any race and stick there with scarcely any factual basis.”⁴³ Their study attests it as many of the stereotypes held by the participants were not based on accurate information about the groups in question. Some of their participants even endorse stereotypes about groups they had never personally encountered (The Jews). Here, Katz & Braly (1933) clearly emphasizes the often-unfounded nature of stereotypes and the ease with which they can be propagated, exaggerated due to the different way information is processed.

Additionally, much research has indicated that stereotypes could be triggered automatically, unconsciously. This phenomenon is explored by Devine and Sharp (2009) in their article on “Automaticity and Control in Stereotyping and Prejudice”, as well as by Greenwald and Banaji (1995) in their work on “Implicit Social Cognition”. Through their studies, all these researchers point out that stereotypes often play out at an unconscious level, suggesting that even well-intentioned individuals may act based on stereotypes without really realizing it.

The collective approach to stereotyping: a social and culture foundation.

In addition to the studies that focus on stereotypes on the individual-level, researchers have also studied those on a collective level as “many (perhaps most) of our stereotypes are [...] widely held and culturally sanctioned”.⁴⁴ Stereotypes are not solely individually characterized. If they were, one could simply ignore the prejudiced person and move on. However, as Gardner (1973) stated: “[an ethnic group member] may be somewhat chagrined to find that a few individuals in the larger community have beliefs about the characteristics of the group of which he is a member, but it has major implications...when such beliefs are relatively widespread in the community”⁴⁵. In contrast to individual stereotypes, cultural ones are shared within a society, they transcend individual cognition and thus, have much more severe consequences as they do not only affect a single individual but an entire community (Stangor, 2000).⁴⁶ Stangor defines cultural stereotypes as collective representation that not only exist “in the head of each

⁴³ Katz, D., & Braly, K. (1933). Racial stereotypes of one hundred college students. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28(3), p. 288

⁴⁴ Schneider, D. J. (2004). *The psychology of stereotyping*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press, p. 322

⁴⁵ Gardner, R. C. (1973). Ethnic stereotypes: The traditional approach, a new look. *Canadian Psychologist*, 14, p. 134

⁴⁶ Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *Idem*.

individual” but also “in the fabric of the society itself”. Here, he emphasizes the pervasive and embedded nature of stereotypes within a culture. For the purpose of our work, the concept *culture* will be conceptualized as a set of “shared meanings embodied in artifacts and practices”⁴⁷, a *lifeworld*⁴⁸ in which its members must share *cultural codes*⁴⁹ in order to communicate effectively with one another (shared meanings) (Hall, 1997). Regarding stereotyping, language, media, and social norms are the shared “cultural codes” used to model social interaction. They influence how people feel, think, and behave (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Through communication with peers, family, and media, individuals internalize and perpetuate stereotypes (Aboud & Doyle, 1996). This communication can be as much verbal as non-verbal. As Stangor (2000) stated: “In many cases, learning about group beliefs comes indirectly from observing how others who are important to us behave toward members of other groups, rather than through direct verbal statements from them.” Despite this *indirect learning*⁵⁰, language plays a pivotal role in the transmission and reinforcement of stereotypes within society (Anglin, 1977). As the cornerstone of communication, it is through language that individuals convey their thoughts and understand the world around them. Due to their manifestation in everyday language and in the media, stereotypes are effortlessly transmitted and become a part of the collective consciousness.

The role of language and the media in stereotyping:

Through their relevance theory, Sperber and Wilson (1986) highlight the role of language in knowledge improvement. This cognitive principle claims that humans as spontaneously seekers of relevance: a speaker should provide his interlocutor a maximum of information with the least possible cognitive effort.⁵¹ However, as seen through the prototype theory, this logic of efficiency often involves categorizing and labeling the reality. By systematically using certain terms to describe specific groups, these practices can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes.

⁴⁷ Miller, J. G., Englebrecht, J., Wang, Z., & Tsudaka, G. (2020). Toward greater cultural sensitivity in developmental psychology. *Applied Developmental Science*, p. 5

⁴⁸ Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage Publications, Inc.; Open University Press, p. 5

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁵⁰ In his book, “Human Groups and Social Categories” (1981), Tajfel explains this the persistence of stereotypes and their role in intergroup dynamics through what he calls *The Social Identity Theory*. A person’s stereotyped actions are derived from their group memberships. Tajfel follows *the prototype theory* but he illustrates it from a cultural perspective.

⁵¹ Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

As Stangor (2000) points out, “the same social groups can be labeled in different ways, ranging from the benign and politically correct (“Black”, “homosexual”, “women”) to the derogatory (“[N-word]”, “faggot”, or “bitch”).”⁵²

This pervasive influence of language on stereotyping is also exerted by the media⁵³. By negatively portraying and associating specific characteristics to certain ethnic groups, the media contributes to the perpetuation and, above all, normalization of stereotypes. In cinematographic history, Indigenous Peoples have often been portrayed as fierce and savage warriors. This consistent portrayal led audiences to associate them with certain traits that became part of their cognitive framework. In an interview for CBC News, Jesse Went, the channel’s pop culture critic, gives his opinion of Indigenous imagery in sports and denounces the perpetuation of stereotyped traits by emphasizing their collective and cultural dimension: “Indigenous people are the only humans that are cast as mascots and as team names.”⁵⁴ Many others such as Anglin (1977), Hartmann & Husband (1974), and Wilson & Gutierrez (1995) also denounced the active role of media in disseminating cultural stereotypes. Moreover, compared to any other form of communication, the impact of the media is even greater as it reaches a broad audience.

Although no stereotype is hundred percent collectively held, both language and media play a significant role in stereotypes’ perpetuation and reinforcement within a community. Here, what really makes them dangerous is the fact that they become social norms.⁵⁵ While individual stereotypes are shaped by personal experiences and direct interactions, consensual ones are based on agreements shared and embedded within the social norms of a society. Although these two dimensions have different dynamics, they are highly connected and acknowledging them is essential for a full understanding of stereotypes and stereotyping (Tajfel, 1981).

⁵² Stangor, C. (Ed.). (2000). *op.cit.*, p. 68

⁵³ Here by media, we mean “the mass media-literature, television, movies, newspapers, E-mail, leaflets, and bumper stickers” which, according to Stangor, is considered to be the form by which most stereotypes are transmitted in modern society. *Ibid.*, p. 69

⁵⁴ Went, J. Anishinaabe, Serpent River First Nation. (2019) Testimony to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

⁵⁵ Stangor, C. (2009). The study of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination within social prejudice: A quick history of theory and research. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination*. New York, NY: Psychology Press. P. 1-4

With a view to a better understanding of the academic literature on stereotyping, we compiled a table organized around key concepts, findings and perspectives. It will be used in our study to analyze the use of stereotyping by the Kansas City Chiefs and the Washington Commanders. However, before further analysis, the following section will give a comprehensive overview of stereotypical images on Native Americans. Their historical roots, perpetuation by the media, and their use by the sports industry will be explored.

3. Stereotypical images of Native Americans in the US: historical roots, perpetuation by the media and use by the sports industry

This third part will focus on stereotypes about Native Americans, particularly those prominent in American sports. First, we will reflect on some key historical moments in Native Americans' story in the United States. The aim is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the origins of these stereotypical representations. Then, we will examine the reasons of their perpetuation in mass media and list the relevant mechanisms. Finally, we will conclude with a brief overview of their application in the sport industry.

3.1. The History of Native Americans in the USA: a narrative marked by resilience, oppression, and acculturation.

From their origins to the present day, Native Americans have endured challenges due to European colonization, government policies, and societal attitudes. The arrival of Europeans on the American continent drastically changed the Native Americans' narrative forever. Early encounters between the two populations were marked by a clash of mentalities and culture (Teles Alves Ferro, 2023). The Natives ancestral way of life, which considered nature as a sacred land⁵⁶, couldn't align with the Europeans view of nature as a commodity resource (Beckert 2015). However, their relationship to nature wasn't the only aspect that contrasted these two cultures; through forced relocation and assimilation practices, Europeans ensured that Native Americans abandoned all of their traditional ways of living. From early alliances during the American Revolution to the contemporary Native American Civil Rights' movements, American Indians have suffered from those practices that undermined their sovereignty, culture, and gave rise to damaging stereotypes. Stereotypes that continue to influence people's perceptions of them today (Teles Alves Ferro, 2023).

⁵⁶ "Although they varied significantly among different cultures, Native American relationships with the natural world tended to preserve ecological integrity and appear to have done so over a significant period of time. These cultures engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring with an Earth and fellow beings as alive and self-conscious as human beings. Such relationships were reflected and perpetuated by cultural elements including religious belief and ceremonial ritual". (Booth, 2003)

3.1.1. The violent relocation of Indian Peoples

Throughout the 17th and 18th century, Native tribes were used in different ways by European powers who were fighting against each other. While the French and the Dutch developed a lucrative commercial relationship with Native tribes (e.g., the fur trade), the Spanish and the English adopted a markedly more violent approach towards the Indigenous communities. Both used a wide range of brutal tactics to assert their dominance over these populations: enslavement, spreading diseases, forced labor, killing the buffalo⁵⁷, burning resources, etc.⁵⁸ “One of the most brutal ones was a program called scalp hunting, which offered bounties for Indigenous scalps. This led to the origin of the name [R-skin], which makes reference to the left mutilated bodies and bloody corpses. To this day, this word remains a racist and a stereotype to describe Native Americans” (Teles Alves Ferro, 2023). Additionally, with the aim of “civilizing” Natives, The Spanish also forcefully imposed their religion (Christianity) upon them (Booth, 2003).

Following all these violent practices, one of the darkest chapters in Native American history, and the first act of removal, unfolded in the 19th century under Andrew Jackson’s presidency. Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830, who led to the infamous *Trail of Tears (1838)*, a forced relocation of at least seventy thousand Native Americans, resulted in the estimated death toll of 4,000 to 5,000 Cherokee (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). The discovery of Gold in 1829 also contributed to the forced removals of Native tribes and westward expansion of Europeans causing destruction of Native lands (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). This century of forced relocation underscored the federal government's disregard for Native sovereignty and the prioritization of settler interests over Native lives and rights. However, this process of relocating Natives to the so-called “Indian Territory”, was just the start to a prolonged campaign of historical and cultural erasure.

⁵⁷ About the Buffalo, the buffalo was really needed to live by the Native Americans. They would use the flesh, the meat, the skin, the bones, every body parts of the animal. When Europeans arrived, they killed a lot of buffalos and brought cattle instead and then killed the native nations as well. An interesting thing is that by killing the buffalo, Europeans also killed community life, the buffalo hunting used to be a family activity for Native Americans. Europeans introduced horses, an animal that did not exist in that part of the globe before their arriving, and from that moment, hunting became a very individual and male activity. The killing of buffalo is very symbolic and a very important element in the history of the Native American nations. Adams, C. (2016, April 22). *Were Bison Slaughtered to Starve American Indians?* The Washington City Paper. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/196662/were-bison-slaughtered-to-starve-american-indians-whether-it-was/>

⁵⁸ Nichols, R. L. (2003). *American Indians in U.S. history*. University of Oklahoma Press.

3.1.2. The Reservation Era and Assimilation laws

Following the American Civil War (1861-1865), Native Americans were increasingly confined to reservations—often marginal lands, very poor and arid, unsuitable for sustainable agriculture or economic development (Nichols, 2003). Despite resistance efforts against American expansion and under the pressure of federal agent, tribal leaders were left with little choice but to adapt to reservation life. However, federal government not only wanted Indians to live remotely in reservations, but they also wanted them to abandon their traditional and cultural practices to conform to white American culture (Nichols, 2003). As part of their assimilationist strategies, the United States Congress passed the Dawes Act (1887). This act stipulated that Native Peoples were allotted single plots of land in exchange for giving up Indian ways⁵⁹. This idea to give a land (*Eloheh*⁶⁰) to Indians was a very capitalistic way of dealing with the earth which doesn't illustrate Natives' profound respect and sacred connection for it (Matthiessen, 1984). Again, by imposing capitalism and ownership, American Europeans forced Native Americans to abandon a part of their culture, their traditional nomadic way of life⁶¹. This form of acculturation was also expressed through the sending of Native American children to boarding schools or foster care where they would adopt the “civilized” Euro-American way of life (Nichols, 2003).

