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Message in a Bottle: University Advertising During Bowl Games

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Abstract Through this descriptive qualitative study of institutional advertisements aired on television during the 2006–2007 college football bowl season, I sought to understand the messages communicated by colleges and universities to external audiences. The findings demonstrate the focus on selling the private benefits of higher education and call into question the effectiveness of university marketing and branding efforts.

Key words branding · athletics · marketing

Intercollegiate athletics, particularly the sports of football and basketball, hold a powerful place in the American psyche (Bowen and Levin 2003; Rudolph 1990; Thelin 1996). Indeed, a safe assumption at many institutions, particularly those in the major Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conferences, is that the head football coach and athletic director have more name recognition than the university's president or the most renowned faculty member. Much of the research on elite college athletics laments the damage done to undergraduate education (Bowen and Levin 2003; Sperber 2000), the rise of commercialism (Zimbalist 1999), and the tremendous financial drain on institutions (Bok 2003). Although these concerns are serious ones for higher education, elite college athletics have the potential to promote institutional identity—increasing prominence (Toma and Cross 1998), escalating prestige (Brewer et al. 2002), and creating differentiation among otherwise often indistinguishable universities (Toma 2003).

Corporate advertisers relish the audience that American collegiate football games attract (Gray 1996). According to the Neilson ratings, over 69 million households in the United States watched the five BCS bowl games during the 2006–2007 season. No single marketing strategy or effort of higher education institutions reaches the sheer number of

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people as do televised football games. This audience represents a significant expansion beyond traditional target groups such as potential students, alumni, and donors. During these broadcasts, television networks typically provide the two competing universities with a 30-second advertising spot[1] to showcase their institution. Only one study has examined the impact of these commercials on student expectations (Tobolowsky and Lowery 2006). Marketing during football games provides an opportunity to reach a sizable portion of the university's external consumers and constituents, and the television audience for a sporting event represents a wide swath of the community. As a result, commercials during these events present a prime opportunity for institutions seeking to reach a large audience to enhance their institutional brand (Blumenstyk 2008).

The higher education literature provides only limited evidence to understand the various marketing strategies and tactics presently employed by colleges and universities (Kirp 2003). In the current environment, marketing strategies and the protection of image are incredibly significant to institutions, especially those seeking greater prestige (Brewer et al. 2002; Kittle 2000). Heightened competition for students, faculty, and external resources means that institutions are constantly battling one another with image as a key differentiator in the marketplace. Higher education institutions receive countless proposals from consultants to assist in brand development (Frank 2000). Yet little empirical research exists in terms of how colleges and universities create their institutional image and brand. My goal in this study was to understand the messages sent out by colleges and universities during nationally televised bowl games. Specifically, I used the concept of brand personality to examine these messages. This work provides an initial empirical glimpse into institutional messages directed towards external audiences. The data for this study come from an analysis of the visual, acoustic, and narrative elements of commercials that aired during the 2006–2007 bowl season. I first review the theoretical concept of branding from the business literature, suggesting the use of branding services as opposed to goods as a more appropriate approach for examining higher education branding.

Branding Within Higher Education

Businesses use branding techniques to differentiate themselves from others in the marketplace (Aaker 1991, 1996). Aaker (1991) defined a brand as a "distinguishing name and/or symbol" (p. 7) used to identify and distinguish between competitors. Branding serves as a central tenet of marketing because of the role it plays in helping customers decide between and among different products (Aaker 1996). This influence over consumer choices makes the brand a valuable organizational asset to be developed, nurtured, and protected (Grace and O'Cass 2005; Keller 2003). Whether the golden arches of McDonald's or the "Enjoy Coca-Cola" slogan, the importance of a brand is critical, although often intangible. The brand's relationship to the organization and consumers is of paramount concern to institutional leaders because of the benefits reputation provides financially and symbolically. A strong brand may increase student demand, and institutional prestige may improve faculty hiring. Many critics within higher education fear that the use of branding leads to a commodification detrimental to fulfilling a larger public purpose (e.g., Hayes and Wynyard 2006). This is part of the larger concern espoused by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) about the threat to the public purposes of institutions. Higher education has historically avoided explicit discussions of

