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Capstone Context/Description

Introduction:

My research object that I am analyzing is the fifth episode of ESPN's "The Last Dance" documentary. The documentary is a 10-episode series that recounts the career of Michael Jordan and his Chicago Bulls, leading up to their sixth and final championship that they won in 1998. Episode 5 specifically is largely centered around key milestones in Michael Jordan's career such as his first shoe deal with Nike, his second championship in 1992 with the Chicago Bulls, and his Olympic gold medal with Team USA soon after that. The episode also spends time emphasizing Jordan's global image and the extent of his fame at the time. Throughout this storytelling, the documentary chronologically bounces back and forth between these storylines while also advancing the central narrative of the series: Jordan's final season with the Bulls in 1998. This paper will outline the surrounding context of "The Last Dance" and the cultural significance that the documentary series had in order to show why it is worth analyzing.

This episode is a form of cultural technology which seeks to challenge/sustain a collective memory of Michael Jordan. Technologies have an important role in instructing how an audience ought to remember something. This idea is echoed in Erl's "Memory in Culture" which says that "whatever we know about the world, we know through media" and that "the individual only gains access to socially shared knowledge and images of the past through communication and media reception." (Erl, 115). "The Last Dance" functions in this very way, giving an individual access to their own version of a cultural memory surrounding Michael Jordan. Because the episode works to construct a collective memory, this episode of "The Last Dance" is a productive site for communicative analysis.

Description and Context:

The documentary centers around Michael Jordan and his final championship with the Chicago Bulls. Michael Jordan is regarded as one of the greatest basketball players in the history of the National Basketball Association. Originally from Brooklyn, New York, Jordan played three seasons of college basketball at North Carolina. He famously hit a game-winning shot in the 1982 National Collegiate Athletic Association Championship as a freshman, which helped him to eventually be selected third overall in the 1984 NBA draft by the Chicago Bulls (Basketball Hall of Fame). Jordan would spend 15 total years in the NBA, putting together one of the greatest careers that the sport has ever seen. In his 15 years of playing, he won six NBA Championships, three from 1991-1993 and another three from 1996-1998 after briefly retiring from the sport. Jordan was named the Finals MVP in each of his six championships. Along with this, Jordan earned 5 NBA MVP awards, 14 NBA All-Star selections, and 10 All-NBA First Team selections (Basketball Reference). After putting together what many regard as the greatest basketball career ever, Jordan officially retired in 2003 (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Jordan would then be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2009.

Jordan's status as a superstar goes well beyond the NBA. Most notably, Jordan had a huge economic impact through his Jordan shoe brand. In 1984, Michael Jordan signed an unprecedented five-year, \$2.5 million contract with Nike. This move forever shifted how brands market athletes, as Nike brought in over \$100 million from the Jordan brand less than a year after releasing Jordan's first signature shoe, the Air Jordan 1. Moving forward, brands became much more focused on securing athlete endorsements and sought to model Nike and Jordan's

partnership (Baum). Thus, Jordan's impact stretched beyond basketball as his own fame and success had a lasting impact on athlete endorsements.

Due to his success and cultural impact, before "The Last Dance" documentary even aired, there was already a mythic memory surrounding Jordan's final season with the Bulls. Some memories have been simplified and centered around the pivotal moment of that season: Jordan's shot at the end of game 6 of the NBA Finals to win the championship for the Bulls (Glassbrook). Due to the Bulls' lack of success after Jordan's career, the memories from that season have seemingly been passed down from older fans to newer ones (Silverstein). Thus, "The Last Dance" did not shed light on some unknown story. Instead, it reinforced and altered an already existing collective memory surrounding Jordan.

ESPN first announced that they were creating "The Last Dance" documentary in 2018. They released a trailer, stating that the docuseries would "chronicle the untold story of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls' dynasty and includes never-before-seen footage from the 1997-98 championship season" (ESPN, 2018). ESPN had a long history of producing documentaries before this. ESPN launched their documentary service, titled "ESPN Films," in the spring of 2008. In celebration of the brand's 30th anniversary, ESPN launched their "30 for 30" initiative, committing to produce 30 documentaries from their first 30 years for television or even theatrical release in partnership with Walt Disney Studios (ESPN FILMS). ESPN and Walt Disney Studios brought in independent, successful filmmakers, directors, and storytellers in order to produce the highest quality documentaries that they could (Bayer). These filmmakers were granted creative freedom, resulting in unique forms of narrative styles being incorporated into each documentary. The results were wildly successful, so much so that documentaries won awards in film; most notably in 2017, 30 for 30's "O.J.: Made in America" won an Academy Award for Best

Documentary Feature, showing just how far ESPN had come in their production of documentaries (Matloob).