3.1.3. Civil Rights Movement and Contemporary Challenges

The 20th century was a century of militancy. After the period of assimilation, policies were enacted by the United States' federal government to address past injustices and promote Native American self-determination (Teles Alves Ferro, 2023). Moreover, inspired by the success of the 60s civil rights movement, Native Americans adopted several strategies used by the Black Power movement to advocate for their own struggles (Johnson, 2007). In 1968, The Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) was enacted by the federal government, protecting the rights of every

⁵⁹ U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. (2022, February 8). Dawes Act (1887). Retrieved June 9, 2024, from <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dawes-act#:~:text=On%20February%208%2C%201887%2C%20Congress%20passed%20the%20Dawes,small%20allotments%20to%20be%20parceled%20out%20to%20individuals>

⁶⁰ Meaning of land in Cherokee. “This same word also means history, culture and religion. We cannot separate our place on earth from our lives on the earth nor from our vision nor our meaning as a people ... So when we speak of land, we are not speaking of property, territory, or even a piece of ground upon which our houses sit and our crops are grown. We are speaking of something truly sacred” (words of Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee, who expressed the symbolic of land in his culture at the Tellico Dam congressional hearing in 1978). Matthiessen, P. (1984). *Indian country*. New York, NY: The Viking Press, p. 119

⁶¹ Today, Natives are trying to buy back their lands. In 2006, the Seminole Tribe of Florida bought the company Hard Rock Café. Max Osceola, the Seminole Tribe representative, said “Our ancestors sold Manhattan for trinkets. Today with the acquisition of the Hard Rock cafes we’re going to buy Manhattan back, one hamburger at a time”. Byron, K. (2006, December 7). *Hard Rock Cafe sold to Native Americans*. CNN Money. Retrieved July 10, 2024, from https://money.cnn.com/2006/12/07/news/companies/hardrock_seminole/

Natives living on reservations (Teles Alves Ferro, 2023). However, the act has been fiercely criticized due to its lack of protections compared to those afforded to other U.S. citizens (Northwest Justice Project, 2018). Furthermore, opponents of the US government's responsibilities toward Native Americans began advocating for the abolition of federally recognized treaties with Native nations (Nichols, 2003). This growing sentiment, also referred to as termination, persists today and remains a significant factor in minimizing racism and perpetuating insensitivity towards Native communities. As demonstrated by Lopez, Eason, and Fryberg (2022), there is a correlation between the perception of American Indians (AI)⁶² as “a People of the Past”⁶³ and the acceptance of stereotypical images depicting these communities. This relationship, mediated by the belief that AI people no longer experience racism, is identified as color-blind racism (Ong 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hartmann 2015; Thangaraj 2015; Kendi 2016; King 2016) and will be briefly addressed later in section (“From Historical to Social Erasure: “A People of the past”) through *racism minimization*.

Native appropriation:

Despite legal actions, contemporary Native American communities continue to suffer controversial debates and to face numerous challenges, including economic disparities, inadequate healthcare, but above all the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes through *Native appropriation*⁶⁴ and misrepresentation in media and popular culture⁶⁵ (Gilio-Whitaker & Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). There are lots of debates in the U.S. news regarding cases of Native appropriation (especially in the sport industry where it is a prominent issue). However, as expressed by Riley & Carpenter (2016) and Whitt (1995), in the historical context of AI, Native appropriation is not a new phenomenon. White Americans have appropriated many aspects of Native American cultures throughout history: “human remains, funerary objects, clothing, regalia, art, dance, stories, spiritual practices, words (e.g., “powwow”), dwellings (e.g., tipis), and other material objects (e.g., totem poles).”⁶⁶ The main issue with Native appropriation is that it dehumanizes AI Peoples (e.g., Green, 1993; Hirschfelder, 1999; Todd, 1990), disregards

⁶² The abbreviation “AI” will be used to refer to “American Indians”.

⁶³ One of the main stereotypes often imposed on Native Americans that will be discussed in the following section *From Historical to Social Erasure: “A People of the Past”*.

⁶⁴ This term refers to the use of a White-generated and stereotypical imagery of Native Peoples without their consent (Coombe, 1997, 1998). For concrete examples of it, see Adrienne Keene’s blog: <https://nativeappropriations.com/>

⁶⁵ This aspect of stereotypes’ perpetuation will be discussed later in the following section “the prevalence of stereotypical images through media portrayals”.

⁶⁶ Davis-Delano, L. R., Galliher, R. V., & Gone, J. P. (2022). *Native appropriation in sport: Cultivating bias toward American Indians*. Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature

their feelings (e.g., Brasch, 1999; Desai & Abeita, 2007), and strengthen the White American hegemony over Native Americans (e.g., Riley & Carpenter, 2016; Todd, 1990) by portraying stereotyped images of these communities (Gilio-Whitaker & Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). A concrete example of this practice is The Boston Tea Party where American rebels hide their identities using Natives' cultural artifacts (Gilio-Whitaker & Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). Other experienced forms of Native appropriation will be discussed in the following sections with a focus on those prevalent in the sport industry.

3.1.4. Historical Roots: How past injustices shaped stereotypes of Native Americans?

“History is relevant to the problems we face today because good hindsight can lead to better foresight”.

- Patricia Limerick.

The historical narrative of American Indians in the United States illustrates the persistent efforts of the government to control and determine the fate of Indigenous Peoples. Violent relocations, forced assimilation laws, and ongoing misrepresentations all contributed to harmful perceptions of AI in modern society. Nowadays, the Indian-white relationship is more than ever constrained by an archaic image portraying a single story: “[Indians are] more brutish than the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly than that unmanned wild country ... captivated also to Satan's tyranny in foolish pieties, mad impieties, wicked idleness, busie and bloody wickednesse” (quoted in Berkhofer, 1978, p. 21). This infamous passage is a stark example of the demonization and dehumanization of Native Americans by European colonizers who played a leading role in shaping the mainstream image of Indigenous Peoples today. Acknowledging the true history of Indians in the United States is the first step away from these manufactured images that still dominate our collective consciousness. As expressed by Pewewardy (1999), “such ethnic images distort reality while creating a new and seductive reality of their own”. Thus, as highlighted by many authors before (Limerick, 1987; Bazzi, Fiszbein & Gebresilasse, 2020), we need to deconstruct the *frontier myth*⁶⁷ and embrace the past to address the stereotypes of Native American in modern society.

⁶⁷ First identified by Frederick Jackson Turner, *the frontier* has remained an important aspect of the American national identity and thus is still conveyed in a number of movies and series. *The Little House on the prairie* is a good example of this imagery clean, happy life at the frontier that is only possible thanks to the conquest of new natural “verging” lands.

“We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the state is clean. The past is absent, or it’s romanticized. The culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on the past, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.”⁶⁸ (Toni Morrison, 1993)

In this section, we mainly focused on one stereotypical images of Native Americans depicting as “a People of the Past”. We now turn our attention to examples of present-day AI stereotypes.

3.2. The prevalence of stereotypical images through media portrayals.

The fascination with Native American culture has a long history in the United States. However, despite rich and diverse cultures, Native Americans are always portrayed the same: “as a caricature of one or more of the commonly held stereotypes of [the past]” (Trimble, 1988). Several mass communication theories explain the link between media portrayals and the persistence of stereotypes. With his *cultivation theory*, Gerbner (1998) suggests that repeated exposure to uniform messages on television leads viewers to internalize these messages, resulting in a generalized and often distorted worldview. Moreover, studies by Tan et al. (1997) also reveal that for some individuals with limited direct social contact with ethnic groups, television and other media become primary tools for forming opinions about minority groups, including Native Americans. In section *Individual vs Collective/Cultural Dimension*, we have already briefly mentioned the role of media at the collective level. Here, we will expand on this analysis by exploring concrete media portrayals, that are often romanticized and idealized by non-Indigenous people, and their role in shaping public perceptions and disseminating stereotypical images of Native Americans.

3.2.1. Stereotypical Images of Native Americans

Contemporary AI people are rarely represented in mainstream US culture (Shear et al. 2015) and when they do appear in mass media, news photographers, film directors, cartoonists, and journalists frequently fall back on stereotypical imagery to depict them (Trimble, 1988). In pop culture, especially in Hollywood movies (e.g., *Stagecoach*, 1939; *Dances with Wolves*, 1990; *The Revenant*, 2016; etc.), portrayals of AI typically focus on historical or fantasy elements, rather than the realities of contemporary Indigenous life. Men are often depicted as bloodthirsty

⁶⁸ These few words by Toni Morrison about slavery are important because they highlight that America’s denial about its past is becoming very problematic. Slavery and the genocide of Native American are a big burden that should be acknowledged.

warriors, noble savages, living out of society while women are often sexually objectified (Gilio-Whitaker & Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016). Despite these stereotypes, Native Americans are also commonly perceived as alcoholics, lazy, out of work and on welfare, uneducated, degraded and broken⁶⁹, and more recently as greedy and manipulative⁷⁰ (Berkhofer, 1978; Tan et al., 1997). However, these stereotypes will not be further analyzed as they fall beyond the scope of this thesis. We identify three main stereotypes of AI Peoples in the context of the sport industry (“People of the Past”, “Bloodthirsty Warrior”, “Noble Savage”) and will analyze their presence in two professional teams: the Kansas City Chiefs and the Washington Commanders⁷¹ (see section *Analysis of stereotypes*).

3.2.1.1. From Historical to Social Erasure: “A People of the Past”

As mentioned before, the portrayal of Native Americans in the United States has deep historical roots. Relevant to our research, we explore *the settler colonial ideology* defined by Veracini as “a comprehensive denial of the presence and sovereignty of indigenous groups”, and “everything indigenous can be reduced to reminiscence” (Veracini 2010, 86). In other words, this ubiquitous ideology suggests that AI nations belong to the past and thus are not part of contemporary society (*social erasure*). In news coverage (Baylor 1996; Miller and Ross 2004), internet images (Leavitt et al., 2015), movies (Raheja, 2010), mascots (Dai et al., 2021), videogames (Williams et al., 2009), print advertisements (Molholt, 2012) and on television (Fitzgerald, 2014), AI individuals are often represented as “a People of the Past”. This stereotype, which frames Native Americans as historical relics, contributes to a widespread misconception that they exist only in historical contexts. This belief that their culture and symbols are part of a bygone era (rather than aspects of living nations), also makes it difficult for many people to understand the offensiveness behind the use of their traditional imagery (*racism minimization*). These two effects of contemporary AI Peoples’ omission are illustrated by Lopez et al. (2022) who demonstrated that social erasure has consequences for racism minimization: “greater social erasure will predict the acceptability of racialized representations” (e.g., Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos). *Social Erasure*⁷² refers

⁶⁹ This stereotype is not very present in the sport industry due to the prominence of the warrior stereotype.

⁷⁰ Davis-Delano, Galliher, and colleagues (2020) found that endorsement of this stereotype (“Casino Indians”) is associated with less support for AI Nation sovereignty.

⁷¹ Formerly the Washington R-skins.

⁷² In the context of Native Americans, factors like population size and geographic residence might contribute to this erasure and their isolation from mainstream America. As mentioned, this mechanism enables a social identity group (e.g., White Americans) to create psychological distance from other individuals (e.g., Native Americans) to protect themselves from uncomfortable truths about their own identity and history (Dai et al., 2021). No one likes to think about themselves as a decedent or beneficiary of past genocide.

to the systematic omission or marginalization of a group from contemporary social contexts. While *racism minimization*⁷³ involves downplaying or denying the extent to which a marginalized group (e.g., Native Americans) experiences racism.

These concepts are interrelated and reinforce each other: “when society omits a group from contemporary social context and understates the extent to which the group experiences prejudice and discrimination, it is not a big leap to understand the lack of apathy or concern toward other social issues these groups experience” (Lopez et. al, 2022). Given this correlation, it is not surprising that many proponents of Native symbols in sport do not understand opponents’ arguments stating that these symbols can have detrimental effects on Native communities (Pewewardy, 2004).

3.2.1.2. From “Savages” to “Noble Savages” to “Bloodthirsty Savages”: a dehumanizing imagery.

Although mass culture’s contributors are reluctant to depict openly negative stereotypes of Native Americans, they don’t hesitate to depict them using *ostensibly positive stereotypes*⁷⁴. Among these, the more recurrent are “The Bloodthirsty Warrior” and “The Noble Savage” (Bird,1996; Davis-Delano et al., 2022b; Mihesuah,1996). Considering these two stereotypes when interpreting the findings of several scholars, their research reveals that they can be perceived as harmful too (Burkley, Durante, Fiske, and Andrade, 2016; Fryberg et al., 2008). Both generate and perpetuate stereotypical images used by colonial settlers to legitimate their cruel behaviors towards these communities: “as bloodthirsty savages, Indigenous Peoples are dangerous and thus the use of military force is necessary to seize their land”; “as noble savages, Indigenous Peoples are primitive and thus need to be civilized through cultural assimilation” (e.g. Berkhofer, 1978; Johnston and Lawson 2000; Fryberg et al., 2008; Veracini 2010). Furthermore, (Davis-Delano et al., 2022b) also highlight that “perceiving and portraying AI Peoples as superb warriors renders military victory over them more impressive, suggesting that White settler soldiers are superior to AI warriors.” Again, there is an implicit desire of strengthening the White Americans’ hegemony over Native Americans.