[1] I use the terms advertisement and commercial interchangeably in this study.

marketing and the adaptation of advertising strategies such as branding. Notwithstanding these concerns, branding as a construct has been successfully utilized within higher education, though such work has seen limited application to date (Sevier 2001; Toma et al. 2005). Typical uses of branding relate to admissions or the use of logos in higher education. What little work that does exist on higher education branding is devoted to broad generalities with few empirical studies on the current activities of universities to market themselves as a brand (Fickes 2003; Lowrie 2006; Moore 2004).

With an appreciation for concerns about viewing higher education as a commodity, a more apt parallel exists within the business literature for higher education scholars. The research on firms that provide services presents a more applicable starting point for higher education branding (see Mazzarol and Soutar 1999 for further discussion of this connection). Applying branding to higher education is complicated by the fact that no significant research exists on how to develop and communicate a service brand despite a rather sizable body of empirical research on marketing service-oriented firms (Opoku 2005). The inherent individuality of providing a service and weighing the worth of that service to a larger population is a key source of difficulty in this arena (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1999; Firth 1993; Fitzgerald 1988). The value of Ritz-Carlton, Holiday Inn, or Motel 6 is a result of an individual decision-making process weighing factors of price, amenities, and location. In addition, consumer perceptions of quality form the basis for assumptions about a range of hotel attributes from cleanliness to comfort to room service. As a result, a real challenge exists in accounting for individual decision-making and perceptions. This challenge suggests the value and necessity of applying what we know about branding products to service organizations (Bateson 1995; Turley and Moore 1995). As Zemsky et al. (2005) have argued, the same difficulty exists for higher education consumers who must evaluate the quality and value of the services colleges and universities provide both directly and indirectly. Parents and students consistently face difficulty in comparing the services offered by higher education institutions despite the plethora of rankings and guides that focus not only on the "Best Colleges," but also the "Best Buy Colleges," attempting to balance price and quality.

In order to overcome the challenges of consumer preferences in service industries, the organization itself becomes the brand with a distinct identity, personality, and image (Onkvisit and Shaw 1989; Thomas 1978). Instead of branding a Big Mac or a Diet Coke, colleges and universities brand themselves, giving us iconic brands such as Harvard, Princeton, and Morehouse. In this scenario, the brand is further defined by the perception and personality of the institution and relevant stakeholders. To use Weick's (1995) concept, the act of sensemaking between the university and consumer provides a foundation for the ongoing relationship between the two entities. Universities are reliant upon external audiences for support, and the brand can serve as a mediating force in these interactions.

Consumers react and respond to a brand particularly where values and beliefs are embedded as is the case of higher education. Institutions (and their brands) and consumers are both active agents negotiating with one another. This varied and changing relationship between higher education and consumers can be mediated through the use of branding strategies. As a result, branding in higher education must move beyond simply reaching out to potential customers; it should also seek to establish relationships with all of the various consumers in the state and region. Marketing efforts in higher education have focused on potential students and parents for many years (Wasmer and Bruner 1999). The general public, governments, and businesses all consume the knowledge, graduates, and economic development generated by universities. As a result, institutions increasingly need to build partnerships with these entities, which can be fostered through strategic branding activities.

Unfortunately, much of the research in this area focuses on the individual or consumer perspective without exploring the role of the organization as an active agent in the relationship. More importantly, a brand serves as the primary point of interaction between the organization's activities and the consumer's perceptions as well as expectations (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). These interactions are exceedingly complex with numerous constituencies and consumers who have an interest in brand development and implementation. Administrators, faculty, students, alumni, employers, and legislators are among the many groups who are heavily invested in the institutional brand. These groups are not only concerned about the success of the brand, but also serve as audiences for branding strategies. As a result of these continuous interactions, higher education branding is remarkably difficult to implement in a meaningful way for the diverse values of each constituency.

