

One-Hundred Years of Rebranding Big-time US College Sport: Analysis of the NCAA's Marketing Endeavors

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Aim

This study involved examination of National Collegiate Athletic Association National Office (NCAA) internal memos, public documents, public service announcements, television broadcasts, and marketing platforms from 1948 to the present through the analytical lens of rebranding theory (Southall, 2014) to determine if NCAA rebranding strategies represent a dominant hyper-commercial institutional logic (Southall, Brown, Nagel, & Southall, 2014)

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

From its founding in 1906, the NCAA has regulated and administered the majority of intercollegiate athletic programs and contests. In addition, since 1948 the NCAA has served as college sport's lobbying, public relations and marketing agency, with one of its most notable achievements being the transformation of American football from a nearly "outlawed" sport (due to high injury and fatality rates) into one of America's favorite sports, consumed by millions of seemingly insatiable fans. In addition, the NCAA has successfully transformed its Division I Men's Basketball Championships from an eight-team event, into March Madness, a 68-team national and international spectacle delivered across numerous multimedia platforms.

While the NCAA has successfully leveraged intense fan avidity in FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision) football and Division I men's basketball to increase revenue generation to unparalleled levels, recently the association's collegiate model of athletics (Brand, 2006) has endured numerous reputational triggers, including several publics questioning the efficacy of amateurism for labor (i.e., Football Bowl Subdivision [FBS] football and men's basketball players) but free-market capitalism for management (e.g., coaches, administrators, and corporate stakeholders) (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013).

Research Design and Methodology

Within this research setting, using open and selective coding strategies we performed critical discourse and document analyses (Luke, 1997) of audio-visual excerpts, newspaper and magazine accounts, online postings, as well as primary and secondary NCAA documents from 1948-2017, looking for evidence of coordinated and ongoing NCAA rebranding strategies utilizing coordinated promotion, advertising and/or public relations strategies (Southall, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Data analysis reveals a consistent pattern of coordinated NCAA rebranding efforts – representative of college sport's commercial institutional logic. This study's results confirm Southall and Staurowsky's (2013) and Southall's (2014) findings that the NCAA National Office – consistent with the association's and college sport's dominant hyper-commercial institutional logic – is the dominant coordinating organization for disseminating member universities' rebranding efforts. Such rebranding efforts have included: (a) revisioning and repositioning the NCAA corporate brand (e.g., Blue Disk), (b) implementing integrated

rebranding strategies, and (c) performing ongoing rebranding performance assessment (Southall, 2014).

Conclusions and Implications

Consistent with the association's hyper-commercial institutional logic, since 1948, the NCAA National Office has continually rebranded NCAA college sports in response to a variety of reputational triggers (e.g., scandals, legal challenges alleging antitrust violations, employment-based state or federal legislation, workers' compensation claims, and calls for increased player compensation). As the theory of motivated reasoning (e.g., confirmation bias) predicts (Redlawsk, 2002), the vast majority of college sport fans, NCAA corporate partners, college recruits, athletes and their parents, as well as the US media, Congress and the US legal system have pulled the NCAA's "friendly information" close, while pushing threatening data away, ignoring violations of state and federal laws, as well as actions inconsistent with the association's stated educational mission. As a result, within the institutional field of North American sport, NCAA rebranding efforts have legitimized a ceremonial institutional façade espousing a "clear line of demarcation" between college and professional sport, while concurrently maximizing lucrative commercial opportunities. Significantly, the NCAA's rebranding efforts have resulted in the redefinition of basic notions of "pay, amateurism and academic success" (e.g., viewing cost-of-attendance cash awards as something other than pay, and imbedding APR [Academic Progress Rate] and GSR [Graduation Success Rate] metrics as preferred measures of educational success).

Through the use and dissemination of targeted statistical methodologies and analyses, coordinated public-relations strategies, messaging discipline, and elements of institutional propaganda, the NCAA's has protected and grown its collegiate model of athletics, which isolates the principle [of amateurism] to the way in which student-athletes are viewed without imposing its avocational nature on revenue-producing opportunities (Brand, 2006), allowing college sport to become a significant global sport industry segment.

In addition to cataloguing and describing elements of the NCAA National Office's seventy-year rebranding campaign, the threat of ongoing antitrust litigation (e.g., *Jenkins v. NCAA*) to the NCAA's current and anticipated rebranding efforts will be discussed.

References

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