

Branding Athletics in Canadian Higher Education

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By

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Abstract

Higher education institutions require competitive branding strategies to differentiate product offerings in the higher education market. Higher education institutions incorporate multiple brand identities into branding strategies that offer unique offerings to various audiences.

Extending the brand identity of an institution is a common branding strategy, allowing a deeper, more meaningful connection with specific audiences internally and externally. A successful extension of higher education institutions is the introduction of an athletic program for collegiate sport competition. The athletic program often develops an alternative brand identity differing from the institution identity. The scope of this thesis considers how athletic programs are branded and named at Canadian higher education institutions and what impact this has on brand alignment with the overall institution brand identity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education institutions are defined by their perceived identities, reputations, and core values. Those characteristics are traditionally portrayed by branding developed through heritage association of institutional insignia, logos, programs, or physical attributes (Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen, & Wilson, 2016). The role of branding within higher education has seen significant growth recently as competition rises and institutions seek opportunities to develop unique propositions to differentiate themselves within a saturating market (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Brands can be defined as a marker of a firm's offering to simplify choice decisions for consumers (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). The brand of a higher education institution is often comprised of individual sub-brands, which include faculties, research groups, or campus clubs. Each of these stakeholders present a unique brand an institution must manage and align to the overall institution brand identity. Brand identity can be defined as, the unique set of brand associations that an organization aspires to create and maintain (Srivastava, 2011). The collection of brands and brand identities associated with a higher education institution are powerful marketing tools to reach various stakeholder groups.

Extending the brand identity of an institution is a common branding strategy, allowing a deeper and more meaningful connection with specific audiences both internal and external to a higher education institution. A common and historically successful extension of a higher education institution is the introduction of an athletic program for collegiate sport competition (Feezell, 2015). An athletic program provides institutions with unique branding or marketing tools that include team mascots, alternative logos, revenue generation, and media coverage (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016). The benefits from a developed athletic program brand provides higher education

institutions a platforms to recruit, retain, or grow the student population, or external funding opportunities (Baade, Baumann, & Matheson, 2008; Pope & Pope, 2014; Wann, Brame, Clarkson, Brooks, & Waddill, 2008). The scope of athletic branding in higher education literature is centered to American institutions and the applicability of this research to alternative countries is questioned (Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016).

The content analysis of Canadian higher education athletic program websites completed in this study revealed that their branding strategies often diverge from the overall institution branding strategies, particularly in Canadian universities. However, these athletic branding strategies can still serve as crucial elements in shaping the institution's brand identity. This research poses the following question:

How do Canadian higher education institutions assess their success in developing, implementing, and aligning their athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies?

It is crucial to emphasize that all the higher education institutions involved in this study have an effective and successful branding strategy. The intention of this research was not centered on identifying and establishing a singular best practice; instead, its focus was on identifying the present operational dynamics of athletic branding within the context of Canadian higher education, specifically examining the relationship between central communications and the athletics unit. The interpretation of success, as well as the criteria for its assessment, varies uniquely across institutions. However, a recurring and consistently positive response emerged: the branding of athletic programs was perceived as successful in Canadian higher education institutions. Within this study, we outline the key factors, as voiced by participants, that contribute to aligning athletic and central communication branding efforts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Brand Equity

To understand the challenges, opportunities, and current capabilities associated with higher education branding, it is essential to analyze the factors that contribute to this dynamic landscape; in doing so, it is equally imperative to recognize and assess the pivotal role that brand equity plays within this context. The two dominant brand equity theories include the Brand Equity Model (Aaker, 2009) and Customer-Based Brand Equity model (Keller, 1993). Aaker (2009) emphasizes the importance of brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations to build brand equity. Meanwhile, Keller (1993) focuses on the importance of developing strong brand associations through various touchpoints and emphasizes the role of the customer attitudes and perceptions in shaping brand equity. Both theories emphasize the importance of creating strong brand associations, establishing brand relevance and differentiation, and building customer loyalty and positive attitudes towards the brand in building and maintaining brand equity. In the higher education sector, institutions must compete for students, faculty, or resources, and brand equity can play a critical role in attracting and retaining these stakeholders. Keller (1993) provides a framework for understanding how higher education institutions can build and maintain strong brand associations with students, faculty, and alumni by focusing on factors such as brand salience, performance, and imagery.

Brand equity is discussed in higher education literature because it is a critical component of higher education branding as it poses a significant influence on various stakeholders. Chapleo (2010) suggests a successful university brand is one that effectively communicates its unique strengths and values to its target audience, while also meeting the expectations of stakeholders such as students, staff, and funders. Supporting the need for successful communication between

stakeholders, Whisman (2009) emphasizes the importance of internal branding in building and maintaining a strong higher education brand, suggesting higher education institutions should invest more in internal branding initiatives to ensure that their faculty, staff, and students are fully aligned with the higher education institution's brand identity and are committed to delivering on its brand promise. By doing so, higher education institutions can differentiate themselves from their competitors and enhance their brand equity in the highly competitive higher education sector (Chapleo, 2010; Whisman, 2009). Higher education institutions need to focus on developing a strong and differentiated brand identity that resonates with their target audience while also building strong relationships with their stakeholders to enhance their brand equity.

Today's higher education market forces institutions to become increasingly brand-conscious and increase marketing and branding activities (Bunzel, 2007). There is an increased importance of universities building strong brands to compete in an increasingly crowded and competitive marketplace within higher education (Chapleo, 2010) requiring specific brand strategies. Amidst the relentless pursuit of building brand equity for higher education institutions in an ever increasingly competitive market, there arises a need to contemplate whether branding can potentially surpass its intended boundaries. Jevons (2006) identifies a critical perspective on higher education branding, arguing that many institutions are using branding inappropriately and in ways that can harm their reputation and credibility.

The reputation of a higher education institution stands as a vital element in the overall perception of its brand equity, as highlighted by Rauschnabel et al. (2016). The strategic choices made in branding have the potential to either enhance or diminish this perceived quality, thereby exerting a significant influence on the overall brand equity of a higher education institution.

However, Jevons (2006) suggests institutions are too focused on marketing and branding activities and not enough on delivering high-quality education and research. Jevons (2006) argues that higher education institutions should prioritize their core mission and values over branding and marketing efforts and warns against the potential negative consequences of an expanding brand portfolio. A strong higher education brand has the potential to attract and retain students, faculty, and funding while bolstering the institution's reputation and prestige (Mourad, Ennew, & Kortam, 2011). However, a sub-brand such as the athletic brand may also be viewed as a divergence from the institution's fundamental values and mission, potentially resulting in a brand identity crisis between academic and research activities to branding and marketing efforts (Jevons, 2006). Maintaining a balance between the advantages and disadvantages of branding is crucial to create a durable and effective brand while prioritizing the institution's fundamental objectives and values.

Brand equity measurement in higher education and academic brands requires a different approach compared to that used for corporate brands. Research within the last decade has seen growth in testing brand equity scales to the higher education context, emphasizing the differences between higher education and corporate brand equity along with the identifying the maturity of a higher education market and the influence it has on brand equity (Mourad, Meshreki, & Sarofim, 2020). Scales directly measuring the dimensions of brand equity within the higher education sector are tested empirically (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & E. Boyt, 2014) suggesting higher education institutions can enhance their brand equity by investing in marketing and communication efforts that effectively convey their unique strengths and values to their target audience. Pinar et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of understanding the dimensions

of higher education brand equity and how they influence stakeholders' perceptions and behaviors.

Additionally, brand equity has been studied in the context of higher education athletics. Hanson, Bryant, and Lyman (2020) investigate the relationship between intercollegiate athletic programs, university brand equity, and student satisfaction. Hanson et al. (2020) find intercollegiate athletic programs have a significant positive effect on university brand equity, which in turn has a significant positive effect on student satisfaction. Specifically, the results indicate students perceive the institution as having a strong brand when they perceive the athletic programs as successful and high-quality. This aligns with literature viewing athletic teams as a prominent resource to increase the student experience on a campus (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). The significance of intercollegiate athletic programs as a substantial driving force behind the overall brand equity of higher education institutions and student satisfaction cannot be overstated. The literature suggests higher education institutions can leverage the success and quality of their athletic programs to enhance their brand equity and improve student satisfaction.

The literature suggests a strong relationship between higher education brand equity and higher education athletic brand equity. Higher education athletic programs can positively impact an institution's overall brand equity. However, it is important for universities to carefully balance the benefits of leveraging athletic programs for branding purposes and ensure they remain focused on their core mission and values while building a strong and enduring brand.

2.2: Brand Extensions

The relationship between a higher education institution and the athletic program can be described as a brand extension. Brand extensions are a branding strategy that uses a primary and

significant brand name to enter an alternative product category (Aaker, 1990; Aaker & Keller, 1990). A brand extension is a frequent strategy existing brands use when extending their product line or entering a new market (Völckner, Sattler, Hennig-Thurau, & Ringle, 2010). Extensive research has been completed to identify the fit between a parent brand and the extension category to determine the authenticity of an extension (Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012). Spiggle et al. (2012) further indicate successful brand extensions enhance the equity of a parent brand allowing an evolution of the brand meaning. Thus, the parent brand must already contain a strong image, personality, and reputation (Milberg, Goodstein, Sinn, Cuneo, & Epstein, 2013). Brand extensions are a common brand strategy used by higher education institutions to effectively reach the various stakeholders associated to the institution.

A higher education institutions' brand may be comprised of various individual brands that work together to develop a congruent brand image. Faculties, research groups, or programs are a few descriptors for sub-brands at a higher education institution. Often, these sub-brands will incorporate the master brand profile but adapt certain qualities to present a distinct brand targeted towards a smaller, more specific audience (Chapleo, 2015). Branding sub-brands within higher education institutions involves managing relations with internal and external stakeholders (Sataøen, 2019). Through a survey conducted by Chapleo (2015), respondents identified the institutional brand is the driver of brand meaning and sub brands contributed a smaller driver role. The article further described respondents alluded to the 'branded house' theory developed by (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000, p. 10) define a branded house as, a branded house uses a single master brand to span a set of offerings that operate with only descriptive sub-brands. The 'branded house' theory appears to be the most suitable for higher education branding of sub-brands (Chapleo, 2010, 2015). Chapleo (2015) further add

sub-brands at higher education institutions may not always produce congruent brand architecture, and thus creates a significant branding challenge for higher education institutions.

Sub-brands under a higher education institution are required to produce a congruent identity and image which often produce challenges for institutions since sub-brands are developed for a spectrum of audiences (Yuan, Liu, Luo, & Yen, 2016). Effective branding must communicate stakeholder perceptions associated with an institution, program quality, and feelings associated with extracurricular offerings (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Successful branding of higher education institutions should offer value to a spectrum of audiences associated under the primary institution brand (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, and Gordon (2008) describe internal branding success as alignment of brand messages for multiple groups. An institution that can align branding of sub-brands to a cohesive institution strategy will present a stronger brand position as described in Rauschnabel et al. (2016). Chapleo (2015) reported that higher education executives reported tension exists between the primary institution and faculty brands, but the tension is not necessarily a negative issue. Instead, the tension is used strategically to reach the groups along the higher education spectrum. The development of sub-brands is increasingly important to establish an extended institution brand identity that resonates beyond a single audience.

Brand extensions offer sport organizations the opportunity to move into industries beyond the core sport entertainment offering (Walsh & Lee, 2012). Walsh and Lee (2012) identify sporting brand extensions often include team merchandise stores, magazines, or sport camps. Each extension differentiates product offerings from the core sport entertainment to find additional revenue streams. Walsh and Ross (2010) add brand extensions in sports minimally dilute the brand of the parent organization. A sporting organization that is a brand extension of a

parent brand is perceived as a driver in the community to improve the image and standing of the parent brand (Walsh, Hwang, Lim, & Pedersen, 2015). Sporting organizations offer extensive evidence of successful development and usefulness of brand extension strategy.