“The Last Dance” first aired on April 19th, 2020 when the first two episodes premiered on ESPN nationally and Netflix (who helped produce the series) internationally. Every week, two more episodes would air until the final two episodes were released on May 17, 2020. The show has a unique form of narrative structure. Director Jason Hehir described it when he said that “we have two simultaneous timelines: one from the 1997–98 season [when the NBA Entertainment film crew had almost unfettered access to Jordan and the Bulls], and then the through line of Michael’s whole career, from ’84 to ’98.” (McCallum). Thus, the episodes slowly tell the story of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls’ sixth and final championship season in 1998. All the while, it goes back and recounts all the key moments in Michael Jordan’s career that led him to be competing for a sixth championship.

Each episode of the series adds to an argument as to how Michael Jordan should be remembered. The first episode of the series introduces the central narrative: the Chicago Bulls’ going into their 1997-1998 season, looking for a third consecutive championship and sixth in the career of Michael Jordan. Visual text at the start claims that, going into the season, the Chicago Bulls granted “unprecedented access” to a film crew to document their season, and that this footage is what led to the production of the series. The episode shows that it was clear to many of the players that this would be the last season with the team's core group of players intact, as Bulls General Manager Jerry Krause had tension with many of the players on the team and was willing to tear the team apart and rebuild. Meanwhile, the episode flashes back to Jordan’s college career and path to the NBA.

The next few episodes are centered around Michael Jordan's prominent teammates, coach, and the impacts that they had on his career. Specifically, the second episode of the series is much more centered around Jordan's longtime teammate Scottie Pippen. The episode highlights Pippen's hostile relationship with team management over his pay in his career, and how he had to miss time during their final 1997-1998 season with a foot injury, requiring Jordan to step up more for the team. The third episode, similarly, explored Jordan's longtime teammate Dennis Rodman. The story showed his key role in providing energy to the team during their last dance season, while simultaneously showing off his unconventional off-court antics. Finally, episode four placed focus on legendary Bulls coach Phil Jackson, his coaching philosophies, and his backstory. All while these stories are being told, flashbacks continue to recount the career of Michael Jordan, leading up to his first career championship in 1991.

The next episodes in the series shift the focus almost entirely to Michael Jordan. As mentioned before, the fifth episode in the series is centered around Jordan's rise to fame as a global icon. Episode six centers around an almost opposite plot point, as it talks about moments where Jordan's image was tarnished by factors such as gambling, conflicts with teammates, and outside pressures from media and fans. Despite these stressors, though, the Bulls would still be able to win their third championship with Michael Jordan in 1993. Episode 7 continues the focus on outside pressures facing Jordan as it recounts the murder of his father in 1993, leading to Jordan announcing his retirement and pursuing a career in professional baseball briefly before announcing his return to the NBA. Episode 8 then discusses how the Bulls did not find immediate success after Jordan's return as many remember. Instead, Jordan had a rough start back into the sport and the Bulls were eliminated in the 1995 Eastern Conference semifinals that year.

The final two episodes place a much more central narrative on the 1998 season, which the episodes had slowly been recounting for the audience as it told past narratives. Episode 9 tells the story of the heated 1998 Eastern Conference Finals matchup between the Bulls and the Pacers, where the Bulls emerged victorious. The episode also flashes back to the Finals the year prior against the Utah Jazz and Jordan's famous "flu game" in order to set up the story of the 1998 NBA Finals rematch against the Jazz to be told in Episode 10. Episode 10 talks about the Bulls eventually winning their sixth championship against the Jazz, led by an iconic game-winning shot by Jordan. The episode then concludes the series as a whole by touching on how the dynasty would be dismantled by poor team management after this championship and the overall legacy of Michael Jordan.