⁷³ Research shows that this process can lead to the acceptance and perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against these groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Plaut et al., 2018) as well as a significantly difference of treatments across racial groups (*color-blind racism*). Lopez et. Al (2022) demonstrated that there was a differential acceptability between racial representations of Black vs Native Peoples based on the general public perceptions of these groups.

⁷⁴ Defined as “subjectively favorable beliefs about members of social groups that directly or indirectly connote or confer domain-specific advantage, favourability, or superiority based on category membership” (Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015, p. 451).

Both images, “The Bloodthirsty Warrior” and “The Noble Savage” deny Native Americans the status of human being (American Indian Historical Society, 1972). They play on our collective perception and characterization of the outgroup, so-called “the other” (Green, 1993) to portray the stereotype of American Indians. Initially, “instead of recognizing that indigenous peoples have a different culture, the assumption was made that they had no culture and thus were living no better than animals” (Benedict, 1959). All aspects of their culture and existence were considered to be animal-like and characterized as such in Western consciousness (Hanson & Rouse 1987). They were seen as uncivilized savages and were not “expected [...] to be [...] more than half-human” (Cooper, 1963).⁷⁵

However, this conceptual framework in terms of which “the other” (the Native American) is conceptualized as the cultureless savage can take different attributes depending on the collective representation of one’s culture. Driven by fear, hatred and a feeling of inferiority, “the other” can become not just “a savage” but “The Bloodthirsty Savage” – “a predatory animal that kills aimlessly and wantonly, that probably practices cannibalism, and that rapes, pillages, and plunders for no other reason than the pure joy of destruction” (Green, 1993). This image of the Native American as the ultimate killing machine is the predominant model in the sport industry⁷⁶ but not the only one. An idealized image of “the other” is also used in the sport world as an emblem of nature, identity, and bravery, “The Noble Savage”. According to Green (1993), the concept of “The Noble Savage” doesn’t really differ from the two above except that it has better “value”. As a romanticized image of “The Savage”, the “Noble” one emphasizes Native Americans’ innocence and their simple ways of living closed to nature while also denying their status as human-being.

All of these conceptions illustrate a belief that was part of many, if not all, and that is still expressed by some in the sport industry – the conceptualization of Native Americans as uncultured savages, animal-like beings living outside the bounds of civilization. As results of

⁷⁵ In *The Deerslayer*, Hurry (a frontiersman) states: “Here's three colors on 'arth - white, black, and red. White is the highest color, and therefore the best man; black comes next, and is put to live in the neighborhood of the white man, as tolerable and fit to be made use of, and red comes last, which shows that those that made 'em never expected an Indian to be accounted as more than half human” (Cooper, 1963, p. 26)

⁷⁶ “Native Americans mascots are rooted in the bloodthirsty savage stereotype, as it is this stereotype that is linked to desirable athletic qualities such as having a fighting spirit and being aggressive, brave, stoic, proud, and persevering” (King, Staurowsky, Baca, Davis, & Pewewardy, 2002, p. 393).

cultural encounters rather than factual ones, these stereotypical images of American Indians “reveal more about the culture doing the portraying than the individuals supposedly being portrayed” (Green, 1993). However, given their amorality but still significant prevalence throughout all levels of sport (Allchin 2020; Levaldo, 2024; Masciotra, 2024). A better understanding of their use in the sports industry seems necessary.

3.3. The use of stereotypical images: a focus on the sport industry

“[The sport industry] is often seen as a social institution that enhances social mobility and inclusion through the promotion of (relatively) equal opportunities, tolerance, cooperation, respect for others, and good sportsmanship” (Knoester and Rockhill, 2021). Yet, beneath this positive view lies a complex reality exemplified by the ongoing controversy over the practice of American sports teams using Native Americans symbols. For over 50 years, this controversial debate has divided the public opinion with strong views both in favor of retaining and eliminating this practice. On one side, proponents (e.g., sports teams and supporters) who use those symbols and assert that they are honoring or valorizing Native Americans (Spindel, 2000; Steinfeldt et al., 2010; Todd, 1990). On the other side, opponents (e.g., Native tribes, organizations and psychological research) alerting on the detrimental effects of those stereotypical portrayals on Native communities (Christensen, 2024; Cortez, 2024; Fryberg, et al., 2008; King et al., 2002; Not in Our Honor). Furthermore, with the popular culture⁷⁷ minimizing the debate, calls for a critical examination of the sport industry’s role in either challenging or reinforcing those stereotypical images has never been more urgent. From this perspective, the purpose of this section is to set the stage of this discussion by exploring the reasons and consequences of using Native American imagery in sports. This section will pave the way for a further analysis of its use in relation to two professional teams in the subsequent section: “Analysis of their use of stereotypes”.

3.3.1. Native-Themed Mascots, Nicknames, Logos and Gestures: Symbols of Honor, Tribute and Tradition?

The portrayal of Native Americans’ culture in sports today takes many forms. Teams use Indian mascots, logos, generic or tribal names, rituals, and traditions that they display and mock during sporting events. Many who support the use of such Native American imagery by sports teams

⁷⁷ “One of the reasons why most Americans find Indian mascots unremarkable and do not turn a critical eye to mascots is because of the prevalence of similar images throughout U.S. popular culture” (King et al., 2002, p. 391)

argue that these symbols honor and pay tribute to American Indians (Price, 2002; Sigelman, 1998). They are part of a cherished tradition, a long history, meant to assemble and unite rather than to disparage and offend: “The Arrowhead Chop is part of the game-day experience that is really important to our fans,” (Mark Donovan, the team president of the Chiefs)⁷⁸. The intention has always been to celebrate the best qualities of the Indian culture (Jacobson, 2003; Pickle, 2002). Moreover, as proponents also highlight, some American Indians themselves do not feel offended by such use (Davis, 1993). Thus, given this assumption and their emblematic use “why would you bother changing them?”. Yet, many have condemned such images and pointed out their deleterious, stereotypical impact (Bird, 1996; Mihesuah, 1996).

According to King and Springwood (2000), sports perpetuate stereotypes about Native Americans by allowing fans to “play Indian” and adopt the misunderstood “fighting spirit” during sports events: “things like the tomahawk chop don’t empower Indian people. It’s still very stereotypical and mocking of an entire race of people” (Crouser, member of the Standing Rock Sioux)⁷⁹. Moreover, as Fred Blue Fox (of the Sicangu Lakota Tribe) claims:

“Indian mascots, by today’s standards, would be offensive to any other race if portrayed in a similar manner. Indian peoples are no different in regarding the depiction of eagle feathers, face paints and war objects such as tomahawks. These are all sacred to the people and therefore have no place in any sort of public display, let alone [as] mascots. (“American Indian Opinion Leaders,” 2001).

There has been a difference of treatments depending on the portrayed ethnic minority group in sports (Farnell, 2004). However, all these common representations of Native people – performances and imagery – are white people’s interpretation of Native Americans’ culture who don’t listen to Native voices. They even obscure the voices of true American Indians with fake ones (Springwood, 2004) and don’t consider these marginalized communities’ need for accurate self-representation (Smith, 1992). This inability of American Indians to accurately represent their culture might even be considered as a violation of the civil rights of American Indian people (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2001) and thus, “where is the honor?”.

⁷⁸ Engle, J. (2020, January 31). *Is it offensive for sports teams and their fans to use Native American names, imagery, and gestures?* The New York Times. Retrieved July 7, 2024 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/31/learning/is-it-offensive-for-sports-teams-and-their-fans-to-use-native-american-names-imagery-and-gestures.html> (Updated October 29, 2021).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

3.3.2. Background on two NFL Sports Teams with storied legacies and complex cultural implications: “The Kansas City Chiefs” and “The Washington Commanders”

The Kansas City Chiefs and The Washington Commanders are two prominent American football teams competing in the National Football League (NFL⁸⁰). As part of two different conferences (AFC for the Chiefs and NFC for the Commanders), the two teams “rarely see each other outside of the preseason, Pro Bowl and Super Bowl⁸¹. However, there is no major difference between the leagues except for the trophy they can win. In other words, both teams adhere to the same rules and standards of the NFL. They both compete on equal footing.⁸²

The Kansas City Chiefs originally played as the Dallas Texans and as member of the American Football League (AFL) from 1960 to 1962. In 1963, despite the team’s success, its owner Lamar Hunt⁸³ (an influential figure in the formation of the AFL) moved the team to Kansas City where it was renamed “the Chiefs”. The Kansas City Chiefs quickly became one of the most successful teams of the AFL. They won three AFL championships in the 1960s and their first Super Bowl in 1970, when they defeated the Minnesota Vikings (23-7). The Chiefs, however, didn’t stop there and won three other Super Bowls in 2020, 2023 and 2024,⁸⁴ becoming “the first team to win back-to-back Super Bowls in 19 years”.⁸⁵

As mentioned before, The Washington Commanders is also an NFL franchise but one that was founded a long time before the Chiefs, in 1932, as the “Boston Braves”. Since its creation, the team has won two NFL championships (1937 and 1942) and three Super Bowls (1983, 1988, and 1992). However, before branding itself as the “Commanders”, the team underwent several name and image changes. The team first changed its name to “The R-skins” in 1933 when it

⁸⁰ The NFL is the most popular sports league in the United States and “a byproduct” of the two former rival leagues (AFL-NFL) that merged in 1970. Art Modell, the owner of one of the NFL's premier franchises, stated: “[a merger] for the good of pro football”. (Rappoport, 2010, p. 166)

⁸¹ The Super Bowl is the final game of the NFL season during which the two last remaining teams (out of 32) will compete for the champion title. Every aspect of the game is monetized, scrutinized and celebrated. (Picheta, 2020). According to the NFL website, the last Super Bowls had an average of 100 million viewers (a third of the country) in the United States. (Bergman, 2023)

⁸² Weinrib, B. (2020). *What is the Difference Between the AFC and NFC?* Athlon Sports: NFL. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://athlonsports.com/nfl/what-difference-between-afc-and-nfc>

⁸³ Although Lamar Hunt died in 2006, the team is still currently owned by the Hunt family NFL: Football Operations. *Team Histories: The Kansas City Chiefs*. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://operations.nfl.com/learn-the-game/nfl-basics/team-histories/american-football-conference/west/kansas-city-chiefs/>

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Morse, B., & Almasy, S. (2024). *Kansas City Chiefs defeat San Francisco 49ers in OT in Super Bowl LVIII, become first back-to-back NFL champions in 19 years*. CNN. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/11/sport/chiefs-49ers-super-bowl-spt-intl/index.html>

moved to Washington D.C.⁸⁶ It remained the Washington R-skins until 2020 when, under pressure from corporate sponsors, politicians, Native communities and public opinion, the name was changed to the Washington Commanders. Alongside with its change of name, the Commanders also redesigned its R-skins logo (a Native American head in profile with braids and trailing feathers⁸⁷) for a new one modeled after military rank insignia and emphasizing the team's roots in the Washington region.⁸⁸

"In light of recent events around our country and feedback from our community, the Washington R-skins are announcing the team will undergo a thorough review of the team's name". At the time, team owner Dan Snyder also added in a statement: "This process allows the team to take into account not only the proud tradition and history of the franchise but also input from our alumni, the organization, sponsors, the National Football League and the local community it is proud to represent on and off the field."⁸⁹

In contrast, , the Chiefs, also involved in the same controversy, has not changed its name. However, in August 2020, it banned fans from engaging in behaviors related to Native rituals, symbols, and traditions⁹⁰. Ahead of their recent Super Bowl victory and due to the relationship between their star player Travis Kelce and singer Taylor Swift, the Chiefs are facing increased pressure to rebrand. Many activists and public figures, including Lily Gladstone (the first Indigenous person to win a Golden Globe Award), continue to denounce Native misrepresentations and criticize the Chiefs' appropriation of Native culture. On an episode of the *Variety Awards Circuit Podcast*, Gladstone (2024, 55:06), who came to discuss her nomination and future projects, was asked to elaborate on her previous statement on the Super Bowl⁹¹. Thus, she clarified it and said: "[...] the Chiefs. There are many ways that you could interpret the name 'chief.' It's not just the name that bothers me. It's hearing that damn tomahawk chop. Every time, it's a stark reminder of what Hollywood has done to us, because

⁸⁶ NFL: Football Operations. *Team Histories: the Washington Commanders*. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://operations.nfl.com/learn-the-game/nfl-basics/team-histories/national-football-conference/east/washington-commanders/>

⁸⁷ see Table 2 in *Chapter 4: Analysis* (following section).