2.3: Branding in Higher Education

The higher education branding literature has addressed management strategies, challenges, and factors contributing to developing the university brand identity. Kalafatis, Ledden, Riley, and Singh (2016) acknowledged the growth of literature contributing to the relevance, management, and effectiveness of higher education branding while contributing to our understanding of how strategic brand alliances can impact institutions when branding higher education. The complex nature of higher education branding and the differences between operating in the service and private sectors is studied (Wilson & Elliot, 2016). A key contribution identified is the unique characteristics of branding education as opposed to consumer products. Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) provided an extensive summary of the importance of branding in academia and the limited literature available specifically discussing branding in higher education. Branding is currently a relevant and important topic in higher education research.

Branding higher education has seen significant growth within the last decade because of distinct market pressures. The competitive nature of higher education requires institutions to adopt increasingly complex brand strategies (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011). Mourad et al. (2011) identified an important context for branding higher education research that is acknowledging students are seen as consumers within the higher education sector. Understanding this context allows higher education institutions to pivot from traditional branding strategies focused on ‘selling the program’ and instead focus on ‘selling the lifestyle’ (C. R. Chard &

Potwarka, 2017). Increasing competition between universities at both the local and global levels add to the need to leverage, manage, and maintain a strong brand position (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Sataøen (2019) claimed that higher education branding is more important than it ever was and is a strategic and managerial issue. Thus, the strategic direction is a priority to ensure students, faculty, and stakeholders are recruited and retained to address the ever changing competition (Sataøen, 2019).

The growth of branding within higher education is not without challenges. Higher education institutions operate as service orientated organizations. Competition among service based organizations is also increasing as the competitive environment intensifies, which directly impacts higher education services (Judson et al., 2008). The increase in competition can be attributed to limited resources available to higher education institutions through endowments, grants, faculty positions, and donations (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Pinar et al., 2011). Commercial branding strategies are not directly applicable to higher education without extensive alteration and accommodations (Chapleo, 2010; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Higher education institutions have unique service offerings and organizational structures, which complicates brand development.

Important higher education branding concerns include the effects of market changes and the continued globalization of the education market (Chapleo, 2015; Pinar et al., 2011). Discussion revolves around how higher education institutions must communicate a distinct image, identity, or reputation to differentiate themselves in a saturating market (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Pinar et al., 2011; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Strong and distinct university brands are required to enhance the awareness of an institution (Chapleo, 2015). University reputations were initially linked to unique institutional program offerings, but now those reputations are built

on distinct institutional advantages as reflected by their brand identities (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). The role of image and reputation within higher education branding has been studied over the past fifteen years (Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown, 2006; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016), but branding in higher education is still a relatively new topic in the branding literature and has yet to be extensively researched (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2016).

The challenges associated with higher education branding require unique strategies developed at the administrative level. Brand management strategies are adopted to improve the reputation, image, ranking or identity of a higher education institution (Mourad et al., 2011; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Chapleo (2015) stated building a brand at a higher education institution is necessarily important, but conventional brand management techniques may be inappropriate for this sector. As highlighted by Chapleo (2015), effective brand management plays a vital role in addressing the challenges and distinctions of higher education branding. Additionally, the brands at an institution are used as an asset to sustain a competitive advantage strategically aligned to address various brand identities within an institution (Chapleo, 2015; Lowrie, 2007). Addressing the various brand identities in a higher education institution requires administrators to continually challenge and re-imagine the integrated marketing techniques, channels, and methods to further develop a higher education brand and brand identity (Judson et al., 2008).

2.4: Brand Name in Higher Education

A brand name and the equity built around this name is one of the most valuable assets an organization owns (Keller & Aaker, 1992). A brand name is the component of a brand that can be spoken or verbalized (Turley & Moore, 1995). Marketing literature suggests a good brand

name should be short, suggest benefits or qualities with a product, easy to spell, pronounce, and easily remembered (Turley & Moore, 1995). Complex brand names are often simplified by consumers to be more approachable (Robertson, 1989). All brand names carry meaning, elicit feelings and emotions and contribute to building brand equity (Wänke, Herrmann, & Schaffner, 2007). A brand name with substantial equity built around it provide organizations brand extension opportunities. Assessing a brand extension through name alone requires consumers to evaluate what they know about the primary brand to evaluate the fit, authenticity and alignment of the brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Spiggle et al., 2012).

Beyond product or service-based brand extensions, sport organizations extend their product through alternative team association. In the study Bernthal, Ballouli, and Nugent (2022) researchers addressed branding decisions for professional sporting organizations and their minor league affiliates. The study identified the professional team (parent brand) could choose to brand the minor league affiliate (sub-brand) after the parent brand name or choose a brand name unique to the community it will operate in. A unique locally branded name is based on the reasoning the brand will more effectively connect the team to the community through unique associations (Bernthal et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions have storied, respected names rich in meaning. The brand name of a higher education institution ignores simplistic naming practices because they require additional distinction in the market. Turley and Moore (1995) suggest service-based brands require additional description to highlight key benefits or associations. Literature discussing the naming style of higher education athletic brands is limited and there is no clear distinction for how the name of the brand extension is managed.

2.5: Branding Athletics in Higher Education

The brand and the role of the brand is one of the most important factors in determining success for professional sports teams (Rodrigue, Abeza, Seguin, & MacIntosh, 2021). Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014, p. 13) define sport marketing as,

Consisting of all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sports consumers through exchange processes. Sports marketing has developed two major thrusts: the marketing of sport products and services directly to consumers of sport, and marketing of other consumer and industrial products or services through the use of sport promotions (Mullin et al., 2014, p. 13).

This definition serves as an important base for how sport marketing is understood and practiced in the field. It highlights the fundamental objectives of sport marketing, which revolve around meeting the needs and wants of sports consumers through exchange processes. It provides a framework for professionals in the sport marketing industry to develop strategies that engage and attract sports consumers while also capitalizing on the unique appeal and reach of sports as a marketing platform. Teams strive to develop deep connections with their spectators and are most successful when an individual incorporates the team identity into their own personality (Wear, Collins, & Heere, 2018). Besides individual identification of a sports team, teams are identified as a symbol for communities, cities, provinces or even a university (Wear et al., 2018). Higher education brands are traditionally developed through academic acclaim, reputation, and historical values (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Mourad et al., 2011). The complexity of higher education brands arises from the presence of numerous sub-brands within an institution, each associated with a diverse range of stakeholders (Mourad et al., 2011). Nurturing these sub-brands alongside the primary higher education brand identity demands considerable focus. One significant sub-brand linked to a higher education institution is the athletic brand (Rauschnabel et al., 2016).

The relationship between a higher education institution and the athletic program is a debated topic about fit, belonging, and values. The athletic brand is distantly related to the educational mission, values, and reputation of a higher education institution (Feezell, 2015; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). The fundamental differences between academia and athletics causes concern for weakening the academic brand, but today's higher education market requires institutions to build brands beyond academics. Historically, athletic programs have provided American academic institutions with an integral revenue stream to support funding opportunities (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Athletic programs provide institutions a unique branding opportunity through televised games that can be viewed as a two-hour long advertisement (Judson, Gorchels, & Aurand, 2006). Athletics also provide higher education institutions with a powerful recruiting tool because of additional social factors contributing to the university experience (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Today, an institution's brand encompasses more than the academic prowess of the institution. An institution's brand must reflect multiple identities appealing to a spectrum of audiences (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013).

The brand identity of a sport organization is a foundational component to differentiate itself from competitors to provide an attractive, distinct offering (Linsner, Sotiriadou, Hill, & Hallmann, 2021). A sport organization also requires a strong brand identity to develop lasting relationships that have created memories, connections, and emotions for their fans (Rodrigue et al., 2021). Previous research in sport branding has identified the logo a team uses as the primary associated asset of a team's brand identity (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Wear et al., 2018; Wear et al., 2016). The athletic logo a higher education institution uses creates unique brand associations to the higher education brand (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) also revealed the academic logo is commonly associated with competence as

opposed to the athletic logo, which is commonly associated with excitement along a brand personality scale. These differences reinforce the perception for higher education institutions to develop distinct brands for various audiences. The brand identity of a sport organization is also related to the sponsorship partners an organization secures. Sporting stadiums and uniforms often bear the logo, name or slogan of corporate partners, effectively acting as a marketing channel for their brand (Jensen, Weston, & Wang, 2008; Walsh et al., 2015; Yu, Robinson, & Lee, 2020). Athletic programs at a higher education institutions are no different, seeking lucrative sponsorship of venues, uniforms, or national network television contracts (Gladden et al., 1998; Wear et al., 2016).

The discussion of branding athletics in higher education has been an important topic for United States of America based institutions. Rauschnabel et al. (2016) identified the role of athletics in American institutions as a major economic source and superior recruitment tool. The article also identifies the limitations of the athletic identity outside of the American market and instead, focuses the research on academic qualities to enhance the generalizability across countries. The American model for branding higher education athletics is more effective than the models of the primary competing higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Chapleo, 2015; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). The American model has fully integrated the athletic program identity into the higher education identity, which allows unique opportunities for higher education branding strategies. Canadian institutions have yet to develop the same levels of athletic integration into their overall brand identity because their athletics programs do not hold the same brand value (Danylchuk & MacLean, 2001).

As a result of large athletic budgets for American schools and the revenue generated by athletic programs, branding strategies have developed to hold the athletic prowess of the

institutions at the focal point. Athletic-focused branding strategies for American institutions allow athletic team names to become an integral piece of the student identities. This identity can impact student application decisions to attend a specific institution based on the institution identity developed due partly to the athletic program (Kaushal & Ali, 2020; Pope & Pope, 2014). The development of the athletic brand image and brand identity is aligned with the American-based university branding strategies and allows the institution to produce a cohesive branding message.

The nature of the American-based research is not directly applicable to Canadian universities because of fundamental differences between the structure of athletic and academic systems. Canadian institutions have limited budgets available for funding significant scholarships and the development of large-scale facilities (Danylchuk & MacLean, 2001). Additionally, Canadian higher education institutions face intense competition with American based NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) when recruiting star athletes (C. Chard, MacLean, & Faught, 2013). Student athletes who have the skill and aspiration to compete at the professional level are often recruited by Division 1 NCAA institutions because they have more lucrative scholarship offerings and exposure to national media (C. Chard et al., 2013; C. R. Chard & Potwarka, 2017).

2.6: Athletic Systems and Canadian Athletics

When examining higher education athletics in Canada, it is crucial to acknowledge the athletic sport systems throughout the world. In Canada and the United States, talented high school athletes traditionally pursue a college education while participating in their preferred sport (Laios, 1995). These athletes engage in intercollegiate leagues within their respective regions, representing their higher education institutions. The Canada and the United States sport system

places a strong emphasis on combining academic and sport participation prior to entering professional leagues (Nafziger, 2008). Athletes competing at the university level are classified as amateurs under governing bodies such as the NCAA in the United States or USports in Canada. Unlike professional athletes, university athletes are prohibited from receiving direct financial compensation from their institutions, with scholarship opportunities being the primary form of support (Nafziger, 2008). In both Canada and the United States, alternative pathways to achieve professional levels in sports exist through junior leagues like the Western Hockey League, Canadian Hockey League, or the United States Hockey League. These leagues provide an avenue for athletes to pursue their athletic careers independently of academic involvement, allowing them to focus solely on developing their skills in a professional setting, free from the demands of juggling academics and athletics.

