

The White Lotus ‘goes too far’: Duke University unhappy over their prominence in show

Two characters in the troubled Ratliff family are Duke alumni, but the association has displeased the US university

- This article contains spoilers for the third season of The White Lotus

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In the aftermath of an incestuous threesome, many viewers of the latest season of [The White Lotus](#) may think the show has stepped over a line. But audiences have an unlikely ally in Duke University, which is unhappy that two characters happen to be Duke alumni.



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[The third season of the popular TV show](#), which follows wealthy guests and workers at a luxury resort in Thailand, includes the Ratliff family, with the father, Timothy (played by Jason Isaacs) and one of his sons, Saxon (Patrick Schwarzenegger) both having attended Duke, a prestigious institution located in Durham, North Carolina.

In recent episodes, Saxon has kissed his younger brother and the pair have taken part in a threesome. Timothy, who is being investigated by the FBI over a money laundering scheme, has considered suicide; in one scene, he holds a gun to his head while wearing a T-shirt adorned with Duke's logo.

Frank Tramble, Duke's vice-president for communications, marketing and public affairs, [said in a statement to Bloomberg](#) that the university did not approve of the use of its logo – particularly the scene where Timothy contemplates killing himself.

“The White Lotus not only uses our brand without permission, but in our view uses it on imagery that is troubling, does not reflect our values or who we are, and simply goes too far,” Tramble said. “Suicide is the second-leading cause of death on college campuses. As imagery from the show is being shared widely across social media, we are using our brand to promote mental health awareness and remind people that help is available.”

Tramble [also told the New York Times](#): “Duke appreciates artistic expression and creative storytelling but characters' prominently wearing apparel bearing Duke's federally registered trademarks creates confusion and mistakenly suggests an endorsement or affiliation where none exists.”

The image of Timothy holding the gun to his head has become a meme in the lead-up to March Madness, the NCAA national college basketball championship – of which Duke, though much-reviled, is the favourite to win. On X, [one user wrote](#) that it would be “an all-time meme” if Duke loses, in a widely liked post – to which the university replied that “some imagery goes too far”.

But it is unlikely Duke can do much about being featured in the show. Jeanne Fromer, a professor who specialises in intellectual property law at the New York University School of Law, [told the New York Times](#) that artists are protected to use trademarks for artistic and expressive purposes under the first amendment.

“On the one hand, I understand that Duke is trying to disassociate themselves from this,” Fromer said. “On the other hand, they’re drawing attention to it.”

A representative for HBO declined to comment to Bloomberg and the New York Times.



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This isn’t the first time a brand has taken issue with a TV show. In 2021, exercise bike company Peloton was miffed after a character in *Sex and the City* reboot *And Just Like That...* was shown dying of a heart attack after exercising on one of their machines. Peloton said that though it had approved of the use of its bike in the show, it didn’t know the context. One company representative [even subsequently claimed](#) that the bike may have kept the character alive for longer.

Earlier this year, [California’s Pepperdine University sued Netflix and Warner Bros](#) over trademark infringement after a fictional basketball team in the show *Running Point* was shown using their colours and their sports team name. A district court judge ruled in favour of Netflix and Warner Bros.

- *In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123. Other international suicide helplines can be found at [befrienders.org](https://www.befrienders.org)*