⁸⁸ The Washington Post. (2022). *The Washington Commanders' logo, team crest and uniforms, explained*. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/02/02/washington-commanders-logo-uniforms/>

⁸⁹ NFL News. (2020). *Washington Redskins to undergo thorough review of team's name*. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://www.nfl.com/news/washington-redskins-to-undergo-thorough-review-of-team-s-name>

⁹⁰ Clarke, L. (2021). *'End racism,' the NFL implored. So what about the Chiefs' name?* The Washington Post. Retrieved July 19, 2024, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2021/02/05/chiefs-name-tomahawk-chop-super-bowl-social-justice/>

⁹¹ At the Santa Barbara International Film Festival's Virtuosos Awards, Gladstone stated: "I mean, Super Bowl's tomorrow. We haven't come that far, if we look at one of the teams that's playing".

the tomahawk chop directly ties to the sounds of old Westerns where we were not playing ourselves, or if we were, we were merely backdrop actors."⁹²

Given the ongoing debates surrounding the Chiefs' use of Native American imagery, the question remains: "Will the Kansas City Chiefs succumb to public pressure and review their name?" The following section analyzes not only the Chiefs' use of stereotypical images but also the Commanders' past use of such images. This analysis will seek to contrast and compare the teams' implications in the portrayals of misleading representations of Native Americans in order to better understand the complex interplay between sports, culture, and identity.

⁹² Morano, R. (Host). (2024, February 15). Lily Gladston ("Killers of the Flower Moon") and Tony McNamara ("Poor Things"). *Variety Awards Circuit*. Spotify.
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3AV3tCqT1ovsz9VmXMCsOD?si=rEpXW0WtTvm0cEnMwIAIDg> or
<https://variety.com/2024/film/awards/lily-gladstone-chiefs-tomahawk-chop-native-americans-1235909668/>

4. Analysis of the use of stereotypes by the Washington Commanders vs the Kansas City Chiefs

In order to provide a comprehensive view of each team's use of stereotypical images, we will first apply a comparative table specifically designed for this thesis to analyse the use of stereotypes by the Chiefs and the Commanders (especially those portrayed under their former name: "the Washington R-skins"). The table was designed to contrast and compare the teams' representations of AI culture and highlight the presence of any recurrent pattern between the teams' use of stereotypes across variables. Previously defined in the literature review, the six variables included (a) medium⁹³; (b) three main stereotypes situated in the context of the sport industry (e.g., "People of the Past", "Bloodthirsty Warrior", "Noble Savage"); (c) activation⁹⁴; (d) dimension⁹⁵; (e) nature⁹⁶; and (f) duration⁹⁷. To improve clarity and ease the further comparison with the survey results (see the discussion section), the table and its findings are organized in the same sequence as presented in the online survey. While doing the comparative analysis (table data and survey results), we also considered the historical and cultural contexts of the teams' branding (naming, logos, mascots, and behaviors), as well as the societal and political pressures they encountered to rebrand.

⁹³ There is a difference between the means/ways, the tools used and the contexts where a meaning/an imagery is displayed. Here, we use the term medium as a combination of the three and thus will explore each team's construction of stereotypes (e.g., visual representations ("means") of Native Americans are displayed through name/logo/mascots ("tools") in sport events ("context"). Visual Imagery of AI -> Logo -> Sport events. Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2009) Social Construction of Reality. In: Littlejohn, S.W. & Foss, K. A. (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, p. 892-894.

⁹⁴ Whether or not the stereotype is based on accurate representations or on unfounded/misleading ones. Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

⁹⁵ It indicates whether the stereotype targets individuals or the group as a whole (collective/cultural). Schneider, D. J. (2004). *The psychology of stereotyping*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press

⁹⁶ Are the stereotypes triggered and perpetuated unconsciously/automatically (without awareness) or consciously (with intent or while knowing their deleterious impact). Devine, P. G., & Sharp, L. K. (2009). Automaticity and control in stereotyping and prejudice. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(4), 537-553.

⁹⁷ Considering all their detrimental effects, are the stereotypes still perpetuated (ongoing) or have they been changed?

Table 1 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 1: the Kansas City Chiefs

Team: 1	Medium: Means->Tools->Context	Stereotypes (3): (1) People of the Past (2) Bloodthirsty Warrior (3) Noble Savage		Activation: <i>Accurate</i> vs <i>Unfounded</i>	Dimension: <i>Individual</i> vs <i>Collective</i>	Nature: <i>Unconscious</i> vs <i>Conscious</i>	Duration (when): <i>Ongoing</i> Vs <i>Changed</i>
The Kansas City Chiefs	Name: <i>“The Chiefs”</i>	“A People of the Past”	“The Noble Savage”	Unfounded	Collective	Unconscious ->Conscious	Ongoing (from 1963 till now)
	 <i>Logo - Arrowhead</i>		“The Bloodthirsty Warrior”	Unfounded	Collective	Unconscious	Ongoing (from 1963 till now)
	 <i>Mascot – KC Wolf</i>	Not applicable		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 2 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 2: the Washington R-skins

Table 2 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 2: the Washington R-skins							
Team:	Medium:	Stereotypes (3):		Activation:	Dimension:	Nature:	Duration (when):
2	Means->Tools->Context	(1) People of the Past (2) Bloodthirsty Warrior (3) Noble Savage		<i>Accurate</i> vs <i>Unfounded</i>	<i>Individual</i> vs <i>Collective</i>	<i>Unconscious</i> vs <i>Conscious</i>	<i>Ongoing</i> <i>Vs</i> <i>Changed</i>
The Washington R-skins	Name: “The R-skins”	“A People of the Past”	“The Noble Savage”	Unfounded	Collective	Unconscious ->Conscious	Changed (used from 1933 to 2020)
			“The Bloodthirsty Warrior”				
	 <i>Logo – « an American Indian »</i>		“The Noble Savage”	Unfounded	Collective	Unconscious ->Conscious	Changed (used from 1983 to 2020)
			“The Bloodthirsty Warrior”				
	 <i>Unofficial Mascot- Chief Zee</i>		“The Noble Savage”	Unfounded	Collective	Unconscious ->Conscious	N/A (As a person, Chief Zee cannot be changed like an object. However, He died in 2016).
			“The Bloodthirsty Warrior”				

Table 3 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 2 bis: the Washington Commanders

Team: 2bis	Medium: Means->Tools->Context	Stereotypes (3): (1) People of the Past (2) Bloodthirsty Warrior (3) Noble Savage	Activation: <i>Accurate</i> vs <i>Unfounded</i>	Dimension: <i>Individual</i> vs <i>Collective</i>	Nature: <i>Unconscious</i> vs <i>Conscious</i>	Duration (when): <i>Ongoing</i> Vs <i>Changed</i>
The Washington Commanders	Name: <i>“The Commanders”</i>	Not applicable (N/A)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	 <i>Logo – Washington roots</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	 <i>Mascot – Major Tuddy</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 1 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 1: the Kansas City Chiefs

Table 1 contains descriptive data for the use of stereotypes by the Chiefs based on our six variables. The Chiefs' former mascot, Warpaint, a reddish-brown and white mare ridden by a cheerleader (see Appendix 2), has been replaced by KC Wolf, a charismatic gray wolf.⁹⁸ In light of this change, for The Chiefs' three mediums, only two portray stereotypical representations of Native Americans, its name and logo.⁹⁹ Both promote past and inaccurate stereotypes of Native Americans. (a) The name "Chiefs", (c) based on unfounded representations, (d) collectively and (e) allegedly-unconsciously has prejudiced Native Americans as (b) "People of the Past" and "Noble Savages" (f) since 1963 till now. Similarly, (a) the arrowhead logo, (c) also based on unfounded representations, (d) collectively and (e) unconsciously has prejudiced Native Americans as (b) "People of The Past" and "Bloodthirsty Warriors" (f) since 1963 till now.

Table 2 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 2: the Washington R-skins

Table 2 shows the Commanders' former use of stereotypes branded as the R-skins. Prior to its rebranding, the R-skins' three mediums promoted past and inaccurate stereotypes of Native Americans. (a) The name "R-skins", the "Native American" logo¹⁰⁰, and the unofficial mascot (Chief Zee)¹⁰¹, (c) based on unfounded representations, (d) collectively and (e) allegedly-unconsciously prejudiced Native Americans as (b) "People of the Past", "Bloodthirsty Warriors", and "Savages" (f) from the 1920s until 2020.

Table 3 – The Use of Stereotypes by Team 2bis: the Washington Commanders

Finally, Table 3 presents data about the Commanders' current use of stereotypes. It shows that, with their new branding (officially operational since 2022), the three mediums of the Commanders (name, logo and mascot) don't portray any of the identified stereotypes. Thus, the analysis of their use associated with the six defined variables is not applicable (N/A). However,

⁹⁸ MCDowell, S. (2021). *Kansas City Chiefs aren't changing name. But they're putting Warpaint out to pasture*. The Kansas City Star. Retrieved July 23, 2024, from <https://www.kansascity.com/sports/nfl/kansas-city-chiefs/article253034403.html>

⁹⁹ Here, we only focus on visual and textual representations of Native Americans especially pictures. Thus, we won't analyze other controversial actions portrayed by the Chiefs or their fans including the tomahawk chop (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4P6z_DTHf8)

¹⁰⁰ Here quotation marks are used to indicate that some believed that the logo represented "Native Americans" (Ortiz-Lytle, 2020)

¹⁰¹ Although Chief Zee was not the official mascot of the R-skins, he was considered to be "THE R-skins fan" (Steinberg, 2016) and thus, following Merskin's definition of a mascot ("a lucky charm of sorts: an item, an object, or a thing that has special powers and comes to represent the essence of a group, or a totemic quality with which a group wishes to associate their brand"), could be seen as the R-skins' mascot. (Merskin, 2020)

we recognize that this analysis does not shed light onto whether, this change really impacted people's perceptions and if so, how. For such insight, we turn to our survey data (see below).

Regarding the data collected from Table 1 and Table 2, it suggests the presence of a recurring pattern in the Chiefs and the R-skins' use of stereotypes. Both teams rely on (a) names and logos that depict stereotypical, (b) past, and (c) unfounded imagery of Native Americans. This pattern reveals (d) a collective and (e) allegedly unconscious perpetuation of this stereotype ("People of the Past"). However, the data from these two tables also highlight differences in the stereotypes perpetuated by the teams. While the Chiefs includes the "Bloodthirsty Warrior" stereotype, it is less pronounced as it appears in only one medium (the logo). Additionally, the Chiefs portrays the "Noble Savage" stereotype, whereas the R-skins omits the "Noble" aspect by representing Native Americans solely as "Savages." After analyzing these two tables, there is clear evidence that while the Chiefs and the R-skins both portray the stereotype of "People of the Past," they differ in their depiction and emphasis of the other two ("the Bloodthirsty Warrior" and "the Noble Savage"). As the R-skins rebranded and the Chiefs did not, it would be interesting to compare their different use of stereotypes and contrast it with their perceptions to see if there's any correlation. The survey discussed below will shed light on the public perception of these two teams.

5. The Survey: Perceptions and Decisions on Team Names and Imagery

The previous sections suggested that there are differences in the teams' use of stereotypes which might have resulted in branding changes. The online survey sought to extend these results by examining people's perceptions of those stereotypical images. The purpose is to examine if there is a qualifiable difference in sports teams' branding work depending on how they are collectively perceived and the stereotypes they portray. While exploring public different perceptions of the teams, we also evaluate the perceptive impact of the Washington R-skins") rebranding to the Washington Commanders") to better understand the role of stereotypes and the impact of public attitudes on branding decisions.

5.1. Method

Around 50 Individuals were contacted through social media (Facebook Group, Instagram, email) and 20 people responded. The general population sample was limited to those who spoke English and were American citizens. The questionnaire was composed of five parts: (1) participant demographics; (2) opinion about the teams' content; (3) perceptions of the R-skins content; (4) impact of rebranding, and (5) cultural and ethical considerations (see Appendix 1).

The respondents were not briefed on the issue before they began answering, and the questionnaire was titled "online survey on the perception of images" to ensure unbiased responses. Respondents were evenly split between male (45%) and female (55%); overwhelmingly White Americans (85%), with a university degree and of all ages (from 18 to 65). Most of the respondents (15 out of 20) were aware that "the Washington Commanders" were formerly "the Washington R-skins" with only 6 of them watched sports on a daily basis.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Teams' visual content exposure, evaluation and perceptions.

In this section (see section 2 and 3 of the questionnaire, Appendix 1), respondents were asked about their opinion of the teams' name, logo and mascot, which were presented in a fixed order¹⁰². Respondents evaluated one image at a time and were asked to give their opinion about it. They characterized their reaction, rated the offensiveness, the connection of the viewed content to Native Americans, and identified any perceived stereotypes. Their responses were analyzed and are discussed below.