In contrast, the European system places greater emphasis on nurturing athletes within club systems rather than relying on universities for their development (Fort, 2000). Athletes often enroll in professional club academies at a very young age, where their focus solely revolves around sport development (Laios, 1995). The integration of academics and sports is less pronounced within the European system, and as a result, players may enter professional leagues at a much younger age, with some even turning professional during their teenage years. In North America, club athletics do not hold as prominent a position and generally serve to provide sports that are not offered within educational institutions (Laios, 1995). As such, the role of educational institutions in sport offerings becomes crucial for the development of student-athletes before they reach the university or college level. These institutions play a pivotal role in nurturing young athletes, providing them with opportunities to participate in various sports and laying the foundation for their athletic development as they progress through their educational journey.

The North American sport systems distinguish themselves from the European sport system through their closed system of competition, in contrast to the pyramid structure prevalent in Europe (Nafziger, 2008). The closed system found in North American sports refers to the organizational structure of professional leagues (Van Bottenburg, 2013). Within this system, a fixed number of teams are granted membership and operate within a controlled league environment (Nafziger, 2008). Promotion or relegation based on performance does not exist, and teams retain their league membership regardless of their on-field success or failure. On the other hand, European sports adopt a pyramid structure characterized by a hierarchical system of leagues and divisions, allowing teams to ascend or descend the pyramid based on their in-season performance (Van Bottenburg, 2013). This structure facilitates promotion and relegation, providing clubs with the opportunity to climb to higher levels or face the risk of dropping to lower tiers based on their on-field results (Van Bottenburg, 2013).

The differences in sport systems between North America and Europe provide North American higher education institutions with a unique advantage, establishing them as a primary option for amateur competition and fostering a rich sporting culture within the university environment. The closed system in North American sports not only allows higher education institutions to serve as a steppingstone for athletes aspiring to play professionally but also creates a vibrant atmosphere of collegiate competition where students, alumni, and local communities rally behind their teams (Nafziger, 2008). As a result, North American higher education institutions stand out as vital hubs for amateur competition, nurturing the growth of athletes and fostering a strong sense of school spirit and community engagement.

Chapter 3: Study 1-Content Analysis of USports Athletic Program Websites

The research in this thesis was conducted in two distinct studies. In the first study, a content analysis was carried out to explore and comprehend the branding practices of Canadian higher education institutions affiliated with USports. The second study involved conducting in-depth interviews with executives from Canadian higher education institutions' central communications and athletic departments. The objective of these two research studies was to assess the level of cohesion between Canadian higher education institutions' communication and athletics departments in the development of branding strategies.

3.1: Content Analysis Methods

A content analysis method was used to identify current naming structures of athletic departments in USports affiliated higher education institutions. Content analysis is a research technique to analyze text or other materials to make valid inferences that are replicable within the context of use (Krippendorff, 2018). The content analysis will provide insight into how athletic departments at USports affiliated institutions are named. Minimal previous research has been conducted in this area, therefore a content analysis is an appropriate method to use (Krippendorff, 2018).

The intention of the content analysis is to develop a deeper understanding of how Canadian higher education institutions develop their athletic program branding. The research will identify and assess the athletic branding styles of all Canadian USports affiliated higher education institutions. USports is the primary governing body for university athletics in Canada. USports is the equivalent of the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) which is the national governing body of collegiate sports in the United States of America (C. Chard et al.,

2013; C. R. Chard & Potwarka, 2017). Through analyzing the athletic program brands, researchers strive to identify how is the athletic program name branded at Canadian higher education institutions.

The search process included all USports universities within the four geographically distinct conferences within which Canadian universities compete: Atlantic University Sport (AUS), Canada West Universities Athletics Association (CW), Ontario University Athletics (OUA), and Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ). Fifty-six universities are members of USports that represent 12,000 student athletes and over 7,700 events and matches each year (USports, 2022). USports affiliated institutions were recorded and sorted by conference. An analysis of each institution's athletic program's website was then completed to identify and record the name of the athletic program name, varsity team name, and if the website primarily presented varsity or recreational athletic information. The analysis of each webpage evaluated the information presented on the main landing page, supplemental documents including mission and value statements, code of conduct programs, annual reports, and strategic plans. A description of each webpage was then recorded identifying if a separate webpage existed for the varsity athletics program, recreational athletics, or if these were combined into a single website. Recording whether the webpages were varsity or recreationally focused was important for researchers to understand if varsity athletics was represented as its own brand rather than included as higher education athletics.

During the data collection process, it is possible the information provided on a higher education institution's webpage was not completely accurate. Webpages occasionally did not directly identify the official name of the athletic program on core program documents. In order to identify the official athletic program name for each USports institution, the researchers

documented all instances of references to the athletic program name, encompassing both formal and informal naming structures. The formal naming structure typically involved a combination of the institution name or varsity team name followed by athletics or recreation, while the informal naming reference occurred when documents simply referred to the athletic program by its varsity team name. The webpages and supplemental documents often presented multiple names when addressing the name of the athletic program. If the official name of the athletic program was not clear or misleading, supplemental documents were not available, then the most commonly named reference to the athletic program throughout the athletic webpage was recorded as the official athletic program name. Researchers believe the recorded athletic program names to be accurate but acknowledged an incorrect name may have been recorded. Future studies researching brand names of higher education athletic programs should consider direct communication with each institution to ensure the accuracy of athletic program names.

After recording all USports affiliated athletic programs name and varsity team names, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was completed to sort each USports institution into groups who shared common naming structures. The use of a second coder would increase reliability, but was deemed unnecessary in the content analysis, as the research employed well-defined criteria and guidelines to extract specific information from each USports institution's webpage. The manageable size of the dataset further facilitated a comprehensive examination of each entry, ensuring meticulous data recording in accordance with the search guidelines. The recorded athletic program names were first sorted by conference to identify all USports athletic program names. A selective coding structure was then used to identify the unique naming elements of each athletic program. The codes used to further sort the athletic program name was the inclusion of the university name or varsity team name. Athletic program names were then

sorted adhering to the code's varsity focused naming structure, university focused naming structure, and varsity and university naming structure. If an athletic program incorporated both the varsity and university name into the athletic program name, it was recorded under the varsity and university naming structure code.

3.2: Content Analysis Findings

3.2.1: University-Branded

In this study, we have introduced the term university-branded to describe the first category of athletic program names that emerged from this research. The university-branded naming category follows a standard structure of incorporating the institution name into the athletic program name. The name of the athletics department is presented as university *X* followed by athletics, athletics & recreation, or athletics department, or some combination of including both university name and athletics. For example, we observed the *University of Toronto* uses the university-branded style for their athletic program *University of Toronto Intercollegiate Athletics*. Here, we identify the university name is the primary brand followed by the sub-brand of the athletic department. The varsity team name is not incorporated into the athletic program name and the branding appears to be closer related to the primary institution's branding strategies. This style of branding may indicate strong connections to the higher education institution's communications office, or brand extensions at these institutions value congruent alignment of the university brand identity within other university related sub-brands.

The university-branded strategy was the most frequently employed, used by 63% of USports institutions. The Atlantic University Sports (AUS) conference has the highest percentage of institutions incorporating this strategy at 91%, but Ontario University Athletics

(OUA) has the largest population of university branded athletic programs with fifteen. Overall, the university-branded branding style is the most common among Canadian higher education athletic programs. Table 3-1 displays the institutions using the university-branded naming strategy. The table displays the USports conference of each institution, the athletic program name, and the varsity brand team name.

Conference	Institution	University-Branded Athletics	Varsity Brand
AUS	Acadia University	Acadia Athletics	Axemen/ Axewomen
AUS	Cape Breton University	Cape Breton University Athletics	CBU Capers
AUS	Dalhousie University	Dalhousie University Department of Athletics & Recreational Services	Dalhousie Tigers/ Dalhousie Rams
AUS	Memorial University of Newfoundland	Memorial Athletics	Memorial University Seahawks
AUS	Saint Mary's University	Saint Mary's University Athletics & Recreation	SMU Huskies
AUS	St. Francis Xavier University	Saint Francis Xavier Athletics & Recreation	STFX X-Men and X-Women
AUS	St. Thomas University	St. Thomas University Athletics	STU Tommies
AUS	Université de Moncton	Physical Activity and Sports Department	Université de Moncton Eagles
AUS	University of New Brunswick	UNB Athletics	UNB Reds
AUS	University of Prince Edward Island	UPEI Athletics and Recreation	UPEI Panthers
CW	Brandon University	Brandon University Bobcats	Brandon University Bobcats
CW	Thompson Rivers University	TRU Athletics & Recreation	TRU Wolfpack
CW	University of British Columbia	University of British Columbia Department of Athletics and Recreation	UBC Thunderbirds
CW	University of British Columbia Okanagan	University of British Columbia Okanagan Athletics and Recreation	UBCO Heat
CW	University of Calgary	University of Calgary Athletics	U of C Dinos
CW	University of Manitoba	University of Manitoba Athletics	U of M Bisons
CW	University of Regina	University of Regina Athletics	U of R Cougars/ Regina Rams
CW	University of the Fraser Valley	UFV Athletics	UFV Cascades
OUA	Brock University	Brock University's Brock Sports	Brock Badgers
OUA	Carleton University	Carleton Athletics	Carleton Ravens
OUA	Lakehead University	Lakehead University Athletics Department	Lakeland Thunderwolves
OUA	McMaster University	McMaster Athletics & Recreation	McMaster Marauders
OUA	Nipissing University	Nipissing University Athletics	Nipissing University Lakers
OUA	Ontario Tech University	Ontario Tech Athletics	Ontario Tech Ridgebacks
OUA	Queen's University	Queen's Athletics and Recreation	Queen's Gaels
OUA	Royal Military College of Canada	Royal Military College Athletic Department	RMC Paladins
OUA	Toronto Metropolitan University	Toronto Metropolitan University Athletics & Recreation	TMU Bold
OUA	Trent University	Trent University Department of Athletics	Trent Excalibur
OUA	University of Guelph	The University of Guelph Department of Athletics	Guelph Gryphons
OUA	University of Ottawa	University of Ottawa Athletic Department	University of Ottawa Gee-Gees
OUA	University of Toronto	University of Toronto Intercollegiate Athletics	University of Toronto Varsity Blues
OUA	Wilfrid Laurier University	Wilfrid Laurier University Athletics and Recreation	Laurier Golden Hawks
OUA	York University	York University Athletics & Recreation	York Lions
RSEQ	Concordia University	Concordia University Athletics	Concordia Stingers
RSEQ	McGill University	McGill University Athletics & Recreation	McGill Redbirds (Male) Martlets (Female)
Total University-Branded			
Conference	Number of Institutions per Conference	Percentage of Institutions per Conference	Total U Sports University-Branded
AUS	10	91%	63%
CW	8	47%	
OUA	15	75%	
RSEQ	2	25%	

Table 3-1: University- Branded Athletic Program Name

3.2.2: Athletic-Branded

We have introduced the term athletic-branded to describe the second category of athletic program names that emerged from this research. The athletic-branded naming category follows a standard structure of incorporating the varsity team name into the athletic program name. The athletic-branded athletic program differs from the university-branded style by incorporating the varsity team name instead of the institution name as the core component of the athletic program name. The name of the athletics department is presented simply as the university varsity team name followed by athletics, athletics & recreation, or some combination of including both the varsity team name and athletics. For example, we observed the *University of Saskatchewan* uses the athletic-branded style for their athletic program *Huskies Athletics*. Here, we identify the university varsity team name is a distinct sub-brand of the University of Saskatchewan as the brand positioning creates an independent brand identity for the athletic program. The higher education institution appears to have incorporated independent branding for the athletics program which may indicate these institutions value developing separate brands to communicate with different audiences. Institutions using the athletic-branded strategy may allow university related brand extensions to be developed with a more independent identity from the academic institution.