The literature regarding the development of mission statements demonstrates the ways institutions communicate with various constituencies (Carruthers and Lott 1981; Lang and Lopers-Sweetman 1991; Newsom and Hayes 1991). The messages sent through mission statements convey a sense of the values that colleges and universities wish to impart to internal and external audiences (Morphew and Hartley 2006). The advertisements studied here have an audience and substance similar to that of mission statements in that the images, language, and symbols in the institutional bowl game commercials communicate the values, beliefs, and priorities of the sponsoring university. However, the process for creating the spots is not nearly as exhaustive as that which is typical for the development or revision of mission statements (Lang and Lopers-Sweetman 1991). The strategic planning steps used for mission statements can serve a valuable role in unifying constituencies around common goals (Bean and Kuh 1984). University marketing efforts are more representative of administrative goals for enrollment and institutional positioning than of the goal of building broad-based consensus about institutional purpose and direction. As a result, these advertisements are particularly useful in understanding the goals and values of the university's administration.

Conceptual Framework

In order to examine in this study how universities communicate messages and portray their brand, I used the notion of brand personality from the consumer behavior literature (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001; Albanese 1989; Fournier 1998). Brand personality refers to the "set of human characteristics associated with a brand," and it serves a symbolic or self-expressive function (Aaker 1997, p. 347). For example, the Walt Disney Company has perfected its brand over the last seven decades as a provider of wholesome family entertainment through movies, home videos, theme parks, and cruise ships. Nordstom's department stores have built upon a brand of sophistication and top-notch service. Visiting Disneyland or shopping at Nordstrom's evokes positive feelings in the consumer. Much of the research on brand personality focuses on the self-expressive aspect of how consumers use a brand and its personality to convey messages to others (Keller 1993; Kim et al. 2001). However, most useful in this study is the potentially symbolic role that brand personality may play. Marketing researchers suggest that brand personality can increase levels of trust in a brand (Fournier 1994) as well as evoke an emotional response from consumers (Biel 1993). Furthermore, brands that do not have personalities struggle to build and grow relationships with customers (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000).

Although the value of brand personalities is well established, the scholarly literature on the subject is plagued by a lack of a systemic construct to analyze the idea. In an attempt to remedy this deficiency, Aaker (1997) adapted the "Big Five" dimensions of human personality from psychology—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience—to create a generalizable framework that can be applied across product lines and populations. Her framework has been extensively debated and utilized within the marketing literature (i.e., Austin et al. 2003). Similar to human personalities, brand personalities are comprised of more specific traits that are used to classify the brand's personality. For example, Mercedes represents upper class, which is a trait that makes up the sophistication brand personality. My data analysis uses this concept of brand traits to examine the messages conveyed by institutions in their advertisements. The framework is useful for studying the current status of a brand as well as future possibilities (Aaker 1997). A brand personality should effectively communicate and in many ways embody core institutional values. The existing research literature fails to address brands in higher education as a significant strategy for communicating institutional values and beliefs. A strong brand personality can provide a basis for colleges and universities to establish and build upon existing relationships with external stakeholders (Blackston 1993).

Research Question and Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how institutions made use of the 30-second television spot during bowl games to present their institutional brand. The primary research question guiding this work was: *How do college and universities promote their institutional brand to external audiences through the use of television spots during the football bowl game season?*

My initial sample consisted of 64 institutions that participated in bowl games during the 2006–2007 bowl season. However, my first analysis showed a demonstrable difference in the quality and substance of the advertisements of universities from the major athletic conferences, which have sufficient resources and television exposure to make an investment in advertising, and the advertisements of smaller institutions, the games of which may be televised only once or twice a year. Consequently, I selected a purposeful sample of 43 universities from the six athletic conferences (Atlantic Coast, Big 10, Big 12, Big East, Pacific 10, and the Southeastern) that comprise the Bowl Championship Series. Thirty-eight of these universities are public institutions. Appendix A contains a list of institutions included in this study. These universities boast a significant television presence and displayed evidence of marketing resources devoted to their commercials. The significant financial resources and popularity of athletic programs formed an additional justification for their inclusion in the study. I recorded each institution's television spot on videotape before converting to digital files to facilitate data analysis.