¹⁰² The content was uploaded from both teams' official website <https://washington.1rmg.com/>, <https://www.chiefs.com/> and from news' articles for the R-skins: USA TODAY Sports (Brad Mills) online: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/redskins/2016/07/19/chief-zee-zema-williams-washington/87312748/> and The New York Times (Daniel Engber, 2013) online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/magazine/who-made-that-redskins-logo.html>

5.2.1.1. Initial reactions: global perception, association with AI, and perceived offensiveness.

The following Treemaps, generated from a five-item measure (from 1 ¹/₅ “very positive” to 5 ¹/₅ “very negative”), illustrate the respondent’s first impression of each team’s content. For clarity, the following color palette will always be linked to similar values: *green* represents positive, *blue* indicates neutral, and *purple* signifies negative. Darker shades of each color will highlight the intensity of the feature (e.g., *dark green* = very positive, *dark purple* = very negative).

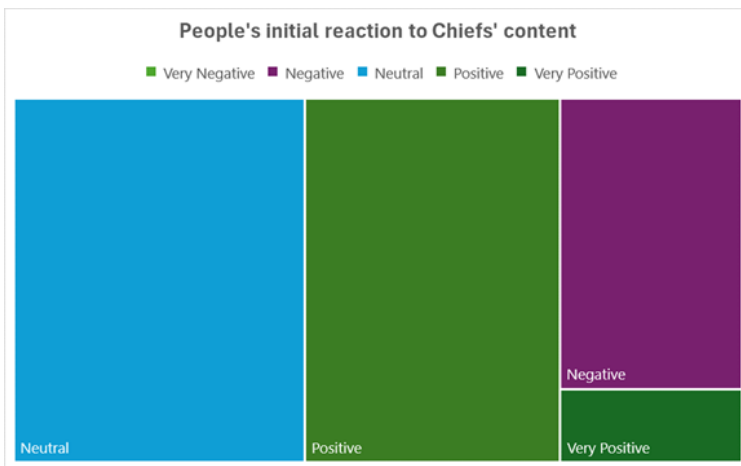


Figure 1 – Treemap of people’s initial reaction to the Chiefs’ content.

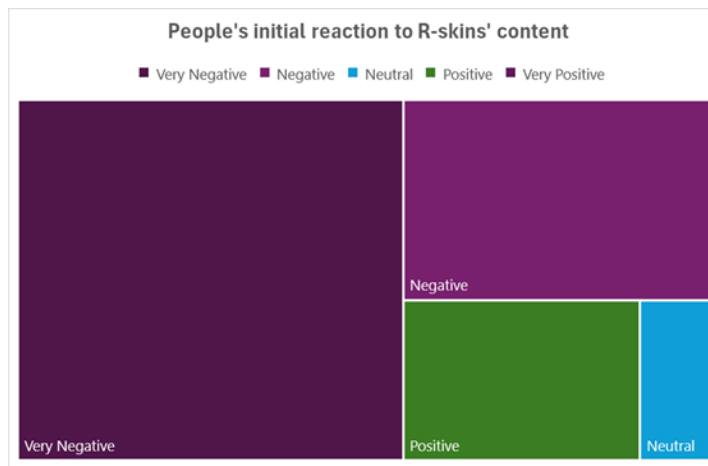


Figure 2 – Treemap of people’s initial reaction to the R-skins’ content.

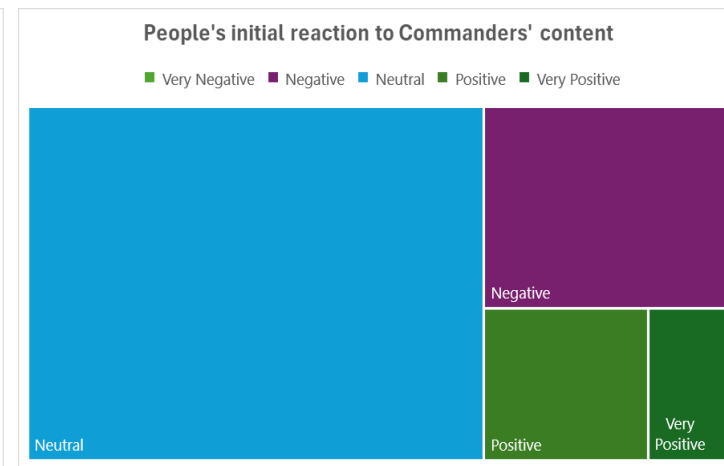


Figure 3 – Treemap of people’s initial reaction to the Commanders’ content.

Thus, the more purple, a Treemap is, the more a team’s content was perceived negatively by the respondents. Based on this trend, the R-skins were overwhelmingly perceived more negatively than the other teams. Out of 20 respondents (*R*), 16 (>80%) considered the R-skins’ content *negative* vs 4 (>20%) for the Commanders and the Chiefs. In contrast, the Commanders and the Chiefs were perceived in a more balanced, neutral manner (the Commanders: *R* (13> 65%); the Chiefs: *R* (8> 40%) vs the R-skins: *R* (1> 10%).

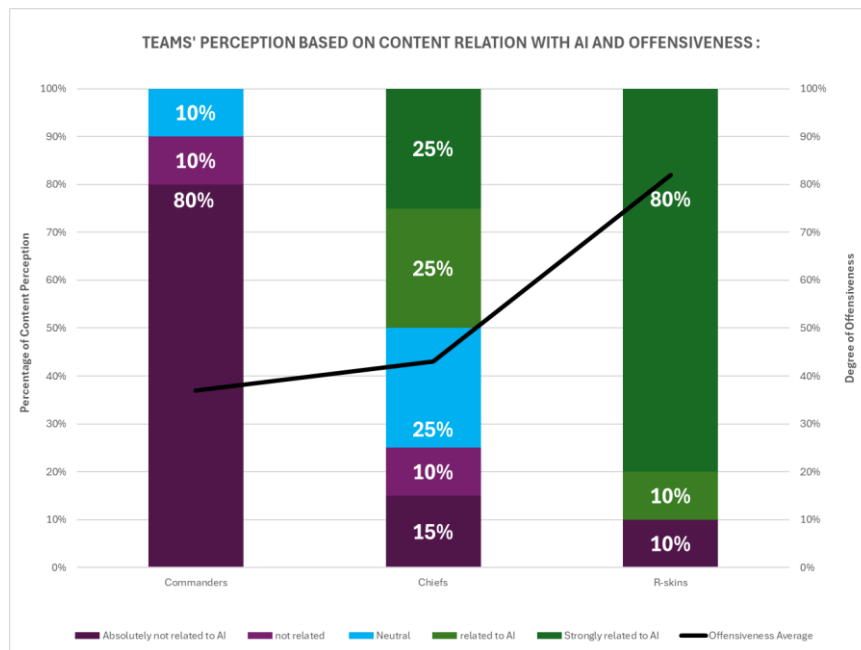


Figure 4 – A combined graph presenting the perception of each Team's content relatedness to AI and their associated degree of offensiveness. Each team's bar is divided into segments representing different degrees of perceived relation to AI, generated from a five-item measure of content relatedness to AI (from 1 1/5 "Absolutely not related" to 5 1/5 "Strongly related"). The Greener, a bar chart is, the more perceived as related to American Indians the content of a team is. Finally, the dark line, also calculated from a five-item measure (from 1 1/5 "Not Offensive" to 5 1/5 "Strongly Offensive"), represents the average offensiveness rating for each team.

In the survey, the R-skins' content was considered to be more related to Native Americans and more offensive than the content from the other two teams (see the third bar chart in Figure 4 for content perception and the dark line for the offensiveness). More specifically, 90% of respondents associated the R-skins' content with the Native American population, and 82% considered it to be offensive. In contrast, only half of the respondents related the Chiefs' content to the AI population, with 43% finding it offensive. The Commanders' content was also perceived as offensive (37%), however, respondents did not associate it with Native Americans. The perception of the R-skins as generally more offensive is further confirmed by the data in Section 3 (see Table 4), where 80% to 85% of respondents confirmed that the R-skins were perceived as more offensive than both the Commanders and the Chiefs.

TABLE 4: Comparative Offensiveness		
Offensiveness Level compared to the R-skins	The Commanders	The Chiefs
Less Offensive	80%	85%
Equally Offensive	0%	0%
Equally not Offensive	15%	15%
More Offensive	5%	0%

5.2.1.2. Stereotypes perception and recognition

With the data from the identification of the perceived stereotypes by the respondents, we generated three different Treemaps (see Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7) to better illustrate the stereotypes' distribution per team. This distribution was calculated based on an average of a stereotype selection. When a respondent selected both "Not sure" and "No Stereotype", we only considered the "No Stereotype" answer. However, when respondents were not sure of their identification of stereotypes (e.g., "Not sure" and "Noble Indian"), we included both answers. To simplify the interpretation, the values have been labeled as *R* (number of selections per team), *nS* (No Stereotype), *ns* (Not Sure), *NI* (Noble Indian), *BW* (Bloodthirsty Warrior), *PP* (People of the Past).

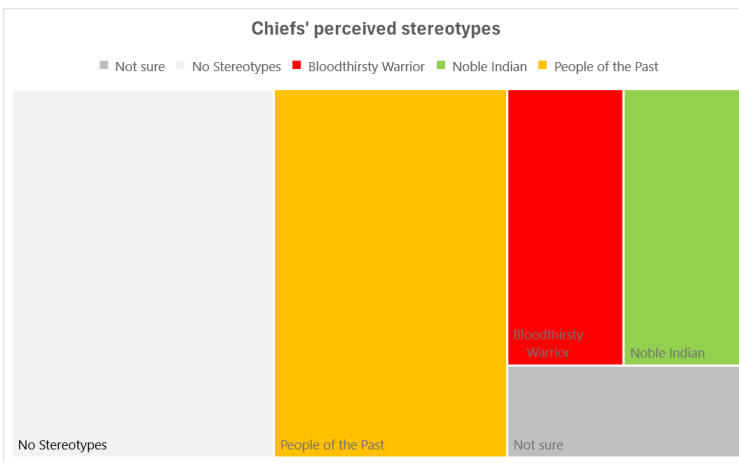


Figure 5 - Treemap of the perceived stereotypes within the Chiefs' content.

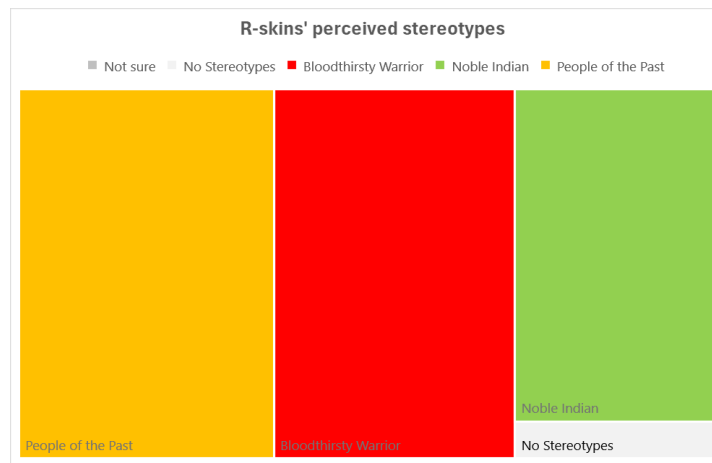


Figure 6 - Treemap of the perceived stereotypes within the R-skins' content.

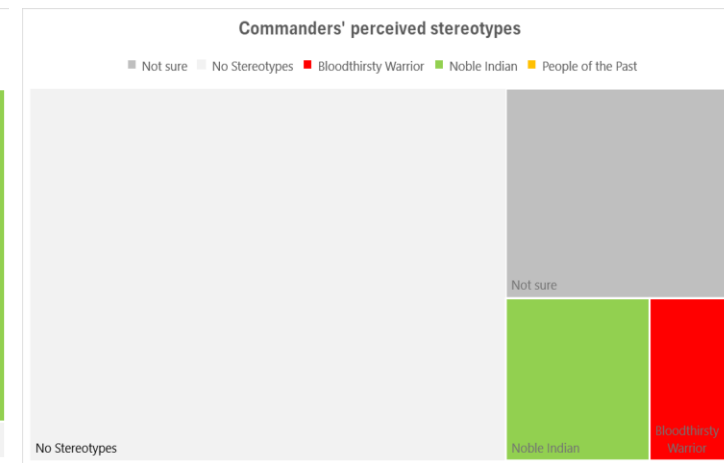


Figure 7 - Treemap of the perceived stereotypes within the Commanders' content.

The more colorful a Treemap is, the more the team was perceived as stereotypical of Native Americans. The respondents considered the R-skins as more stereotypical than the two other teams (refer to the Figures above).

Although the Commanders and the Chiefs were not seen as stereotypical as the R-skins, stereotypes were still identified for both of them.¹⁰³ The stereotype “People of the Past” wasn’t identified by any respondents within the Commanders content.

¹⁰³ (the Chiefs: *R* (25), *nS* (9> 36%), *ns* (2> 8%), *NI* (3> 12%), *BW* (3> 12%), *PP* (7> 32%); the R-skins: *R* (33), *nS* (1> 3%), *ns* (0> 0%), *NI* (9> 27%), *BW* (11> 34%), *PP* (12> 36%); the Commanders: *R* (22), *nS* (15> 68%), *ns* (4> 18%), *NI* (2> 9%), *BW* (1> 5%), *PP* (0> 0%).