Athletic-branded higher education institutions contributed to 21% of USports institutions using this branding style. The Canada West Universities Athletics Association (CW) conference has the highest distribution of institutions choosing this strategy at 35% and has the largest population of athletic-branded programs with six institutions. Table 3-2 displays the institutions using the athletic-branded naming strategy. The table displays the USports conference of each institution, the athletic program name, and the varsity brand team name.

Athletic-Branded			
Conference	Institution	Athletics	Varsity Brand
AUS	Mount Allison University	Mounties Athletics & Recreation	Mount Allison Mounties
CW	Trinity Western University	Spartan Athletics	Trinity Western Spartans
CW	University of Lethbridge	Pronghorn Athletics	U of L Horns
CW	University of Northern British Columbia	Timberwolves Athletics	UNBC Timberwolves
CW	University of Saskatchewan	Huskies Athletics	U of S Huskies
CW	University of Victoria	Vikes Athletics	U of V Vikes
CW	University of Winnipeg	Wesmen Athletics	Winnipeg Wesmen
OUA	Laurentian University	Voyagers Athletics	Laurentian Voyagers
OUA	University of Waterloo	Warriors Athletics and Recreation	Waterloo Warriors
OUA	University of Windsor	Lancer Athletics and Recreation	Windsor Lancers
RSEQ	Bishop's University	Gaiter Athletics	Bishop's Gaiters
RSEQ	Université de Montréal	Carabins' sport excellence program	Montreal Carabin's
Totals Athletic-Branded			
Conference	Number of Institutions per Conference	Percentage of Institutions per Conference	Total U Sports Athletic-Branded
AUS	1	9%	21%
CW	6	35%	
OUA	3	15%	
RSEQ	2	25%	

Table 3-2: Athletic- Branded Athletic Program Name

3.2.3: Combination-Branded

We have introduced the term combination-branded to describe the third category of athletic program names that emerged from this research. The combination-branded naming category follows a standard structure of incorporating both the institution and varsity team name into the athletic program name. A combination-branded athletic program incorporates elements from the university and athletic branded naming styles. The name of the athletic program incorporates a portion of the institution’s name along with the varsity team name. The strategic selection to include both institution and athletic elements allows the institution to position itself as an identifiable component of the academic institution while promoting the varsity team name a sub-brand of the institution. For example, we observed the *University of Alberta* uses the combination-branded naming style for their athletic program *University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas Athletics*. Here, we identify the university name is the primary brand, but the

incorporation of the varsity team name as a sub-brand creates a unique opportunity where the institution and athletic program brand identity are positioned together. This branding strategy appears to strongly value the primary institution brand but recognize the need for and importance of the varsity team sub-brand to further develop the university brand identity beyond academics. This style of branding may indicate strong alignment between the institution identity and institution brand extension identities.

Combination-branded higher education institutions contributed to 16% of USports institutions using this branding style. The Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ) conference has the highest distribution of institutions choosing this strategy at 50% and leads USports institutions with four combination branded programs. AUS did not have an athletic program using the combination-branding style. The combination-branded naming style is the least common naming style among Canadian higher education athletic programs. Table 3-3 displays the institutions using the combination-branded naming strategy. The table displays the USports conference of each institution, the athletic program name, and the varsity brand team name.

Combination-Branded			
Conference	Institution	Athletics	Varsity Brand
CW	MacEwan University	MacEwan University Griffins Athletics	MacEwan University Griffins
CW	Mount Royal University	Mount Royal University Cougars Athletics & Recreation	MRU Cougars
CW	University of Alberta	University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas Athletics	U of A Golden Bears & Pandas
OUA	Algoma University	Algoma University Thunderbirds Varsity Athletics Program	Algoma Thunderbirds
OUA	University of Western Ontario	Western Mustang Athletics	Western Mustangs
RSEQ	Université de Sherbrooke	Vert & Or from the Université de Sherbrooke	UdeS Green and Gold
RSEQ	Université du Québec à Montréal	Citadins de l'UQAM	UQAM Citadins
RSEQ	Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières	Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières Patriotes	l'UQTR Patriotes
RSEQ	Université Laval	The Laval University Rouge et Or	Laval Red and Gold
Totals Combination-Branded			
Conference	Number of Institutions per Conference	Percentage of Institutions per Conference	Total U Sports Combination-Branded
AUS	0	0%	16%
CW	3	18%	
OUA	2	10%	
RSEQ	4	50%	

Table 3-3: Combination- Branded Athletic Program Name

The different types of athletic program branding styles at Canadian higher education institutions present interesting observations regarding how the institution identity is managed. A key observation is the distribution of naming styles across conferences. The geographical location of a higher education institution and their respective USports conference appear to favour one naming style over another. It is unclear why a geographical region favours a specific naming style without additional research, but region specific provincial or university regulations may impact an athletic program's ability to use an alternative naming style.

The analysis presented in this section, along with the findings from the interviews conducted in study 2, will be thoroughly discussed in the discussion section. By integrating these analyses, a more profound understanding will be gained regarding how Canadian universities assess their success in developing, implementing, and aligning their athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies.

Chapter 4: Study 2- Interviews with USports Affiliated Communication and Marketing Executives

The key findings derived from study 1 have laid the foundation for the development of three distinct categories that describe the naming of athletic programs in higher education institutions: athletic-branded, institution-branded, and combination-branded. Building upon these insights, study 2 aims to further this research by exploring the degree of alignment between the athletic brand and the institution brand, providing valuable insights into their relationship.

4.1: Interview Methods

This research has adopted a qualitative inquiry approach, which is appropriate as the study seeks to understand how Canadian universities assess their success in developing, implementing, and aligning their athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies. The use of qualitative research methods is appropriate for this study as it seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and insights from higher education professionals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Crotty, 1998). By utilizing qualitative research, the study can explore complex phenomena in a nuanced and detailed manner. Through the data collection method of in-depth interviews, the research aims to uncover rich and diverse perspectives on how Canadian universities approach and measure the success of their institutional and athletic branding strategies in relation to their institutional branding strategies. The findings of the qualitative research study will be used to understand the alignment between the institution and athletic branding strategy in Canadian higher education institutions.

This research uses interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) as the theoretical framework and analytical approach. This methodological approach allows for a detailed

exploration of participants' personal lived experiences, as it seeks to interpret the meaning they attribute to their experiences. The theoretical position of IPA emphasizes the subjective nature of human experience and prioritizes the role of interpretation in understanding those experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Through the application of this research method, the study seeks to identify and explore phenomena related to the development, implementation and alignment of athletic brand strategy with institutional brand strategy in Canadian higher education. By examining the experiences and perspectives of executive-level leadership at multiple Canadian higher education institutions, the study will provide insights into best practices and brand strategy development.

The outcome of this study is in line with the central aim of interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) researchers, which is to investigate and comprehend individuals' experiences and perspectives pertaining to particular phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA approach provides an in-depth account of how Canadian higher education professionals view the branding relationship between central communications and the athletic department. The idiographic, inductive, and interrogative nature (Smith et al., 2009) of IPA is well suited to the purpose of this study. IPA facilitates a comprehensive understanding of individuals' lived experiences through their unique perspective, without imposing preconceived notions or biases on the data interpretation (Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Using IPA enables the authentic emergence of higher education professionals' experiences, perceptions, and comprehension of brand alignment within the research.

In the context of researching branding athletics in Canadian higher education, Van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, and Van Meurs (2009) decision-making theory provides a valuable foundation. Decision-making theory offers insights into the cognitive and behavioral processes

(Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Doyle & Brady, 2018) involved in making branding decisions within higher education institutions. By applying decision-making theory to the study of branding in Canadian higher education, researchers can enhance their understanding of the factors influencing brand-related decisions and their impact on institutions. This study incorporates (Van Ameijde et al., 2009) theory of a distributed leadership model as higher education institutions can promote a more inclusive and participatory culture, encourage innovation, and effectively address the diverse needs and interests of stakeholders. By examining the decision-making dynamics, the study can identify the cognitive biases, information processing mechanisms, and organizational factors that shape branding decisions of Canadian higher education professionals.

4.2: Interview Participants

The study recruited participants through stratified purposeful sampling, specifically targeting executive level leadership in Canadian higher education institutions. Recruitment was initiated through email, with a comprehensive recruitment email (Appendix C) providing detailed information about the study, its purpose, and the expectations of participants. The use of purposeful sampling enabled the researchers to identify and recruit participants who had the knowledge, expertise, and experience necessary to provide valuable insights into the research question. Potential participants were informed that the study was seeking marketing or communication executives and athletic executives from Canadian higher education institutions who had direct involvement in the development and implementation of the institution's brand strategy.

Those who met the specified criteria and expressed interest in participating in an interview were sent a comprehensive consent form (Appendix A) via email. The consent form

provided detailed information on the purpose of the study, the procedures involved in participation, and the potential risks and benefits associated with participation. This process ensured that participants fully understood the study's goals and were willing to provide informed consent before their involvement in the study. Consent was obtained from participants through a signed consent form or through verbal informed consent at the time of the interview.

In order to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the brand strategy of a higher education institution, the study required participation from both the communications/marketing and athletics departments. Therefore, an institution was considered eligible for the study only when representatives from both departments agreed to participate. Participants did not receive any form of financial compensation for their involvement in the interviews.

Sixteen Canadian higher education executives who are currently employed in either the central communications and marketing office or the athletics department of a Canadian higher education institution affiliated with Usports were selected as participants for this study. These individuals were selected because of their expertise and experience in the fields of higher education marketing, communications, and athletics. They represent a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the Canadian higher education sector, allowing for a comprehensive and dual-perspective lens of exploration for the research topic. By engaging with these participants, the study aims to gain valuable insights into the approaches and challenges of developing, implementing, and aligning athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies in the Canadian higher education context. When examining the topic knowledge related to developing brand strategy at a Canadian higher education institution, the participant pool can be deemed homogenous with regards to both the central communication and athletic participants. This is because all participants possess relevant experience and expertise in these

areas, as demonstrated by their involvement in the development of brand strategies within their respective institutions. As such, the participants can provide valuable insights and perspectives on the research topic, allowing for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the issues surrounding the alignment of institutional and athletic branding strategies. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, any identifying information such as names, places, institutions, organizations, and athletic varsity team names have been omitted from any quotes used in this document. To maintain confidentiality, quotes from interview participants will be assigned numerical pseudonyms. This approach is intended to protect the privacy of the participants while still allowing their insights and perspectives to be shared in the study.

The study participants occupied a narrow range of roles within their respective institutions, although the specific titles varied based on the hierarchical structure of each organization. All participants in this study were part of the executive leadership team either in the communications/marketing department or the athletics department of their respective institutions. Specifically, those on the central communications side held titles such as Director of Marketing, Vice-President of Communications, or Associate Director of Marketing, while those on the Athletic Department side held titles such as Athletic Director, Associate Athletic Director, or Director of Marketing Athletics. This ensured that the study captured the perspectives of individuals with significant experience and expertise in both the marketing/communications and athletic departments of Canadian higher education institutions. In order to enhance the diversity and range of responses from participants, institutions representing various categories identified through content analysis were included in the recruitment process. The study participants were affiliated with Usports partnered institutions located in five provinces across Canada. While table 4-1 outlines the participants' general demographics, their specific locations are not disclosed to

maintain confidentiality. This broad geographical distribution of participants allowed for a diverse range of perspectives and experiences to be represented in the study, enriching the analysis and findings.

