Understanding the Brand Associations Attached to U Sports by Former NCAA & Current U Sports Student-Athletes

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is often considered the pinnacle of collegiate sports, drawing athletes from around the world to compete at one of its 1,281 institutions. Of the thousands of athletes imported to the NCAA each year, Canada, who themselves bolster comprehensive collegiate sport organizations, experience the greatest exodus of athletes. In fact, it has been seen that in some sports up to 33% of participatory athletes are Canadian (Edwards & Washington, 2015). While there is still a tremendous number of Canadian athletes heading to the NCAA, statistics have shown that many of these athletes return to Canada after at least one year. Through recent adjustments to U Sports (formerly Canadian Interuniversity Sport) policy, student athletes are no longer required to forego a year of eligibility upon transferring from the NCAA. As a result of this amended policy, U Sports has effectively catered to athletes contemplating leaving the NCAA by reducing their barrier to entry. As these student athletes begin to return to Canada at a rapidly growing rate, an opportunity to explore their unique brand perceptions has emerged. As collegiate sport represents a multi-million-dollar business, research into the effect of brand on the decision making process of these student athletes is poised to provide significant results for the field of sport management, specifically branding in post-secondary athletic institutions.

As David (2000) notes, brand is shaped by any and all interactions an organization has with their consumer. In the context of intercollegiate sport, as student athletes are traditionally recruited to attend institutions there is a variety of factors that contribute to their perception of brand. While various factors such as, but not limited to, head coaches (Klenosky et al., 2001; Letawsky, 2003; Crowley, 2004; Pauline, 2010), school location (Letawsky, 2003; Crowley, 2004; Finley & Fountain, 2008; Johnson, Wessel & Pierce, 2013), and academic reputation (Popp, Pierce & Hums, 2011; Weiss & Robinson, 2013; Edwards & Washington, 2015) have been consistently referenced throughout various studies, additional research has established that no one factor has a greater influence than another (Magnusen, Kim, Perrewé & Ferris 2015). Rather, it is a combination of these various factors, each unique to the individual experiencing them, that shape their ultimate perception of brand. While there is a significant body of research on intercollege branding and brand perception (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Judson, Gorchels & Aurand, 2006; Judson, Aurand, Gorchels & Gordon, 2009; Chard, 2013; Chard, Maclean & Faught, 2013), little has been done to examine the brand perception of international student athletes (Popp et al., 2011). Particularly, research surrounding the effect of branding on student athlete’s decision to transfer schools/institutions is scarce, specifically in the Canadian context. Although Chard (2013) identified student athletes brand perception of the CIS, these perspectives came from student athletes who had never transferred organizations. Literature surrounding the topic of brand perception of intercollegiate sport has traditionally come from an American perspective and has yet to include student athletes seeking to transfer from one institution to another.

Although utilized in a limited capacity, Means-End Chain theory has been identified as an applicable theory to guide the study of student athlete decision making (Klenosky, Templin & Troutman, 2001; Finley & Fountain, 2008). Means-End Chain theory suggests that “means” are objects or activities and “ends” are the valued state of being created by consumption or interaction with these means (Gutman, 1982). As Kelonsky, et al (2001) explain, the purpose of Means-End Chain theory is to understand this connection at three stages of abstraction. These three stages include attributes (i.e. athletic facilities or head coach), consequence (i.e. playing time or improved performance) and personal values (i.e. a feeling of security or achievement) (Klenosky et al., 2001; Finley & Fountain, 2008). Traditionally this theory has been used to serve research conducted from an American perspective, and its utilization in the context Canadian interuniversity sport is limited.
The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of brand on the decision making process of student-athletes transferring from the NCAA to U Sports. As the recent change to the U Sport transfer policy occurred just over two years ago, research has yet to be conducted with this unique population of student athletes as its focus. Additionally, due to the timing of this study, the population of student athletes to be examined will undoubtedly include some of the first student athletes to transfer under new this new policy; in other words, the trailblazers of this new exodus from the NCAA. In order achieve this purpose and in accordance with Means-End Chain theory, three research questions have been developed. 1) Reflecting on their current school, what are the specific attributes associated with attending this school that lead to student-athletes to consider it more favourable than other schools? 2) Reflecting on their current school, what are the consequences associated with attending this school that lead student-athletes to consider it more favourable then other schools? 3) Reflecting on their current school, what are the personal values that lead student-athletes to consider this school more favourable than others?

Semi structured interviews utilizing a laddering approach will be conducted with athletes currently playing in the Ontario University Athletics (OUA), a conference of U Sport, who have previously played in the NCAA. The study will focus on hockey players, of which a potential participant sample of 45 individuals from 19 schools across the OUA has been identified. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim and from these transcripts, emergent themes will be coded and data triangulation will be utilized to ensure reliability. Data analysis will occur in three phases, content analysis, structural analysis and cluster analysis. At the completion of these phases a Hierarchical Value Map will be created to visually represent the three stages of abstraction outlined by Means-End Chain Theory.

As data collection has yet to be conducted, formal discussion of results is not possible. However, the potential implications and application of this study are vast. Speaking from the organizational perspective, results and findings of this study can be used to better develop branding strategies for both the NCAA and U sports as they respectively aim to retain or recruit student athletes. In the case of U Sports, these findings can be used to improve or alter athlete recruitment strategies to better appeal to Canadian student athletes. On the other hand, the NCAA can take note of potential findings to understand what adjustments must be made to ensure international student athletes not only attend, but remain at their institutions for the duration of their post-secondary education. Results of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge surrounding intercollegiate branding, recruitment and school choice decision making. As this population of student athletes has yet to be explored through research, new and interesting themes should emerge leading to an expansion of our current understanding of intercollegiate branding.