5.2.2. Rebranding-Impact-And-Reasons-Assessment

Section 4 aimed to extend the results of Section 2 and 3. Based on the same content, respondents were assigned to answer a set of questions assessing the impact of rebranding and the factors that might have influenced a team's decision to change or maintain their imagery. On whether the rebranding of the R-skins had impacted their perception, respondents generally agreed that this change did influence their view of the team's imagery positively (see Figure 8).

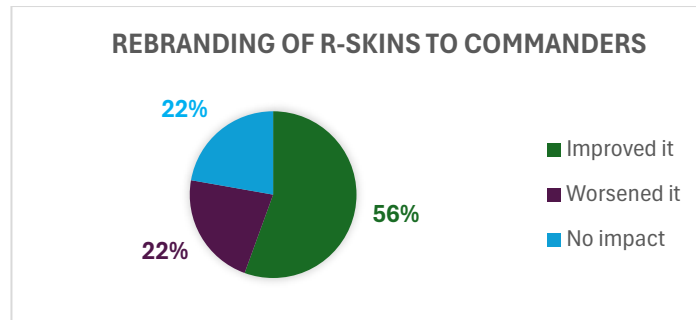


Figure 8 - Pie generated based on respondents' responses on the rebranding of the R-skins to the Commanders. Respondents had to select one single answer between the following: "Improved it", "Worsened it", "No impact", "Other". Only 18 responses were considered for this question as 2 were judged off-topic. Out of 18 respondents, 10 (>56%) selected "Improved it" which indicates that this option was favored by a majority of respondents.

Moreover, about the same number of respondents *strongly supported* their rebranding with only $\frac{1}{4}$ *opposed* to it (the R-skins' rebranding: R (20), *strongly supported* (11>55%), *opposed* (5>25%)¹⁰⁴. Regarding the Chiefs, if the team were to rebrand, less than a majority of respondents would support it; however, more would support it than being opposed to it (the Chiefs' hypothetical rebranding: R (20), *supported* (8>40%), *opposed* (6>30%), remaining *neutral* (6>30%).

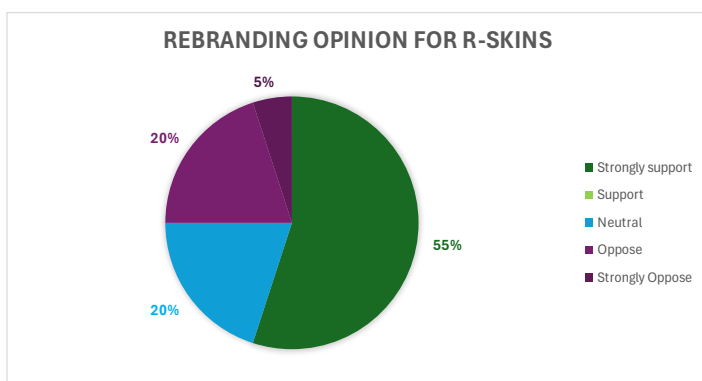


Figure 9 - Pie generated based on respondents' opinion about the rebranding of the R-skins.

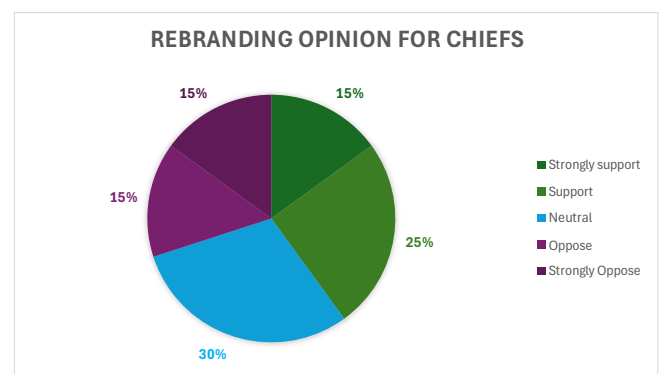


Figure 10 - Pie generated based on respondents' opinion about the Chiefs not changing their imagery (name and logo). To compare it with the R-skins, the answers were rephrased to align with the R-skins rebranding answers. Thus, the above pie conveys answers to the hypothetical rebranding of the Chiefs instead of its no change of name and logo.

¹⁰⁴ Here we include the one response (5%) that was strongly opposed to it.

Furthermore, the following factors were identified as the most influential in supporting the Chiefs decision to maintain its existing imagery: traditions (9>45%), lack of public pressure (8>40%) and absence of offensiveness (7>35%) (see Appendix 3). In contrast, media coverage, Native American advocacy, and historical context were considered the most influential factors in a team’s decision to rebrand (see Appendix 4).

5.2.3. Cultural and Ethical Considerations

The results from the last section of the survey provide a better insight into the respondents cultural and ethical considerations, especially with respect to Native Americans. A dominant share of respondents agreed that using Native Americans’ imagery in sports was a form of cultural appropriation (R (20), *agree* (15>75%), *neutral* (3>15%), and *disagree* (2>10%). Moreover, almost all considered that it was important to respect Native Americans’ culture in teams’ imagery (R (20), *important* (18>90%), and *not important* (2>10%).

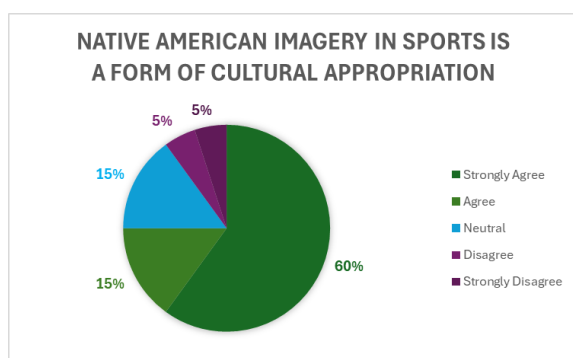


Figure 11 – Pie generated from a five-item measure of Native American imagery in sport as a form of cultural appropriation (from 1 1/5 “Strongly Agree” to 5 1/5 “Strongly Disagree”).

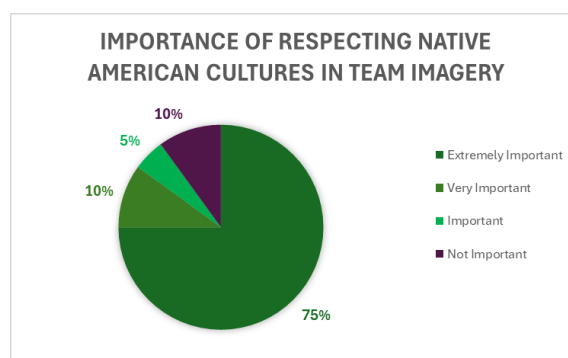


Figure 12 - Pie generated from a five-item measure of the importance of respecting Native Americans’ cultures in team imagery (from 1 1/5 “Not Important” to 5 1/5 “Extremely Important”). “Slightly Important” was not included as no one voted for it.

6. Discussion

As this thesis has shown, unlike other professional sports teams, such as the Washington Commanders (formerly the R-skins), that have acknowledged the racist origins of Native American branding, the Kansas City Chiefs have remained loyal to their current brand, and it has not impacted their success, especially on the football field. In fact, as recently as February 2024, the Kansas City Chiefs, won the Super Bowl. Despite a call for discontinuation in the use of this practice, coming from several advocacy groups¹⁰⁵, the Chiefs have not yet fully joined the movement.

In this thesis, we empirically examined some factors that might influence a team's decision to rebrand. More specifically, we investigated why the Washington Commanders underwent rebranding while the Kansas City Chiefs did not. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research, we compared the use of stereotypes by both teams and examined the public's perceptions of these stereotypical images. According to previous findings (Fryberg et al., 2008), we predicted that more stereotypical symbols of Native Americans are perceived as more offensive than others. Further, we predicted that the reasons behind the Commanders' rebranding was driven by a greater perceived offensiveness of stereotypical images and presentation when compared to those used by the Chiefs. Moreover, to fully understand the rebranding process and examine whether sports teams chose to rebrand, we also assessed the Commanders' current imagery. We hypothesized that the Commanders' rebranding led to a notable shift in public perception as evidenced by a measurable decrease in the perceptions of their rebranded images as offensive. Finally, we hypothesized that the decision to rebrand is as much influenced by public perception and external pressure than by the use and offensive nature of stereotypes themselves.

¹⁰⁵ In recent years, many have called or supported the retirement of Native imagery in sports: institutional and Native organizations (the APA in 2005, the U.S. Commission in 2001, and more recently Not in our Honor), experts (Chaney et al., 2011; Freng & Willis-Esqueda, 2011; Davis-Delano, 2022), influential figures (like Barack Obama in 2013 and Lily Gladstone in 2024), the media scene (the Native American Journalists Association in 2003) and schools across America dropping their Chiefs-name (The Southern Cayuga Central School District, Saranac High School, and Penfield High School in 2001).

6.1. The use of stereotypes and their public perception: the R-skins vs the Chiefs.

Our first hypothesis (H1) predicted that more stereotypical symbols of Native Americans would be perceived as more offensive than others. This hypothesis is supported as teams' content carrying higher levels of stereotypical representation of Native Americans provoked stronger reactions in terms of perceived offensiveness. Using a combination of criteria (see Tables in Chapter 4), we explored how different teams used stereotypical imagery across various mediums. Although the mediums were similar (name, logo, and mascot) their use differed from one team to another. Each of the R-skins' three mediums portrayed three distinct stereotypes (the People of the Past, the Bloodthirsty Warrior, and the Savage). This broad and condensed portrayal led to a high perception of stereotyping with 97% of the respondents viewing the R-skins as stereotypical (see Figure 6). In contrast, the Chiefs, whose two mediums portrayed two stereotypes each (instead of three) - the name (the People of the Past and the Noble Indian) and the logo (the People of The Past and the Bloodthirsty Warrior) - were less perceived as stereotypical (56% of stereotyping). This difference in the use of mediums and stereotype representation also likely resulted in the degree to which content related to Native Americans. In the survey, the R-skins' content was considered to be more related to Native Americans than the Chiefs' content. The R-skins' content was perceived as 90% related to AI while the Chiefs' was perceived as 50% related to AI (see Figure 4).

By comparing these findings with the perceived degree of offensiveness, a clear pattern emerges. The R-skins, with the higher level of stereotypical imagery related to Native Americans, were perceived as significantly more offensive. More specifically, the degree of offensiveness of the R-skins' content was rated at 82%, compared to 43% for the Chiefs' content (see Figure 4). This supports our first hypothesis and demonstrates that respondents take greater offense when stereotypical representations are overt and severe. In contrast, fewer and less severe stereotypical depictions of the Chiefs made them appear less offensive. One respondent commented on the Chiefs' content saying:

“I feel neutral again, although I do recognize the KC logo to be a Native American arrowhead. I'm not sure that this is perpetuating stereotypes. These images are not necessarily pejorative. However, the team is using the shape of the arrowhead and the name "chiefs" which was taken directly from Native American culture, and they are profiting of this imagery which does seem unfair to me”.

This implies that the degree of offensiveness is strongly correlated with the extent to which the content is thought to reflect Native Americans as well as the severity of the stereotypes. These findings are consistent with those from other research teams that demonstrate the psychological consequences of American Indian Mascots (Fryberg et al., 2008). Although their research objectives differ from ours, they also reveal an association between severe stereotypical depictions of AI and increased perceptions of offensiveness.

Given that H1 turned out to be accurate, we felt confident about the validity of our second hypothesis (H2). H2 predicted that the R-skins rebranded – changed their names, logos, and mascots – because their stereotypical representations were perceived as more offensive and harmful compared to those of the Chiefs, which resisted attempts to rebrand.

As demonstrated above, the data from the tables not only revealed a difference in the use of mediums but also a difference in the perpetuated stereotypes, which might also have impacted the extent to which each team was considered not only stereotypical but above all offensive. It makes sense that a team portraying more stereotypical representations and thus perceived as more offensive would be more encouraged to rebrand. To validate this hypothesis, we carried out empirical analysis while also taking the historical and cultural context into account. First, we identified the recurrent pattern, suggesting by the tables and the survey (see Figure 5 and 6), in the teams' use and perceptions. Then, highlighted the differences that contributed to the R-skins being perceived as more offensive than the Chiefs and thus making their rebranding more imperative.

The recurrent pattern: the R-skins and the Chiefs' shared stereotypical features.