Pseudonym	Department	Experience (Years)	Conference
P1C	Communications	2	CW
P1A	Athletics	5	
P2C	Communications	3	CW
P2A	Athletics	22	
P3C	Communications	1	OUA
P3A	Athletics	25	
P4C	Communications	18	AUS
P4A	Athletics	15	
P5C	Communications	5	CW
P5A	Athletics	4	
P6C	Communications	9	CW
P6A	Athletics	10	
P7C	Communications	< 1	CW
P7A	Athletics	5	
P8C	Communications	10	CW
P8A	Athletics	7	

Table 4-1: Participant Information

The participants in this study had varying levels of career experience within Canadian higher education. Some were new to the field, while others had decades of experience in higher education, having either transitioned to a new position within the field or remained in the same role for an extended period. While a participant's career experience occasionally influenced their responses, it will only be included in the analysis if it is relevant to the analysis and findings of the study.

4.3: Interview Format

In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 16 members of executive leadership, who were either affiliated with the communication/marketing department or the athletic department. A distributed sample of participants consisted of eight professionals from the communication/marketing department and eight professionals from the athletic department. During these interviews, participants were asked to provide insights into how their institution and athletics department develops, manages, implements, and aligns the brand strategy. These interviews were conducted either in person or through web-conferencing platforms and had an approximate duration of forty-five minutes to one hour.

To guide the interview, a flexible yet structured interview guide was utilized, which can be found in (Appendix B). After each interview, the interview guide was reviewed and revised based on the specific institution or participant role, ensuring that the questions remained relevant and appropriate. This allowed for a more flexible and personalized approach to the interviews, ensuring that the questions were adjusted as needed to capture the specific insights and experiences of each participant.

4.4: Interview Analysis

The interview sessions were recorded using an audio recorder, and the recorded data was then transcribed to produce over 150 pages of text for analysis. The data analysis process began with open coding, whereby a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out. During this stage, the researcher was attentive to the emergent themes in the data regarding the management, development, alignment, and implementation of brand strategy between the central communications and athletics departments in Canadian higher education institutions. Open coding allowed the researcher to generate a set of codes based on unique and interesting aspects

of the data related to how central communication executives and athletic executives engage in brand strategy.

The complete sample of participants (16) was analyzed by the researcher through transcript analysis, while a coding assistant conducted the same analysis on a subset of the participants (6). This approach ensured that the coding and analysis were consistent across the entire dataset, and any discrepancies or differing interpretations were discussed and resolved. After the analysis was completed, the researcher compared and defined emergent themes through axial coding. This involved systematically grouping similar codes together using inductive and deductive reasoning to begin theory construction. The process of constructing core groups was collaborative, allowing for the comparison of ideas, codes, and themes. The independent development of separate data analysis by a research assistant with a sub sample of participants (6) also benefited the study by providing a deeper understanding of the data groups.

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, thematic analysis was employed to identify and organize key emergent themes regarding brand strategy in Canadian higher education institutions, as reported by communication/marketing and athletic executives. To aid in this process, NVivo was used as a qualitative research tool to help organize and structure the codes and participant quotes. NVivo allowed for easier sorting, filtering, and visual representation of the data, which in turn facilitated the identification and analysis of patterns and themes. Overall, the combination of thematic analysis and NVivo helped to systematically analyze and interpret the data to generate key findings regarding the management, development, alignment, and implementation of brand strategy between central communications and athletics in Canadian higher education institutions.

4.5: Interview Findings

The findings that emerged from the in-depth interviews identified three distinctive categories of Canadian higher education institutions based on their degree of athletic brand alignment to the institution brand. The categories that will be introduced that emerged from the interviews are deliberate brand alignment, collaborative brand alignment and autonomous brand alignment.

All institutions that participated in the research have a functional model that describes the relationship between athletics and central communications with regard to brand strategy. Each institution demonstrates a capacity to implement a brand strategy that is contextually appropriate for their unique circumstances. A closer analysis reveals differences in the underlying relationship, organization, or operations of the athletic and central communication offices. The observations in the following sections outline the process for brand alignment across Canadian higher education institutions and describe the key themes that emerged under brand development, brand implementation, and brand management. The interview findings will conclude with an in-depth analysis identifying categories that further explain the differences of athletic brand alignment in Canadian higher education institutions.

4.5.1: General Observations

4.5.1.a: Brand Strategy

Based on the findings of the research, it was observed that Canadian universities have developed distinct institutional and athletic brand strategies that differ in terms of their focus, message, and audience. Institutional brand strategies were found to be more formal, traditional, and focused on portraying the university's academic reputation, research achievements, and

overall institutional values. Participant 4C explained higher education institutions are, *“In the prestige business... And we're selling prestige... I'm very conservative and cautious (with) brand strategy... We're building our reputation over time (P4C).”* This statement highlights the primary objective of a higher education institution, which is to build a prestigious reputation over time. It is essential to maintain a level of formality and conservatism in branding efforts to establish a sense of credibility and trustworthiness. This approach is necessary to uphold the institutional image and ensure that it aligns with the values and expectations of stakeholders, including faculty members, alumni, and potential students. By emphasizing the need for caution and conservatism, recognizing that the institution's reputation is paramount and must be protected and preserved.

In contrast, athletics brand strategies were found to be more informal, dynamic, and focused on portraying the overall student experience. Participant 2A described the athletic brand as,

I also think you can do different things with an athletics brand that maybe you can't do with an institutional brand... you can probably have a little bit more fun you can be a little bit more loose. And we see that with the institutional use of our mascot, where (Central Communications) get him involved doing things that they wouldn't necessarily want the coat of arms stuck on. There's a certain amount of formality around that. (P2A)

This quote highlights the importance of distinguishing between the institutional and athletic brands. Participant 2A acknowledged that an athletic brand can afford to take more risks and be more playful than an institutional brand. This is because the athletics brand has a narrower focus and a more specific audience, allowing it to experiment with different messaging and visuals. However, Participant 4A also recognized that there are limits to how far the athletic

brand materials can deviate from the athletic brand guidelines. The use of the mascot is an example of this, as it provides a way to inject personality and fun into the institution brand without straying too far from the athletic brand's overall tone and messaging. Ultimately, the quote highlights the need for clear communication and collaboration between the athletics and institutional brands to ensure that both are aligned and reinforcing each other's goals.

Central communication and marketing professionals communicated the differences between what the institution or athletic brand were trying to achieve. Consider the insight made by Participant 3C,

I do think the more we go down that path (athletic brand focus) creatively as an institution, it does feel somewhat unsophisticated from a mass marketing perspective... I feel like it has its place in athletics because it plays a very specific role. But I think a lot of those branding, tactics and styles are less sophisticated and do less service for the institutional level. (P5C)

The quote highlights a view that institutional branding and athletic branding have different goals and that the tactics and styles used in athletics branding may not necessarily be sophisticated or suitable for the institutional level. While it is true that athletics branding has a specific role to play in promoting athletic events, university experience, or community events it is important to recognize that athletic branding also serves a crucial role in promoting the overall reputation, values, and achievements of the university. Institutional branding requires a different set of tactics and styles that are more formal, traditional, and consistent. While athletics branding may have a different feel, it should not be dismissed as unsophisticated or irrelevant, as it can also contribute to enhancing the overall student experience and promoting the university's overall reputation. Participant 1C explained, “*Success for athletics is success for the institution,*

institution success translates into success for athletics (PIA).” Ultimately, a comprehensive branding strategy should aim to balance the unique goals and audiences of institutional and athletics branding, while also maintaining a consistent and cohesive brand image.

It was also noted that institutional brand strategies tend to be more varied across different channels, whereas athletics brand strategies tend to be more consistent based on the audience and purpose. Participant 2C described, *“The university’s overall brand has to be expansive enough to include many different faculties (P2C).”* This quote highlights the importance of considering the institutional brand as a whole, rather than focusing solely on the branding efforts of a single department or faculty. As noted by Participant 2C, the institutional brand must be "expansive enough" to encompass the varied offerings and achievements of the university's different faculties. This requires a thoughtful and strategic approach to branding that takes into account the diverse needs and priorities of each faculty while still maintaining a cohesive institutional brand. By prioritizing the broader institutional brand over individual faculty brands, the university can create a more unified and impactful brand image that reflects its overall mission and values. Participant 1C adds, *“Every college and every institute, they all have a unique story to tell, but we try and create a framework for colors, for recognition that can be used across all our varied departments and colleges and institutions (PIC).”* This quote highlights the importance of creating a cohesive institutional brand that can be applied across all departments and colleges. While each entity may have a unique story to tell, having a recognizable and consistent brand can help to build recognition and trust with stakeholders. By creating a framework for colors and other visual elements, institutions can create a sense of unity and cohesion among its various entities, while still allowing each to retain their individual identities.

This approach can help to reinforce the idea of the institution as a whole, while still allowing for diversity and specialization among its different components.

Finally, participant 2A highlighted the critical differences between various institution brands compared to athletic brands, *“There's fewer differences in a basketball team and hockey team than there is between a med school and a social work faculty. I think it's (Athletic branding) a more straightforward (brand) approach (P2A).”* Participant 2A suggested that the athletic brand may have a more straightforward approach compared to the institution brand. Remarking that there are fewer differences between athletic teams compared to faculties. This implies that the athletic brand may have a more uniform approach, as the focus is on promoting the teams and their success, rather than the nuances of different faculties. The relative simplicity of the athletic brand compared to the institution brand may make it easier to communicate and promote, as it has a more straightforward and singular focus.

The strategic plan of institutional branding is a critical aspect of higher education brand development, as it provides a framework for effectively communicating the institution's identity, values, and mission to key stakeholders. Participant 8C remarked,

We (central communications) tend to align more with the universities strategy... wherever the university is going is where communications and marketing is going... we can have all the strategy in the world but if that flies in the face of what the university is saying... then it wouldn't be a very useful strategy we have strategies about how to use specific tools and how to use specific tactics to support the institutional direction. (P8C)

The quote suggests that the brand strategy of a higher education institution should be aligned with the overall strategic direction of the university. The participant highlighted the importance of communications and marketing aligning with the university's strategy and

direction, as this will ensure that the branding strategy supports the university's goals and objectives. The participant also acknowledged the significance of the university's direction in guiding the brand strategy, as the strategy needs to be useful in supporting the university's overall direction. The quote implies that the branding strategy should be developed with the university's strategy in mind and that it should be flexible enough to evolve as the university's strategic direction changes over time.

Such a plan should involve a thorough analysis of the institution's current branding efforts and the identification of areas that require improvement. This can include the development of a clear and compelling brand message, the creation of a consistent visual identity across all platforms, and the implementation of effective communication strategies to reach key audiences. The plan should also be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that it remains relevant and aligned with the institution's goals and values. Participant 2A explained, “*But those brand campaigns tend to, you know that every five years (align) with every strategic plan, they will get reviewed, and obviously you don't change who you are every five years but there's this constant evolution that is occurring (P2A).*” As mentioned in the quote, brand campaigns tend to align with the strategic plan, and this is because a clear and consistent brand message that supports the mission and vision of the institution can strengthen its position in the market. The brand strategy should be informed by the institution's values, goals, and unique attributes. It should differentiate the institution from its competitors and be relevant to the needs and desires of its target audience. By following a strategic direction that integrates brand development, higher education institutions can effectively communicate their message, build a strong brand identity, and achieve long-term success. Ultimately, a well-designed and executed institutional branding plan can contribute to the institution's success by enhancing its reputation, attracting

and retaining students, faculty, and staff, and creating a strong sense of community among all stakeholders.