At the conclusion of the 2006–2007 bowl season, I coded the 43 commercials from the selected universities for themes related to institutional branding. Guided by the concept of brand personality traits, I used content analysis to identify each commercial's visual and narrative components. To complete this, I coded each commercial in its entirety focusing on message elements such as the narration, music, images, characters, and scenes. An inductive analytic approach was used to examine the patterns emerging from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The qualitative nature of this study required the subjectivity of the researcher although intercoder reliability is important to achieve greater trustworthiness

(Rust and Cooil 1994). As a result, I asked a second researcher to separately code a subset of ten commercials that elicited similar codes related to the conceptual framework.

As explained, the study focused on institutional advertising during bowl games. A limitation of this approach is that some institutions use different commercials during other football games or have alternate versions of their spots. Additionally, by focusing on the mass audience available during football games, this study excludes other advertising outlets and strategies that may help establish or augment institutional brand. However, the symbolic and generally recognized importance of bowl games to both the institution and television audience warrants a focus on these advertisements specifically.

Findings

Data analysis revealed five themes that formed the major aspects of the institutional advertisements, as indicated in Table I.

Campus Characteristics

The characteristics of the campuses in this study formed a basic component of each advertisement. Institutions highlighted aspects of their campuses by directly mentioning them verbally or more often implicitly as part of the background. The size of the campus was a selling point for both small and large institutions, seeking to convey the positive features available to each. Images of campus appeared in twenty advertisements and epitomized the popular conception of a college campus— red brick academic buildings, tree-lined grassy quads, and students studying in solitude on a conveniently located bench. One of the most powerful characteristics communicated was the sense of community and

Table I Five Major Themes and Traits

Theme	Traits
Campus characteristics	• Size • Beauty • Community/family
Academics	• Variety and uniqueness of academic programs • Research conducted by faculty and students • Contact with Faculty • Award winning, renowned faculty
Co-curricular engagement	• Exciting and fun • Outdoor recreation • Intercollegiate athletics • Community service
Prestige building	• Rankings • History/tradition • Cutting edge • Successful alumni
Mission/purpose	• Help achieve dreams • Exploration • Economic development • Service to the state

even family that one joins upon becoming part of the institution. Whether one joins the "Gator Nation" at the University of Florida or becomes a terrapin at the University of Maryland, the sense of a larger community dominated many of the institutional advertisements.

Academics

A refrain of nineteen institutions was "success beyond athletics," highlighting the juxtaposition between a football team playing in a nationally televised bowl game and a serious academic organization. During their entire commercial, for example, the University of Nebraska focused on optometry research showing a close-up of a person's eye while the University of Tennessee highlighted their unique forensic academy. Institutions used their advertisement to highlight specific academic programs and research endeavors that exhibited the significant academic activities taking place. Commercials were also used to bring attention to new undertakings such as the emphasis on public health at the University of Georgia, which recently opened a School of Public Health. Related to the messages of serious academic programs and research activity is the depiction of intimate contact with faculty members. Faculty images presented faculty members working with students in small groups or classes. The University of South Carolina's spot shows a faculty member and a traditional-aged undergraduate intimately discussing the importance of simply "asking the question." Fourteen advertisements within this group touted faculty members as nationally renowned in their research as validated by the number of awards and fellowships received in recent years.

Co-Curricular Engagement

The theme of co-curricular activities represented a significant aspect of twenty-two institutional advertisements. College life was depicted as exciting and fun rather than as time spent in boring lectures or studying for finals in the library. There are organizations to join, friends to make, and events to attend. Campuses are active places teeming with co-curricular opportunities to fit any student's interests. Student amenities were also included such as new dormitories, rock climbing walls, or swimming pools in nineteen commercials. Institutions highlighted particularly popular activities available on their campuses. Oregon State, for example, highlighted the outdoor recreation possible in the woods of the Pacific Northwest while the University of West Virginia showed an image of a crew team. Taking advantage of geographic possibilities for outdoor activity formed a key trait to attract potential students.