The research has highlighted that both the R-skins and the Chiefs' (a) names and logos portray stereotypical, (b) past, (c) unfounded imagery of Native Americans at (d) a collective level and (e) allegedly-unconsciously. These stereotypical representations include “the People of the Past”, “the Bloodthirsty Warrior”, and “the Noble Savage” or its variant, “the Savage” (for the R-skins¹⁰⁶). Focussing on shared stereotypical features, “the People of the Past” was perceived evenly by the respondents in both teams' content (36% for the R-skins and 32% for the Chiefs). Due to the history of erasure and genocide of the Native communities (see section *The History of Native Americans in the USA*, p. 16), this stereotype is offensive as it relegates them to a

¹⁰⁶ Unlike the survey, Table 2 provides a more detailed identification of the stereotypes and does not recognize “the Noble Indian” as an appropriate label for the R-skins' stereotype. Given that the R-skins exhibit only one of the following features (“living closed to nature, primitive, with great value, pure”: primitive), they portray a more pejorative version of “the Noble Indian,” known as “the Savage.”

timeless past and neglects the positive contemporary aspects of their culture. Moreover, as it plays at a collective level, both teams also failed to accurately represent the diversity of Native communities (see *homogenization effect*, p. 10). Although the nature of this failure was claimed to be unconscious and driven by honor and traditions¹⁰⁷, the degree of Native appropriation couldn't be ignored (see *Native appropriation*, p. 19). 75% of respondents agreed that using Native Americans' imagery in sport was a form of cultural appropriation (see Figure 13).

Despite this common use and portrayal of "the People of the Past" stereotype, only one of the two teams rebranded, the R-skins. Thus, it is unlikely that this stereotypical representation influenced the degree of offensiveness leading to the R-skins' rebranding. However, the data suggests that other stereotypical representations were used by both teams: "the Bloodthirsty Warrior", "the Noble Indian" or its variant "the Savage".

Different stereotypical features leading to rebranding:

The above results from the tables (see *recurrent pattern*) have supported that three of the six variables were similarly applicable for the R-skins and the Chiefs. Both teams' stereotypes are based on the same unfounded activation, share a collective dimension and an allegedly unconscious nature. As demonstrated by the validation of our first hypothesis, the primary difference between these two teams' use of stereotypes lies in their mediums and the severity of their perceptions. A same stereotypical representation is differently perceived by the respondents depending on the team that is portraying it. The survey findings revealed that "the Bloodthirsty Warrior" was perceived at 34% and "the Noble Indian" at 27% in the R-skins' content, while both were perceived at 12% in the Chiefs' content. This difference of perception between similar stereotypes is linked to historical and cultural factors and has been influenced by the teams' branding strategies. Table 1 showed that "the Bloodthirsty Warrior" is portrayed through the Chiefs' arrowhead logo¹⁰⁸, while "the Noble Indian" is more associated with the Chiefs' name¹⁰⁹. In contrast, Table 2 showed that "the Bloodthirsty Warrior" and "the Savage" were prominent in all the R-skins' mediums (the name, the logo, and the mascot).

¹⁰⁷ "Tradition" was considered at 45% to be one of the main factors/reasons for the Chiefs to not rebrand (see Appendix 3)

¹⁰⁸ In Chapter 3 of "Native American Weapons", Taylor mentions the Native Americans' piercing weapons, including the bow. (Taylor, 2001)

¹⁰⁹ The meaning of Chiefs comes from Old French and refers to the "head, leader, captain; the principal or most important part of anything." Chief as the "head of a clan" was attested from 1570s and later extended to headmen of Native American tribes. Harper, D. (n.d.). Chief. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved July 28, 2024, from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/chief>

All these findings support our second hypothesis. As predicted, the Washington R-skins rebranded - changed their names, logos, and mascots - because their portrayed stereotypical representations were perceived as more offensive and harmful compared to those of the Kansas City Chiefs, which resisted attempts to rebrand. The difference in the use and perception of specific stereotypes likely increased the R-skins' degree of offensiveness, leading to their rebranding. In other words, the more pervasive portrayals and negative perceptions of "the Bloodthirsty Warrior" and "the Savage" contributed to their decision. Unlike the Chiefs, the R-skins, whose offensiveness was rated 40 times higher (see Figure 4), likely chose to rebrand to mitigate public backlash.

Finally, as suggested by our respondents and analysis, external factors such as media coverage, Native Americans advocacy, historical context, and financial considerations also played a significant role in the R-skins' rebranding¹¹⁰. One respondent noted, "I grew up near Washington D.C. with the R-skins being the popular team in my area. I remember growing up that whether or not the team's name and mascot were offensive became a topic of conversation. As an adult, I now personally believe that it is offensive - it's a crystal-clear example of a stereotype - and a mockery of Native American culture. Things have really changed; there is more sensitivity now towards respecting other cultures/races. This is a perfect example of what's no longer seen by many as acceptable. I believe it's for the best that the team has changed their name and mascot."

6.2. From the R-skins to the Commanders: a rebranding impact

Given the accuracy of our first two hypotheses (H1 and H2), which confirmed the correlation between the use of stereotypes and their perception as offensive, we expanded our analysis to assess the impact of the R-skins' rebranding. As predicted, the rebranding of the Washington R-skins to the Commanders led to a notable shift in public perception, resulting in a measurable decrease in the perceptions of their team as offensive. Our third hypothesis (H3) is supported and provides clear evidence of the impact of stereotypes' use and perceptions on team rebranding.

¹¹⁰ Among these external factors, media coverage, Native Americans' advocacy, and historical context were considered, by our respondents, to be the most influential ones in team's rebranding (see Appendix 4).

The results from the tables (see Table 2 and 3) suggested a clear difference between the R-skins and the Commanders' perpetuation of stereotypes, as none of the six defined variables were applicable for the Commanders (while all were for the R-skins). These findings were corroborated by the survey, which showed a significant difference in the perception of the two teams by the respondents. As previously noted, respondents identified three stereotypes in the R-skins' content (36% "the People of the Past", 34% "the Bloodthirsty Warrior", and 27% "the Noble Indian"¹¹¹; see Figure 6) and considered it 90% related to AI with a degree of offensiveness at 82% (see Figure 4). In comparison, although respondents associated the Commanders' content with some stereotypes (5% "the Bloodthirsty Warrior" and 9% "the Noble Indian"), they did not consider it as associated with Native Americans¹¹². Considering the Commanders' content, a military-themed name and logo with a pig as mascot, it makes sense that it was not considered to be related to AI. Thus, the two identified stereotypes ("the Bloodthirsty Warrior" and "the Noble Indian") and the degree of offensiveness (37%) perceived within the Commanders' content are related to something else.

Given that most respondents' comments on the Commanders' content were linked to their mascot, we hypothesized that the 37% of perceived offensiveness is related to the Commanders' mascot. Some of the comments included:

- (1) "The image of a hog is not a positive one even if some loyal fans called themselves 'hogs' after the nickname of past offensive lineament"
- (2) "I'm not sure a pig is an appropriate mascot for a sports team",
- (3) "strange mascot, unappealing"
- (4) "pigs are usually stupid or dirty"

However, we did not investigate this further as it was not the primary focus of our research, especially given the fact that this rebranding was generally favored and that it improved people's perceptions of the team (see Figure 8 and 9). The 56% of respondents who believed that the rebranding of the Commanders had improved their views of the team were supported by their initial reactions to the Commanders' former and current content. As illustrated in Figure 3, the R-skins' content was overwhelmingly perceived negatively by 80% of the

¹¹¹ According to us, "the Noble Indian" stereotype perceived within the R-skins' content can be considered as being related to "the Savage" stereotype. (see section *From "Savages" to "Noble Savages" to "Bloodthirsty Savages": a dehumanizing imagery*, p. 23).

¹¹² Considering that the Commanders was the only team whose content was not considered related to Native Americans and the only one where "the People of the Past" stereotype was not identified, we believe there may be a correlation between these two variables. However, as we did not specifically assess it, we cannot prove it, and we suggest it as a subject for further studies.

respondents, while only 20% perceived the Commanders' content negatively. Our findings support our third hypothesis that the rebranding of the Washington R-skins to the Commanders led to a notable shift in public perception strengthening the evidence of stereotypes' influence in team branding.

To conclude this discussion, our fourth and final hypothesis (H4) predicted that the decision to rebrand is as much influenced by public perception and external pressure as by the use and offensive nature of the stereotypes themselves. Although we mentioned some external factors that contributed to the Commanders' rebranding (advocacy groups, historical and cultural context), we did not assess the extent to which each one of them impacted it. As our study did not fully examine this aspect, our findings cannot support this hypothesis. However, they provide clear evidence that stereotypes, more specifically their use and perception, influence a team's decision to rebrand. As demonstrated by the validation of three hypotheses, unlike the Kansas City Chiefs, the Washington R-skins rebranded to the Commanders due to their use and higher perceived offensiveness of their stereotypical imagery. This provides one reason why, after almost a century of using a name and symbols considered controversial and offensive, the Washington Commanders decided to review them while the Chiefs did not.

7. Conclusion

This thesis compared the influence of the use and perception of stereotypes in the decisions of two sports teams: the R-skins, which chose to rebrand, and the Chiefs, which retained their original branding. As illustrated by Table 4 (*see below*), there is a recurrent pattern in both teams' use of stereotypes. However, differences in the R-skins' use and perpetuation of stereotypes, compared to the Chiefs, significantly impacted public perception and made them appear more offensive. This amplified perception of stereotyping and offensiveness pressured the R-skins to rebrand, whereas the Chiefs, with fewer and less severe stereotypical depictions, were perceived as less offensive and thus faced less pressure to rebrand. Overall, our findings on the impact of stereotypes' use and perception were supported by our assessment of the R-skins' change to the Commanders which improved people's views of the team.

Table 4 - SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Teams:		Medium:	Key factors: use and perception										
			Unfounded Activation, Collective Dimension, allegedly Unconscious Nature		Stereotyping	Offensiveness / Related to AI	Duration						
1	The Kansas City Chiefs 		No Stereotype (and not sure) 44%		“The Bloodthirsty Warrior” (12%)	Not applicable	N/A	Ongoing from 1963 till now (a change would be supported at 40%)	Native Appropriation				
		Name - The Chiefs								“A People of the Past” (32%)	“The Noble Savage” (12%)	56% stereotypical	43% Offensive & 50% related AI
													
2	The Washington R-skins 	Name - The R-skins  	“A People of the Past” (36%)	“The Bloodthirsty Warrior” (34%)	“The Noble Savage” (27%)	97% stereotypical	82% Offensive & 90% related AI	Changed (see below) 	75%				

Initial reaction to content: (predominant perception)

Positive:  (none of the team’s content was primarily perceived as positive)

Neutral:  (40% The Chiefs’ content; 65% The Commanders’ content)

Negative:  (80% The R-skins’ content)

2*	The Washington Commanders 	<i>Name - The Commanders</i> 	Not applicable	N/A	N/A	Ongoing From 2020 till now
			N/A	N/A	37% Offensive BUT Unrelated to AI	

The above table, presenting a summary of the findings, clearly illustrates both the similarities and, more importantly, the differences between the R-skins and the Chiefs' use and perception of stereotypes. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, we found that greater use of stereotyping was associated with higher degree of perceived offensiveness towards Native Americans. Then, we found that this correlation influenced the R-skins' decision to rebrand, whereas the Chiefs' less severe depictions did not provoke the same level of public outcry or perceived necessity for change. The decrease in perceived offensiveness observed in the Commanders' data confirms and supports these conclusions. The R-skins' content was overwhelmingly perceived as negative, stereotypical, and offensive towards Native Americans. Public opinion on the Chiefs' content was more divided. Although a rebranding of the Chiefs would be favored by more people, the majority did not view it as necessity. The implications of our findings are clear: The Washington R-skins rebranded to the Commanders due to higher perceived offensiveness and public pressure resulting from their more severe and pervasive use of stereotypical imagery. In contrast, the Kansas City Chiefs, with less severe and fewer stereotypical depictions, did not face the same imperative to rebrand.

Motivated by the ongoing debate over whether the sports industry should continue to use Native American “representations” as team symbols, our research sought to the question: “why, after nearly a century of using a name and symbols considered controversial and offensive, did the Washington Commanders decide to review them while the Chiefs didn’t?” Although the thesis provides valuable insights, specifically in the role of the use and perception of stereotypes, it cannot fully capture all the factors influencing a team’s decision to rebrand. The use and perception of stereotypes were proved to be crucial factors, but they are not the sole considerations. External factors such as advocacy groups, historical and cultural contexts, media coverage, and financial considerations, also played a leading role in the R-skins’ decision to rebrand. Although we acknowledged these factors, a thorough assessment of their impact was beyond the scope of this research. However, to fully answer our research question, further study of these external influences seems necessary.

Finally, our findings also suggest avenues for further research. The absence of association between the Commanders and the “People of the Past” stereotype, as well as Native Americans’ culture, could lead to a potential correlation between these two dynamics. Combined with an investigation of the origins of the Commanders’ perceived offensiveness, this correlation could provide deeper insights into how stereotypes shape team perceptions and influence decisions about rebranding.