In comparison the athletic strategic plan is a less defined document and instead focuses on the deployment of athletic activities. Participant 7A remarked, “*No not in athletics (we do not) have a multi years we try to develop sort of a plan, a player initiatives every year, a calendar of maybe a different look different messaging (P7A).*” Similarly Participant 1A added, “*The multi-year brand strategy is not fully documented at this point in time ... right now the document is strategy from 2020 to 2025 is just internal controls disciplines and brand integrity (PIA).*” These quotes suggests that neither Participant 7A nor Participant 1A were implementing a multi-year brand strategy plan within their athletic programs. Instead, they focused on developing yearly initiatives with different messaging and visual elements. It could be viewed that these findings suggest a potential deficit in the implementation of a long-term planning approach towards branding initiatives within higher education athletic programs. The lack of documented multi-year brand strategies may imply a lack of consideration for the long-term strategic objectives of the central communications department. Consequently, these athletic programs may not fully align their branding efforts with the overall strategic direction of the institution.

Although a higher education athletic program may lack defined strategy, the development of an athletic brand strategy plan helps the institution to distinguish its identity. Consider the assessment by participant 2C,

(With) the color palette, if they're using a red it's going to be institution red... if they're using a blue it's going to be institution blue, the font will be Gotham which is our

(Central communications) font rather than picking another random font, minimizing the differences allow for better consistency. (Participant 2C)

The selection of colours and fonts in athletics branding is consistent with the institution's overall strategy, thereby aligning with the brand guidelines, ensuring consistency and coherence across various departments and units within the institution. Athletics branding efforts, therefore, are in line with the institution's broader goals, values, and mission. This alignment is crucial as it reinforces the institution's brand identity. In addition, a well-structured athletic brand strategy plan enables the program to enhance its image, increase visibility, and achieve its goals.

While there is evidence of a multi-year brand strategy for the institution as a whole, the same cannot be said for athletics, where a lack of long-term planning in branding efforts was observed. This highlights the need for athletic departments to work closely with central communications to ensure that the athletic brand strategy is consistent with and supports the overall institutional brand strategy. Ultimately, a well-developed and implemented strategic brand plan can not only enhance the visibility and reputation of an institution's athletics program but also support the institution's broader strategic goals and objectives.

Overall, the findings suggest that Canadian universities approach institutional and athletics branding as distinct and complementary strategies that serve different goals for different audiences.

4.5.1.b :Brand Guidelines

Brand guidelines play a crucial role in developing an institution's brand. These guidelines are a set of rules and standards that govern how the institution's brand should be presented and communicated to its target audience. Participant 2C explained, *“When it comes to the various leads of communications teams or in other parts of the university, they are required to follow our*

(central communication brand) standards (P2C).” Participant 2C's statement highlights the important role of brand guidelines in maintaining consistency and coherence in the institutional brand. The central communications office has developed specific standards that other departments are required to follow to ensure that the institutional brand is represented consistently across all channels and platforms.

This approach helps to reinforce the institution's core values and messaging, while also helping to build recognition and trust with key stakeholders. By establishing clear and consistent brand guidelines, the institution can more effectively manage its brand identity and ensure that it is being communicated in a way that is aligned with its overall strategic goals. Participant 8C explained,

We have a board approved document that is our visual identity and graphic standards manual... our office maintains that, we lay out the rules of what you can and cannot do with the logo and what the expectations are for use. (P8C)

Participant 8C emphasized the importance of having clear guidelines for the use of the institution's visual identity and logo. These guidelines provide a framework for consistency and ensure that the institution's brand is represented consistently across all communications channels. The existence of an approved brand guidelines manual highlights the commitment to maintaining a strong and cohesive brand image throughout the institution.

The brand guidelines provide a framework for consistency in visual and verbal communication across all media channels, including print, digital, and social media. The guidelines outline the proper usage of logos, typography, color schemes, imagery, and messaging that align with the institution's brand identity. By adhering to these guidelines, institutions can ensure that their brand is presented in a cohesive and professional manner, reinforcing their

reputation and establishing a strong brand presence. Reinforcing this idea, Participant 7A identified athletics responsibilities to adhering to the institution brand guidelines,

The brand guidelines have been developed centrally... so we have to follow that... if we want to deviate from that at all... we work centrally with them to do that to make sure that we honor the brand guidelines... we have to make sure we're on point with what's being done centrally. (Participant 7A)

The significance of well-defined, explicit, and easily accessible brand guidelines is reinforced by the fact that athletics must comprehend and comply with the brand guidelines, as well as maintain the institution's overall standards.

4.5.1c: Institutional Control

In the context of brand management, the distinction between institution control and athletic autonomy is significant, as it reflects the management decision style of the higher education institution. Institution control tends to imply a more centralized approach to branding decisions, with clear guidelines and restrictions on how the brand is to be used across all departments *“Any marketing materials that are to be disseminated externally (go through central communications) even all publications (P7C).”* Participant 7C highlighted the importance of ensuring that all branding efforts are consistent and aligned with the overall institutional brand guidelines. It also implies that the institution takes an active role in the management of its brand and is committed to maintaining a consistent and professional image across all communication channels. By having strict guidelines in place, the institution can ensure that its brand message is clear and coherent, and that it resonates with its target audience. This level of control over external communication is essential for maintaining a strong institutional brand identity and reputation.

Participant 8C echoed the idea of a strong institutional control but recognize the need for less control in certain contexts,

This is a really challenging part of the university environment... if it's an administrative unit, we have pretty strict controls over what those units can and can't do with regards to the brand the look and feel the academic units tend to have a little bit more freedom to work with, you know, how their materials look and feel and that's, that's fine... and pretty much everybody knows that when they're going to use the logo to use it a certain way.

(P8C)

The participant highlighted the varying degrees of control each unit has in terms of brand management, with administrative units having stricter guidelines and academic units having more freedom. The participant also acknowledged the importance of consistency in using the university logo, emphasizing the need for everyone to follow the same guidelines in order to maintain a cohesive brand identity. Overall, the quote highlights the complexity of brand management in a university setting and the need for clear and consistent guidelines to ensure that the brand is effectively represented across different units and communication channels.

Participant 4C further added the necessity of staying on brand when departments or units have a desire to produce their own marketing materials,

We have a pretty high degree of control, but we also have to be very flexible as well... with the advent of off the shelf tools for graphic design, people who love to do graphic design or marketing work themselves have great tools and the capability to do that... Oftentimes, it's not good enough or it's not on brand. I will be flexible on that, given the impact and how much time we have to deal with issues... So we're cognizant of it. We're

aware of it. We have a high degree of control but it is a daily battle, not a weekly battle but a daily battle. (P4C)

The participant explained that there are now graphic design tools available to individuals who may want to create their own marketing materials, but these materials may not always align with the institution's brand guidelines. Therefore, while there is a high degree of control over brand management, the participant recognized the need for flexibility to address issues as they arise. The participant also acknowledged that this is a daily challenge, requiring constant monitoring and adjustment to maintain the institution's brand consistency. Overall, this quote highlights the importance of finding a balance between control and perceived ownership of the brand in terms of brand management within Canadian higher education institution.

When it comes to branding decisions and the overall brand management, institution control ensures that all branding activities align with the institution's mission, vision, and values. They set the overall strategic plan for the institution, which includes branding objectives, and make sure that all departments and units are following the same plan. Institution control plays a critical role in maintaining consistency in the brand across all departments and units, which is essential for establishing a strong institutional brand. Institution control plays a significant role in brand management decisions as it represents the overall management decision-making style of the higher education institution. The institution sets the guidelines and rules that govern the branding process and enforces them to ensure consistency across all departments and units *“And we're responsible for setting system wide rules and creating the standards through which university communications (and marketing) are run (P2C).”* Participant 2C highlighted the role of the university communications department in setting system-wide rules and creating standards for university communications. As a central unit responsible for brand management, the

communications department is tasked with ensuring consistency and coherence in the university's messaging across all departments and units. The department's role extends beyond creating guidelines, as it also serves as a resource for other units on campus, providing support and consultation on communication strategies and branding initiatives. By establishing and enforcing these standards, the central communications department plays a critical role in shaping the institution's brand management decision process.

4.5.1d: Athletic Autonomy

Athletic departments within Canadian universities often have a degree of autonomy in managing their brand. This is due to the unique goals and audiences of the athletic brand, as well as the specific challenges and opportunities of promoting athletics within the larger institutional context. Participant 2A explained,

To ensure that that we (Athletics) did have a bit more of a level of control of the athletics brand than the institution typically gives up... I think that has a lot to do with sort of the reality of what things are like within sport the need to move pretty quickly... that's the other thing is athletics, we tend to move very quickly. It's one thing to another, and large institutional bureaucracies take quite a bit longer to get into gear (P2A).

The above quote highlights the need for a certain level of autonomy in athletic brand management, as the fast-paced nature of athletics requires quick decision-making and implementation. The necessity of autonomy in the management of athletic brands lies in its potential to enable the athletics department to manage their brand effectively in a timely and efficient manner. Participant 1A outlined the importance of the athletic brand to the institution allowing for the increased autonomy, *“So they have probably the most recognizable brand on campus like it's a very very important brand (to the university) (Participant 1A).”*

However, this autonomy in brand management can also pose challenges for consistent messaging and coordination with the larger institutional brand. As such, it is important for Canadian higher education institutions to consider how to balance autonomy and collaboration in the management of their athletic brand to ensure effective promotion and alignment with the institution's overall strategic goals. When we consider Participant 7A's remarks about the athletic brand colour, the discrepancies between brand colours can create a degree of distance between the athletic and institution brand,

The athletic department will follow really closely to the institutional brand in a number of ways. But if you look at our athletic mark it is a different colour... and doesn't follow the institutional mark colour it is not consistent with it at all. There's really no crossover.

(P7A)

Participants, typically remarked the consistent colour palettes between the institution and athletics, *"The only way this strategy is successful is if we have those internal controls handled and managed. We have one color, a consistent font, our primary, secondary and heritage logos and that's all we use (Participant 1A).* When considering the challenges that may arise because of athletic autonomy over the athletic brand, it is important to recognize that the branding decisions must align with the approved brand guidelines and the overall strategic plan of the institution. When the athletic department operates under a separate set of branding rules, it may risk diluting the institutional brand or creating brand confusion among stakeholders. It is important to ensure that the athletic department's branding decisions complement and align with the institutional brand guidelines. This can be achieved through effective communication and collaboration between the athletics department and the institution's brand management team. By

working together, the athletics department can maintain some level of autonomy over their brand while still adhering to the overarching brand strategy of the institution.

A notable differentiation for the higher degree of autonomy granted to athletics in managing their brand, as compared to other departments within a higher education institution, stems from the size of the athletics department. When considering support of marketing and branding activities of smaller departments at a higher education institution, Participant 1A explained, *“You know they have one comms person so we're quite involved with supports around making sure that they're well funded and they have the support they need. (P1A).”* Participant 2A comparatively identified the different approach towards the athletic department,

Of all of the various brands at the university the one I worry about the least is the athletic brand because not only are they you know, half an arm's length from the university as a whole, despite being deeply embraced... they know what they're doing. Their brand has been around for a while. Arguably they do brand better than anyone at the university because hey, when you ask about brand at this university what comes up (the most), the athletic brand. (P2A)

This quote suggests that the athletic department may have a higher degree of autonomy in brand management compared to other brands within the university. Participant 2A expressed confidence in the athletic department's ability to manage their brand effectively. Participant 2A also suggested that the athletic department may be more successful at branding than other areas of the university, as the athletic brand is the one that comes up the most when discussing branding at the institution. Overall, this quote implies that the athletic department has a strong sense of identity and a high level of competence in brand management. Additionally, Participant

8C provided insight into a key foundation for why athletics at a higher education institution has been able to maintain a high degree of brand autonomy,

I think here, they (Athletics) get leeway because they've earned it. I think when I got here, they had leeway because they were taking it and no one was really challenging it. I think this institution is actually an example of what can happen to a university if you do care, and you do engage because they're making us look good all the time as a university, so why wouldn't I want to be involved with them. (P8C)

Overall, institutions typically maintain a high level of control over branding strategies, materials, and implementation. Athletics are part of the unique cases where central communications willingly relinquished a high level of autonomy over brand development, management and implementation.