As mentioned before, while all of these episodes work to construct/sustain/challenge the collective memory of Michael Jordan in a certain way, my analysis is centered around the fifth episode in the series. This episode has a few main storylines; one of which is Jordan's time on the 1992 Olympic team, also known as the "dream team," and the storylines that went into their gold medal that summer. The episode also covers the initial rise of the "Air Jordan" brand, which connects it to the main storyline of the 1998 season as it shows Jordan playing his final game of his career in New York and wearing his first original shoe. Finally, the episode touches on various plot points like Jordan playing in the 1998 All-Star game, his relationship with the late Kobe Bryant, and controversy surrounding Jordan staying silent in politics.

"The Last Dance" documentary had a massive cultural impact upon release. In terms of viewership alone, the series averaged 5.6 million viewers per episode, with 6.1 million viewers for the debut episode, making it the most watched documentary in ESPN history. The series also won the award for Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Series at the 72nd Emmy Awards

(ESPN, 2023). The show similarly had a huge impact on social media: the show was the #1 trending topic on Google and Twitter after the first episodes aired. Additionally, ESPN posts related to the documentary on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter combined for 9 million engagements (Beer). Much of this buzz was due to the show premiering during COVID-19 lockdowns, when there was very little sports content being produced. A quarantined audience granted the show a massive audience and a widespread cultural impact.

More than just popularity, “The Last Dance” received overwhelmingly positive reviews from viewers. For example, the series received a 95% critic rating on Rotten Tomatoes, with a 95% audience score as well. Critics praised the series, saying that the series is “a character study” that has been put together “expertly.” Others said that the series “presented Jordan’s basketball idiosyncrasies unfiltered” (Spin.ph). Along with high praise, the show revitalized interest in Michael Jordan’s brand: the Air Jordan brand saw a 40% increase in sales and a 68% increase in website traffic after the show premiered (Fataar). Thus, the documentary had widely positive reception from viewers and critics, so much so that Jordan himself gained increased cultural attention and popularity.

Interestingly, reception of “The Last Dance” has been much more mixed from other former Chicago Bulls that were included in the documentary. Specifically, one former Chicago Bull, Horace Grant, ranted about the show, claiming that it made “the majority of [the Bulls] look incompetent” (Knobloch). Similarly, he ranted about how the show didn’t give the Bulls’ second best player, Scottie Pippen, the respect he deserved. Pippen himself was very vocally opposed to his portrayal in the documentary, as he said in his memoir that the documentary “glorified Michael Jordan while not giving nearly enough praise to me and my proud teammates” (Pippen). Dennis Rodman, another one of the Bulls’ star players during Jordan’s career, also

backed this sentiment, saying that Pippen was “underrated,” “underpaid,” and that “he should be holding his head up higher than Michael Jordan in this documentary” (Ahmad). So, although much of the reception of the documentary from fans was very positive, the actual players depicted in it were very critical of it, largely because of the emphasis that it placed on Michael Jordan over the rest of the team.

Initial Conclusions:

All of these various receptions surrounding “The Last Dance” shows just how culturally large and impactful the documentary was, and why it is such an important object to be analyzed. It is clear that the documentary had an active role in shaping how an audience remembers Michael Jordan. It is important to analyze this constructed memory with a communicative analysis to understand how the documentary instructs audiences to remember historical events in a particular way. As I begin to conduct my research into the fifth episode of “The Last Dance,” the initial conclusions that I have for this research object are that it strongly seeks to manipulate the collective memory surrounding Michael Jordan. More specifically, it seeks to sustain the already mythic, larger-than-life figure that many portray him as, and even strengthen this perception in the way in which it describes his presence on and off the court. Specifically in this episode, there are many instances of his off-court presence being illuminated through descriptions of his global image, his commercial impact through the shoe industry, and his role in American politics. I look to dive deeper into these topics in my analysis as I strive to answer questions like what does the episode do to the memory of Michael Jordan, how does it sustain/challenge existing portrayals of Jordan, and in what manner is the story told in order to be compelling towards its audience? Examining the episode with these questions should give me

insight into what argument this episode and documentary make for how Michael Jordan ought to be remembered.

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