7.1. The necessity to promote more accurate representations

In the literature review, we introduced the concept of stereotypes by inviting you to participate in a cognitive exercise to capture “the pictures in your head”. This exercise was designed to illustrate how effortlessly individuals generate stereotypes influenced by various factors. After our analysis of the teams, you can easily imagine the cognitive representations their content might provoke.

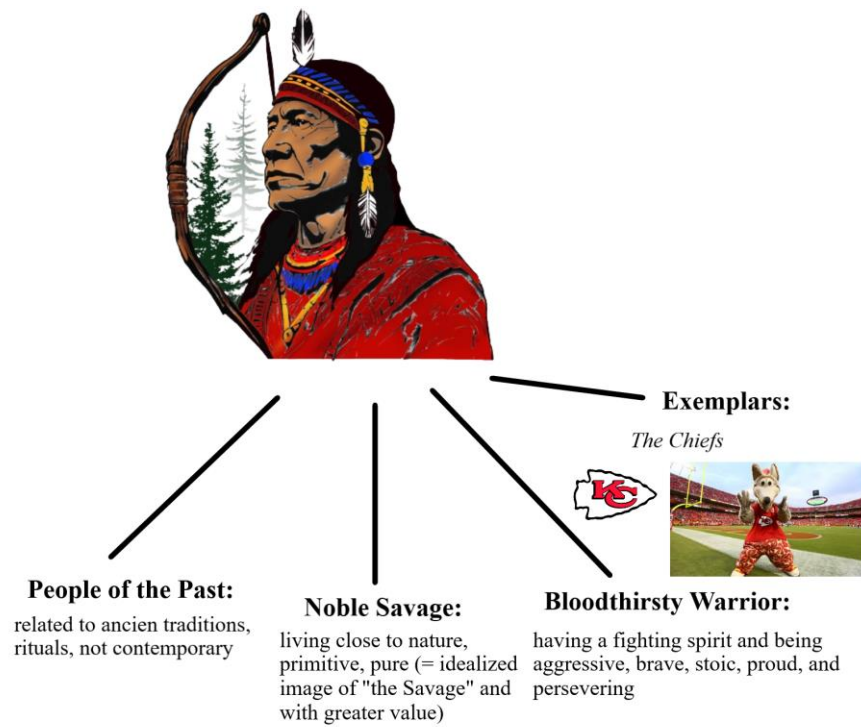


Figure 13 - Inspired by Stangor's (2000) figure. A cognitive representation of a Native American, including stereotypes and exemplars (based on the Kansas City Chiefs' content). Artwork by Ckis Illustration, in collaboration with Romain Dupont.

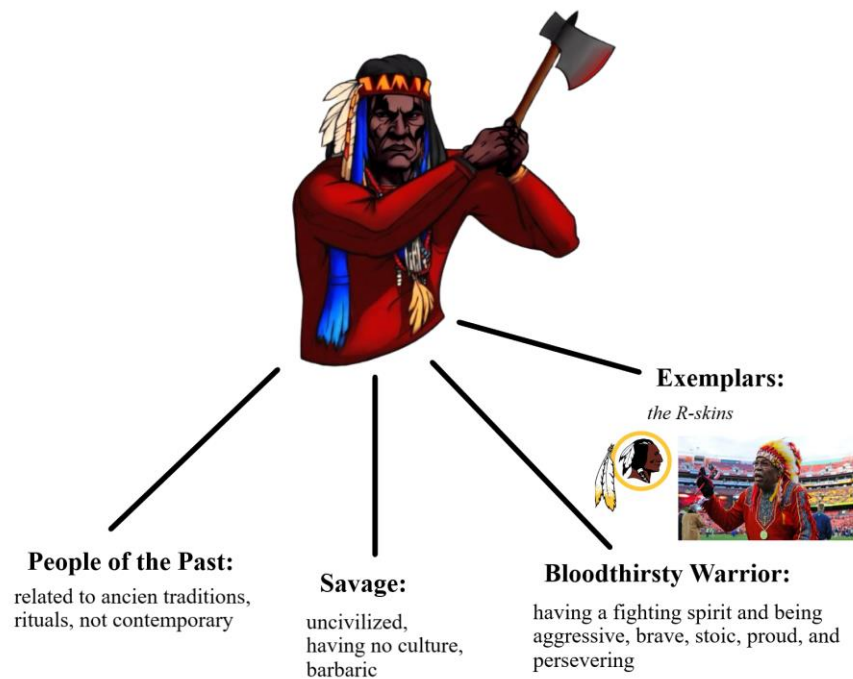


Figure 14 – Inspired by Stangor's (2000) figure. A cognitive representation of a Native American, including stereotypes and exemplars (based on the Washington R-skins' content). Artwork by Ckis Illustration and Nisune, in collaboration with Romain Dupont.

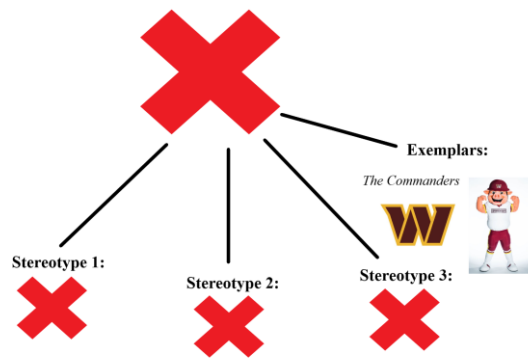


Figure 15 - Inspired by Stangor's (2000) figure. A cognitive representation of a Native American, including stereotypes and exemplars (based on the Washington Commanders' content).

As we have just seen, these unconscious cognitive images, or stereotypes (Devine & Sharp, 2009), are based on unfounded representations (Katz & Braly, 1933). They can be individually or collectively shared (Stangor, 2000) and are often transmitted and reinforced within society (Anglin, 1977). However, being conscious of their detrimental effects, we believe that it is time to promote more accurate representations of these communities and we support the work of several scholars (Chaney et al., 2011; Dai et al., 2021; Davis-Delano et al., 2024; King et al. 2002) urging the sports industry to change.

Since stereotypes are deeply associated with memory (Stangor & Lange, 1994), changing them directly is challenging. However, the teams' mediums (the exemplars) are easier to modify, especially when they originate from specific contexts like sporting events. By focusing on changing the teams' mediums, such as names, logos, and mascots, we can address a part of these portrayals. This approach aligns with the findings from our research, which highlight the importance of the use of stereotypes in shaping public perception. According to Knoester & Rockhill (2021), promoting more accurate representations involves embracing multiculturalism and fostering more contact between communities. What better platform than the sport industry, specifically the National Football League (NFL), which prides itself on being "a force for positive change"¹¹³, to set an example and champion the idea of "unity in diversity" through new, respectful portrayals? "This is no easy task, but even a little success contributes to the reclaiming of a more legitimate cross-cultural exchange and a new and different view of the future" (Thomas & Miller, 1993, p. 461).

¹¹³ NFL Community. (n.d.). Retrieved July 29, 2024, from <https://www.nfl.com/community/>

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Online Survey questions

Appendix 1, titled (online survey on the perception of images), is too large to be included in this thesis. It is available as a separate document in the supplementary materials.

Appendix 2 – Picture of the Chiefs' former mascot: Warpaint



Figure 16 – Warpaint taking a victory lap across the field at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City in 2019. Picture taken by Ryan Kang (Medina, 2021)

Appendix 3 – Pie chart: the Chiefs' reasons to not rebrand (based on the survey results)

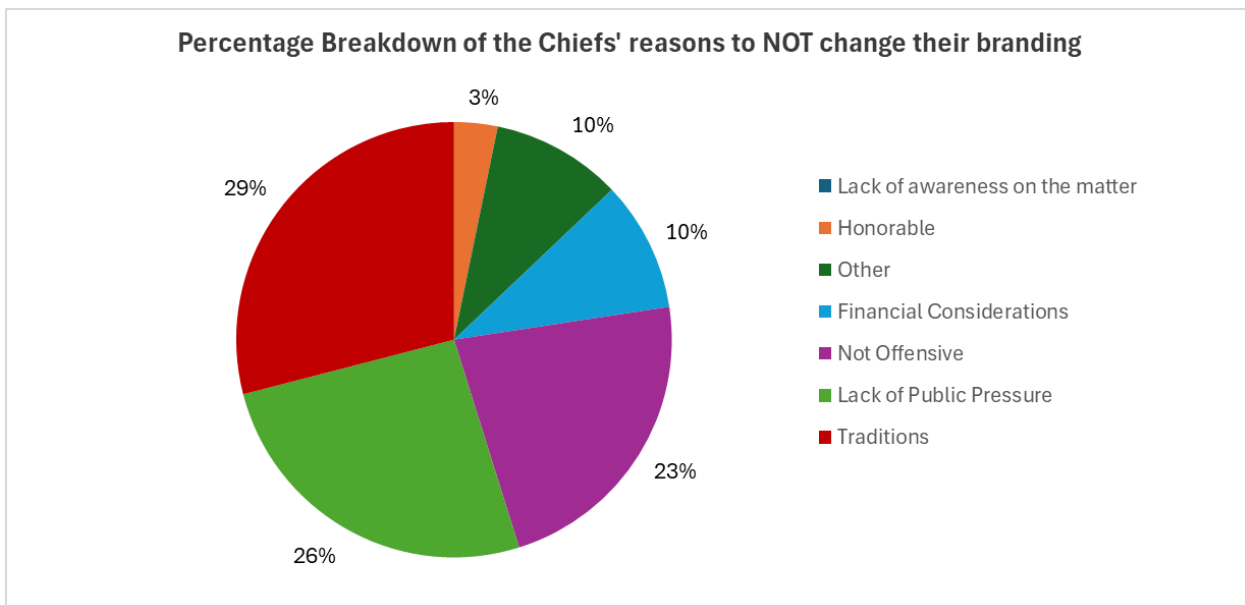


Figure 17 – Pie chart generated from the respondents' answers to the question, "why do you think the Chiefs have not changed their branding?" Respondents were allowed to select multiple factors, and the percentages reflect the frequency with which each factor was selected.

Appendix 4 – Graph: importance of external factors on a team’s decision to rebrand.

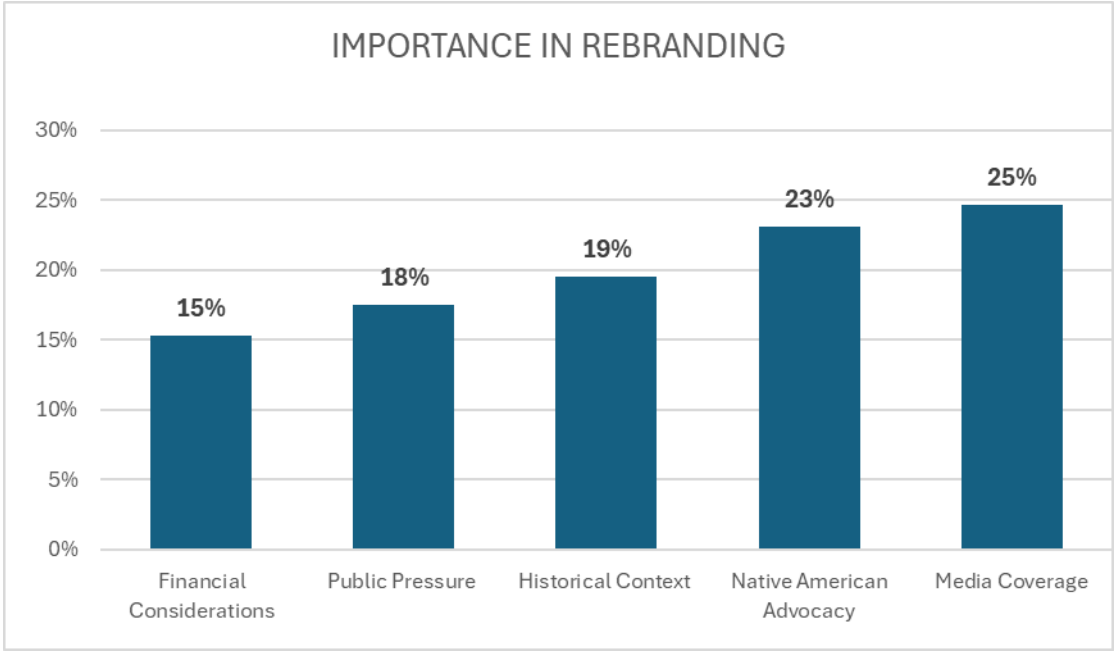


Figure 18 – Graph presenting the degree of importance of various factors in a team’s decision to rebrand. Respondents were asked to rank the above factors from 1 (Most Important) to 5 (Least Important). Each factor was assigned a unique rank which means that each rank (1, 2,3, etc.) could be associated with only one factor. The percentages shown on the bars represent the average importance rating for each factor. It reflects how important respondents consider these factors in influencing a team’s decision to rebrand.

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