4.5.1e: Athletic Orientation

In Canadian higher education institutions, athletics plays an important role in the overall brand management strategy. Athletics can serve as a valuable supplement to an academic institution's brand by reaching a unique and often difficult to reach audience,

Athletics is the front porch of the university. It's not the most important room in the house, but it is the most visible and I think that's really that rings true in a lot of ways that athletics can get into the community and be a visible part of the university and draw people in a way that's different from the academic side of the house. (P2A)

While academic branding often focuses on attracting prospective students, donors, and faculty, athletics can attract a diverse range of supporters, including alumni, fans, and the wider community. By leveraging the popularity and visibility of athletic programs, institutions can expand their brand reach and increase overall visibility. Additionally, successful athletic

programs can enhance the reputation and prestige of the academic institution, leading to increased interest and support from various stakeholders. Athletics serves as a significant touchpoint for students, alumni, and the wider community, allowing for increased exposure and engagement with the institution's brand.

The athletic department often takes an innovative approach to branding, including the use of unique visual elements and the development of exciting and memorable campaigns. Through their branding efforts, athletic departments aim to increase school spirit, engage with fans, and promote a positive image of the institution. The athletic brand is very public facing and focused on reaching the community where the institution is located,

“I do truly believe that the institution highly values the athletics brand. They fully understand that we are the gateway to the community, we bring more people to campus on an annual basis than any other unit or college on campus. I think our institution does understand and value that our brand is in the newspaper every day our brand is on radio on TV and in the social space every single day and our institution does value that (PIA).”

By acknowledging the value of the athletics brand and recognizing its potential to reach a wider audience, the institution can leverage it as a marketing tool to strengthen the institution's reputation, increase brand awareness, and attract more prospective students and donors.

Beyond the institution's community focused approach the athletic brand also needs to be managed and orientated to support the institution brand outlined by Participant 7A,

“The general principle that we follow is that our brand should be a tool to enhance the reputation and image of the institution our look, or messaging or behavior, whatever it may be, at the very least it shouldn't hurt the image of the institution and we want the

institution to look at us as you know through our work... we have to bring some value to the institution for that. We want them to view us as a viable option. For profiling the institution, globally or nationally (P7A)."

The quote highlights the importance of the athletic brand in enhancing the overall reputation and image of the institution. The participant emphasizes that the athletic brand should not negatively impact the image of the institution and must bring value to the institution through its work. This aligns with the concept of the athletic orientation of brand management, where athletics is viewed as a powerful tool to promote the institution's brand to a wider audience, within the community, provincially, and nationally. The participant also emphasizes the need for the institution to view athletics as a viable option for profiling the institution, further emphasizing the significance of athletics in promoting the institution's brand. Overall, this quote highlights the critical role that athletics plays in the institution's brand management strategy and the importance of aligning the athletic brand with the institution's overall brand image.

4.5.2: Athletic Brand Alignment

When considering the market offering of institutions, the topic of brand alignment within the higher education sector is a significant and relevant aspect of brand strategy. The themes previously discussed, highlight the general factors that exist in Canadian higher education institutions in terms of brand development, implementation, and management. The strategic orientation or organization of each institution influences the brand alignment of the athletic with the institution brand. The transcript analysis revealed institutions could be classified into one of three distinct categories of brand alignment which included, deliberate brand alignment, collaborative brand alignment, or autonomous brand alignment. Although each institution

possessed a distinctive and successful operating structure, the analysis indicated differences in their approach to brand alignment.

4.5.2a: Deliberate Brand Alignment

Institutions classified under the deliberate brand alignment category are typically smaller in size within the higher education sector. The size of these institutions forces independent units to work closely together because of limited resources or expertise in certain areas. Participant 4C in central communications outlined the need for collaboration between units, *“because we're so small, there has to be a lot of crossover (P4C).”* The collaboration between independent units is echoed by Participant 4A, *“I have a very good working relationship with communication(s)... we work closely with communications (on brand strategy) (P4A).”* Similar conversations appeared in another small institution where Participant 8C in central communications outlined a constraint of operating a small institution, *“We're a pretty small university which means we have a small communications and marketing team (P8C).”* The constraint of a small marketing team is acknowledged within athletics and operate in a collaborative structure *“I know we have a bit of an interesting crossover in terms of (marketing) personnel because we are so small (P8A).”*

The small size of these institutions provides opportunities for central communications to be actively involved in athletic branding activities, assisting in connecting the two brand identities. Participant 4C described the need for central communications involvement in athletic branding as,

The biggest challenge we face is that the staffing in athletics don't have the same approach or sense of what's appropriate relative to branding opportunities or branding. The skill set is different all the skills that make them successful in operating a successful

athletics program at a small school. None of those skills help on the marketing side. They do well but they don't do as good as the rest of the school because the skill sets are different. (P4C)

Additionally, Participant 8C identified the benefits of a high degree of collaboration, “*we collaborate on everything, because I understand that they (athletics) bring strengths to the table and they understand that our unit brings strengths to the table so we are very collaborative (P8C).*” Athletics feel the same way about the nature of the relationship, “*It's very collaborative. You know, checking in every day about something (P8A).*” There is a deliberate choice made by these units to work with each other outside of major decisions.

Central communications and athletics work closely in branding decisions, but that does not mean central communications manages the athletic brand. When asked about how the athletic brand is managed Participant 8A discussed,

If I say full I don't know if that's something (Central Communications) would disagree. I don't think I can just do whatever I want, of course, but we're pretty close. I think the quality of the work that we've sort of proven that we have done okay and a lot of things not just oh look, that's a nice graphic, but some of our handling of issues. (P8A)

Central communications are aware of the autonomy allotted to athletics in terms of independence in brand management but give up control because of the relationship built. Participant 8C comments, “*I think here, they get leeway because they've earned it. I think when I got here, they had leeway because they were taking it and no one was really challenging it (P8C)*”.

The athletic brand is controlled closely by the outlined brand guideline document developed by central communications, *“Before we produce anything we always use approved logos that have already been pre-approved...it should all for sure come under (the) communications department... we try for sure to, to always get approved. (P8A)”*.

The heavily integrated communication structure allows the athletic brand to be more integrated into the institution brand strategies, participant 4C outlined how they view athletic brand integration.

I want to do more. I'm going to capture some digital that we can leverage on social media. And then in a couple of weeks, I'll roll it out again. And I get double the bounce, and I get to promote the athletic team and then I get to promote our engaged student athletes. I'll take that content and leverage as much as I can. Athletics is an important part of what you need to demonstrate to the community to parents of potential students that you're a real university. (P4C)

Deliberate brand alignment signifies the purposeful and strategic integration of the athletic brand with the institution's brand. It involves a conscious effort to align messaging, values, visuals, and experiences to create a cohesive and unified brand identity. By intentionally integrating the athletic brand within the broader institution brand, organizations can cultivate a consistent and harmonious brand image that resonates with their target audience. Deliberate brand alignment ensures that the athletic brand not only aligns with the institution's overarching goals and values but also contributes to a seamless and compelling brand narrative that reinforces the institution's identity and messages among various stakeholders.

4.5.2b: Collaborative Brand Alignment

Institutions under the collaborative brand alignment category differentiates from deliberate brand alignment because central communications begin to be less involved in brand development and brand management. Participant 2C outlined the relationship between central communications and athletics,

They (athletics) fully control their brand is the short answer... we (central communications) certainly have no concerns with the athletics brand or any qualms with it... We do control the overall brand experience at the university. We would have the ability, at least on paper to say don't do that. I think in practice, it's going to be much more collaborative and collegial if they ever get (there). (P2C)

From a central communications perspective this appears to be a common strategy as Participant 1C supported the previous comment when looking at the level of control the athletics brand has because of the collaborative partnership,

They (athletics) have probably the most recognizable brand on campus but it is developed in consultation with my office, but they very enthusiastically brand themselves as well. They have someone who's in charge of that and it's been a really important for me since coming on board to have a good relationship with both athletic director and their marketing director to understand what they're doing, making sure that we're on the same page. (P1C)

The athletic units agree with this collaborative approach to developing and managing the athletic brand, Participant 2A commented,

It is imperative that they that the two sides work together. I've seen it a couple of times on my own campus. I've seen it very much on other campuses where things are singing on

two completely separate songbooks, so it's not coordinated. It's not aligned. I can't overstate the value of making sure that the two sides work together collaboratively, because it will move both sides forward. (P2A)

An important distinction of the deliberate alignment category included the close working relationship between central communications and athletics. The relationship under collaborative alignment is a more relaxed approach and there is a less formal communication structure especially as it comes to consistent communication. Participant 1C described the communicative relationship as, *"It's (meetings) more based on if there's any issue... if there's anything happening, we'll get together and put our heads together (PIC)."* Similarly, Participant 2C described the lack of formal communication and reporting structure, *"No reported relationship, although again, athletics does have to follow the rules, but the rules are very permissive in the case of the athletics (P2C)."*

The informal and decentralized communication structure provides athletics with more autonomy over the athletic brand. *"We have oversight on our brand...I don't need approvals from the institution on all of our ads...our banners... our signs that we do in our venues. I don't need that institutional approvals (PIA)"*. When discussing how the brand guidelines were developed participant 1A remarked, *"We (athletics) worked very collaboratively very close with the university central communications department to streamline our brand to declutter and to build our brand guidelines document (PIA)."* Central communications has a similar thought to how brand guidelines should be developed,

It's making sure you have a community of practice, you have trust you're moving towards something in a collaborative sense. It's not policing. If something's off brand., I would

never go in and say you can't do that. It needs to be an explanation of why, what the benefits are of staying within the brand (and) laying out the expectations. (PIC)

Rather than a formal communication structure, the established brand guidelines outline the limitations of the athletic brand “*We're (athletics) quick out of the door following our brand guidelines. I suspect if we were ever to step outside of these then you know that communication expectations structure might change (PIA).*” Athletics understand the need to stay within the defined brand guidelines to maintain the current relationship structure. The collaboration between both units to develop the athletic brand maintains the alignment of how the athletic brand is managed.

Both central communications and athletics understand the role and value of collaboration, while also acknowledging the value of independence for the athletic brand. Participant 1C described,

It (athletic brand) isn't separate, , the athletic brand needs attention to be laid and mapping out as its own brand, but in collaboration with central communications...It's very, very integrated in terms of our how we're mapping things, out. They're independent, but there's constant collaboration and check ins. (PIC)

The athletic brand is viewed as a sub-brand or a brand extension of the central institution brand and athletics understand the need and necessity for this alternative identity,

I also think you can do different things with an athletics brand that you can't do with an institutional brand. You can have a little bit more fun, be a little bit more loose...we see that with the institutional law and use of our mascot... they'll get him involved doing

things they wouldn't necessarily want the coat of arms stuck on. There's a certain amount of formality around that. (P2A)

Collaborative alignment represents a synergistic relationship between the institution and the athletics department, leveraging the strengths of both brands. This alignment category demonstrates a shared understanding of the importance of integrating both brand identities while recognizing the unique audience and communication needs of the athletic brand. By effectively collaborating and coordinating their branding efforts, institutions can create a cohesive and powerful brand narrative that resonates with stakeholders, fosters pride and loyalty, and strengthens the overall brand positioning of the institution within the higher education landscape. The collaborative alignment serves as a strategic approach to maximize the impact of both the institution brand and the athletic brand, resulting in a unified and compelling brand experience for the intended stakeholders.