In remarkable contrast to the academic message of "success beyond athletics," five institutions sought to communicate the opportunities to attend a school with big time college athletics. Stadiums of screaming fans (and occasionally students) provided a scene of an exciting American university with plenty to do on Saturday afternoons in the fall. Three institutions moved beyond the fun and exciting environment to extol the virtues of community service opportunities available to students.

Prestige Building

The pursuit of prestige increasingly has come to dominate the discourse and operations of higher education (Brewer et al. 2002). Nine universities examined in this study sent messages regarding their prestige using a number of internal and external validation measures. The use of national rankings furthered assertions of prestige by demonstrating that an external group corroborated the institution's claim of quality. These references often were vague, providing little direct reference or context. For example, Ohio State's advertisement prominently mentions that its dance program is ranked first in the nation, but does not explain the ranking. (The graduate program was ranked first in the United States and Canada by a trade publication.) Rankings were a significant feature of the University of Iowa's commercial, which listed the university's "remarkable" achievements: seven programs ranked in the top ten of their fields nationally, ranking as an educational value, and 16th ranking in overall research funding. Big bold numbers flashed on the screen in these advertisements, leaving no doubt of the emphasis on numerical rankings. The mere mention of a "ranked" program apparently was perceived as sufficient justification for the claim of success. The brand message implies that ranking ensures credibility although the audience has little to no information upon which to base its opinion of the validity of the rankings or the institution. The use of rankings served the purpose of demonstrating the quality and prestige of the institution.

History and tradition are of tremendous value to colleges and universities (Thelin 2004). Higher education consumers often equate history with prestige; thus institutions have an incentive to make claims to long storied traditions. Not surprisingly, tradition appeared as the most common element in thirty of the advertisements. References to tradition varied from the central message of six of the advertisements to simply one of several smaller elements This also confirms the earlier work of Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006), who found honoring tradition a major theme of bowl commercials in their study. The "Senior Walk" at the University of Arkansas formed the basis for its advertisement; the institution portrays the walk as three miles of graduates including famous teachers, scientists, and athletes. The baritone-voiced narrator describes the institution as "proudly embracing its past" since the first seniors put their names in cement in 1876. The visual images of the campus include students strolling across the walk surrounded by green grass and large oaks while bold orchestral music plays in the background. The commercial clearly demonstrates the importance that the institution gives to its history, alumni, and traditions.

A tension in marketing higher education institutions arises from the need to focus on history and tradition while at the same time appearing innovative and on the cutting edge. The advertisement of the University of California at Berkeley illustrates this tension by citing its "long tradition of untraditional excellence" using scenes from the 1960s as well as the famous 1982 football game between Stanford and Berkeley. The commercial moves quickly between images demonstrating an exciting history and future potential. Sending the message of a history-rich university conducting cutting edge research forms the core of increasing institutional prestige.

Famous alumni and supporters of the institutions in this study were evident in nine advertisements. The University of Southern California used its entire advertisement to depict a range of alumni in a variety of fields to show its history of creating leaders. Just as in many business advertisements, prominent celebrities served as spokespersons for their alma maters. Oklahoma State University's commercial features country singer Garth Brooks attributing the success he has achieved with his connection to the university and boasting of the potential benefits for students and parents alike. Rutgers University also duplicates the approach of featuring prominent alumni, such as actor and Rutgers alumni James Gandolfini. In the commercial, Gandolfini is shown speaking with fellow alumni and famed chef Mario Batali. The overall theme of the commercial is "It all starts at Rutgers." The commercial conveys the message that the institution serves as the foundation for future career success. It is evident that institutions hope that building prestige through the utilization of national rankings, traditions, and successful alumni will provide an advantage in improving their competitive position within the marketplace.

Mission/Purpose

The commercials did not directly deal with the issue of mission, yet they communicated traits representative of their respective missions. A major focus of nineteen commercials was on the private benefits that can occur by helping students achieve their dreams. Whether the dream is the ability to get into a top graduate school or a Fortune 500 company, the university stands ready and willing to make that dream a reality. Higher education also presents the opportunity for students to explore all of the possibilities available through the plethora of academic and research endeavors underway. However, these endeavors were not solely tied to student success. Three commercials touted the economic successes of universities in creating new technologies and bringing new jobs to the state. Particularly troublesome is that only four of the institutions in this study focused in a serious way on their service functions within the state beyond economic development. The overwhelming number of institutions in this study are public, yet that function of their missions was largely missing in the messages conveyed through the bowl advertisements.

Discussion

In spite of the lofty ideals expressed in institutional mission statements (Morphew and Hartley 2006), the messages conveyed through the institutional advertisements studied focus on the private benefits leading to a commodification of higher education (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Colleges and universities are sending a message of individual success as a central component of their activities. Selling campus characteristics, academics, and co-curricular activities—and even outright fun—while neglecting the larger purposes of a higher education leads to an escalation of student consumerism. This focus creates a self-perpetuating cycle of consumerism leading to the creation of an academic smorgasbord and expensive student amenities, which in turn only causes more consumerism. Certainly institutions should be responsive to student needs, but the larger principles expressed by the institution also merit consideration in institutional decision-making.

There are challenges facing institutions as they communicate with external audiences. History and tradition were major traits communicated by institutions in the study. In many ways, these elements were used to promote the prestige and quality of the institution. However, the history of higher education reflects the exclusion of persons and groups not based upon academic ability but rather upon discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or religion. History and tradition represent the worst of academe to these historically underrepresented groups. Branding can help improve relationships, but only through the use of proactive planning and strategy. Leveraging an institutional brand to strengthen identity has the potential for encouraging a broader participation in the higher education enterprise (Toma et al. 2005). This strategy takes advantage of the symbolic potential of brand personalities. Specifically, the research on higher education branding and the results of this study should cause institutions to examine the messages conveyed in their advertisements. A focus on the messages that colleges and universities seek to communicate as well as the larger implications of such messages should persuade administrators to better evaluate and in many cases reconsider marketing efforts.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most telling and disconcerting conclusion of this work is the basic question: What difference exists between institutions? If every institution is performing cutting edge research, has famous alumni, a rich tradition of excellence, and is nationally ranked, how are external audiences able to judge the quality of the institution (and its brand)? An important role of branding and brand personality is to help differentiate products and sellers in the marketplace. Higher education institutions, through the medium of televised advertisements, have not been able to create a real distinctiveness between one another despite the benefits of doing so (Townsend, Newell, & Wiese, 1992). Surely, in part this conflict lies in the normative expectations that have created the American collegiate ideal (Toma 2003). Consumers have only these expectations to rely upon for making their decisions regarding higher education with the dubious nature of external validation such as national rankings. Furthermore, branding has the yet unrealized potential to build relationship and connection with external partners including underrepresented groups. Additional research is needed to explore the impact of institutional messages on current and future students. The literature should more fully address with empirical work the question of what messages universities are sending to external audiences as well as the organizational decision-making behind these commercials and other marketing outlets. Without a better understanding of branding in the higher education market, institutions are left to struggle in an ever-escalating marketing competition.

Appendix A: Institutions Included in Study

Arizona State University	University of Georgia
Auburn University	University of Iowa
Boston College	University of Kentucky
Clemson University	University of Louisville
Florida State University	University of Maryland
Georgia Institute of Technology	University of Miami
Kansas State University	University of Michigan
Louisiana State University	University of Minnesota
Ohio State University	University of Missouri
Oklahoma State University	University of Nebraska
Oregon State University	University of Oklahoma
Pennsylvania State University	University of Oregon
Purdue University	University of South Carolina
Rutgers University	University of South Florida
Texas A & M University	University of Southern California
Texas Tech University	University of Tennessee
University of Alabama	University of Texas
University of Arkansas	University of Wisconsin
University of California at Berkeley	Virginia Polytechnic Institute
University of California at Los Angeles	Wake Forest University
University of Cincinnati	West Virginia University
University of Florida	

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