4.5.2c: Autonomous Brand Alignment

Institutions that fall under autonomous brand alignment have a decentralized approach to the degree of alignment between the athletic brand and the institution brand. Central communications have a limited role in athletic brand strategy and there is limited integration of athletic identity into the institution identity. When initially discussing the relationship between central communications and athletics, Participant 3C outlined, *“(I) think they're (athletics) particularly autonomous, but I think it's probably true across all institutions, but here in particular, there is a bit more freedom and autonomy for athletics (P3C).”* Central communications outlines athletics operate as a fairly autonomous unit when compared to other units on campus,

I would say that the primary groups that are doing significant marketing and communications with fairly decent media budgets would be Marketing and Undergraduate Recruitment, Advancement, and Faculties (that) do their advertising as well. We work really closely with those groups, it's not a very formalized process, but it's about keeping really close contact with those individuals and as campaigns or initiatives are being developed having a seat at the table, providing guidance along the way. (P3C)

This is a stark contrast to the involvement and contact central communications has with athletics, *“As VP of marketing and brand strategy I don't think of athletics often. I find as we're developing creative or activations, saying, this is coming across too athletic, and that's an area I don't want to take the institutional brand (P3C).”* In comparison athletics discuss the struggle they face because the brand identity of athletics is not fully integrated into the institution brand, *“Going through that branding trouble of no one really supported or not supported, but no one really knew the school right (colours) everyone was so into their faculty (colour) the school was losing that support as well (P3A).”*

Central communications appear to prioritize brand alignment with academic focused units and maintain distinction from the athletic brand. Participant 5C describes a similar relationship,

I think they're (athletics) a bit too far removed from what we're (central communications) doing. We might pull storytelling wise, how diverse and how successful our athletics programs are, but the reality is, recruitment for student athletes is its own niche little thing. And it's not wide enough to help the institution with its lofty recruitment goals. I think they're sort of so far down the are so far away from what we're doing strategically at the institution executive level, but they're never not thought of because they are a very

impactful group. I'd say from a direct brand standpoint and the brand strategy, there are sort of just there, we can't live without them, there's not like a direct overlap. (P5C)

The idea that the athletic brand is too far removed from the institution strategy is further emphasized by Participant P3C, *“It's fairly separate and not as integrated with the rest of the overarching identity or expression. It's clearly student and varsity focused. A very different audience than, academics and business leaders (P3C).”* Although central communications recognize the value and benefits of the athletic brand, limitations exist preventing the athletic brand to become an integrated piece in the institution brand. Participant 5C identified the fast-paced nature of athletics as a limitation preventing integration,

I think capacity has them putting out fires all day and doing events. It's not on their agenda to work more closely with us. We try to reach out and collaborate but they're often just so busy. We have this event and that event, they can host up to like eight events in one week. It's capacity, but they are at arm's length from us and I do think we can always work more closely together. (P5C)

Athletics describes the emergence of autonomy over their brand happened because,

It was just so complex. The work involved would be almost not redundant, but, why would we dock in when you can do it on your own? You're the experts. You know how to navigate this, call us if you need a hand. I think it was too big of a project, what their bandwidth they can handle because of the other units and departments. It's a smaller level of support that they (other units and departments) need. And I think we're just too big to take on in that level. (P5A)

These quotes highlight the challenges of finding the right balance in collaboration and support within an organization. While Participant P5C emphasized the desire for closer collaboration despite perceived limitations, Participant 5A acknowledged the expertise and capacity constraints that may hinder a deeper level of involvement.

The goals and mission of the institution also appears to limit the degree of athletic brand alignment if they are not developed with the individual identities in mind. Participant 3C described how the goals of the institution and athletics differ, *“I have a personal preference to not (use) the varsity (athletic) brand, I think it somewhat undermines the credibility and gravitas of the academic goal for university...I imagine athletics has the same tension where they present something and they don't want to come across stuffy or overly academic. I imagine that tension exists both ways (P3C).”* A similar concern is expressed by athletics, *“In terms of the branding goals. We just kind of year to year we go through it... because we're fighting the faculties on campus and their colors and the students want to wear their colors (P3A).”* The identity strategies within the institution are competing with one another which further promotes independence of the athletic unit.

Autonomous alignment occurs in an institution when there is minimal central communication involvement in the development and implementation of the athletic brand. Although the two units primarily operate independently the established brand guidelines regulate how the athletic unit and brand is managed. Autonomous alignment appears to work effectively in large Canadian higher education institutions because there are adequate resources to effectively manage the athletic brand. However, the autonomous management style hinders the integration of the athletic brand identity into the overall institution identity. Maintaining separate

identities allow the brand messaging to distinctly target the audiences who may be most receptive to the messaging.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study used a content analysis of USports affiliated athletic programs and in-depth interviews with Canadian higher education professionals in central communications and athletics to find out how do Canadian universities assess their success in developing, implementing, and aligning their athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies. In this section we will discuss the key insights gained from this research, the theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions.

5.1: General Discussion

This study provides initial insight into the relationship that exists between athletic programs at Canadian higher education institutions and the overall institution brand. The themes identified provide important insights of how brand extension strategies appear to be managed at Canadian higher education institutions. The categorization terminologies introduced in both study 1 and study 2 will be examined in conjunction with strategic branding terminologies. For further clarification on the respective sections of research to which each category term belongs, please refer to Figure 5-1 as a comprehensive guide. This study contributes to sport marketing literature and higher education branding literature in several ways.

University and Athletics Website Content Analysis	University and Athletics Branding Strategies	University and Athletics Brand Alignment
University-branded Athletic-branded Combination-branded	Institutional branding Athletic branding Comprehensive branding	Deliberate brand alignment Collaborative brand alignment Autonomous brand alignment

Figure 5-1: Category Term Overview

First, previous studies on brand extension strategies in sport have mainly focused on professional sport organizations (Bernthal et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2015; Wear et al., 2018; Williams, Son, Walsh, & Park, 2021). The results suggest however, sport brand extension strategies apply to the higher education context as well. The parent brand that is a higher education institution typically has tremendous brand equity which allows a relatively simple extension into athletics. The distinction of naming styles for higher education athletic programs identified in this study is supported in Bernthal et al. (2022), who said that sport brand extensions could adopt the parent brand name or choose a unique brand name.

The conditions leading to the presented naming styles may be influenced by the official and unofficial athletic program names. Consumers often create unofficial brand names that are shortened, simplified and easy to remember (Robertson, 1989). Sport organizations are no different. Fans cut defining characteristics from a team name creating easy to use unofficial team

names (Wear et al., 2018) the Toronto Blue Jays become the ‘Jays’, the Toronto Maple Leafs become the “Leafs”, or the Toronto Raptors become the “Raps”. The differences between athletic program naming styles may indicate modernization of the athletic brand. A university-branded athletic program communicates the official university name indicating use of the official brand name. Compared to an athletic-branded athletic program that communicates the unofficial name indicating use of the unofficial brand name. The athletic-branded naming style communicates a strategic management decision adopting a commonly used unofficial name as the primary name of an athletic program. We propose this strategic decision would allow an athletic program to develop a unique brand identity that has a deeper connection and meaning to the intended audience. A historical analysis of athletic program names at higher education institutions would be necessary to identify how often a program has re-branded and what naming strategies have been previously used.

Second, this study contributes to the understanding that athletic brand extensions appear to be managed at higher education institutions. Evaluating brand extensions at the private firm level is extensively studied and specific measures or theories exist (Aaker, 1990; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Aaker & Keller, 1990; Batra, Lenk, & Wedel, 2010; Spiggle et al., 2012). The relationship between brand extension strategies and higher education branding is studied (Chapleo, 2010, 2015; Feezell, 2015; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016) but brand extension strategies are studied to a lesser extent between higher education athletic programs (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Williams et al., 2021). A brand name must fit correctly for a brand extension to be successful, and this study contributes to the current gap of how the athletic name and identity fit within the institution name and identity.

The observed naming style categories of university-branded, athletic-branded, and combination-branded offer a unique perspective to how brand extensions are typically managed at a higher education institution. A parent brand in a brand extension can be extensively involved or nominally involved in the management of a sub-brand (Walsh et al., 2015). Walsh et al. (2015) further add, the involvement of a parent brand increases or decreases based on the importance of decisions. The naming styles identified in this research may allude to how involved and aligned the higher education institution is when managing the athletic program. Where, university-branded institutions place value on higher involvement for how brand extensions at these institutions are aligned with the university brand identity. The athletic-branded institutions place value on developing independent brand extensions to create various brand identities to communicate with different audiences. The combination-branded institution places value on brand extensions that maintain the academic identity of an institution within sub-brands. The naming styles present a context for how brand extensions appear to be managed in higher education institutions. Additional qualitative or quantitative studies on athletic brand extensions in higher education would support a clear understanding for how these brand extensions are managed.

Athletic brand alignment plays a crucial role in the overall brand strategy of an institution, particularly in the realm of higher education. It involves the intentional and strategic alignment of the athletic brand with the institution's broader brand identity, values, and goals. By effectively integrating the athletic brand, institutions can create a cohesive and compelling brand narrative that resonates with various stakeholders, including students, alumni, faculty, and the wider community. One key aspect of athletic brand alignment is the consistency of messaging and visuals. Aligning the messaging of the athletic brand with the institution's overall brand

positioning ensures a coherent narrative that reflects shared values and goals. Visual integration, such as incorporating consistent design elements and color schemes helps create a unified and recognizable brand identity across different touchpoints.

Collaboration and cooperation between the athletic department and central communications are vital for successful brand integration. Open lines of communication, shared goals, and coordinated efforts facilitate a seamless brand experience. By working together, both entities can leverage their respective strengths to enhance the institution's overall brand positioning and reputation. Integration also extends to the alignment of values and culture. When the athletic brand aligns with the institution's core values, it reinforces a sense of unity and purpose. This alignment helps to cultivate a shared identity and fosters a positive brand perception among stakeholders. It enables the institution to leverage the passion and loyalty associated with athletics to strengthen its overall brand reputation.

Athletic brand integration should take into account the specific target audience and market positioning. Understanding the unique needs and preferences of the target audience allows institutions to tailor their messaging and experiences accordingly. This targeted approach helps build stronger connections and engagement with stakeholders, ultimately contributing to brand loyalty and affinity. Constant evaluation and adjustment are necessary for ongoing brand alignment and integration efforts. Regular monitoring of brand performance, stakeholder feedback, and market trends helps identify areas for improvement and fine-tuning. This iterative process ensures that the athletic brand remains aligned with the institution's evolving objectives and maintains relevance in a dynamic landscape.

The content analysis conducted on Canadian higher education athletic departments revealed interesting findings regarding their brand names. In the interviewed institutions, it was

observed that the recorded athletic brand name did not necessarily align with how the institution commonly referred to itself, see table 5-1 for content analysis category recordings and table 5-2 for interview analysis category recordings. The research included three institutions with university-branded athletic departments, four institutions with athletic-branded departments, and one institution with a combination of both brands. When inquired about the naming structure of their athletic program, only four institutions confirmed that the recorded brand name accurately represented how the athletic department was referred to. Five institutions reported their athletic department as athletic-branded, two as combination-branded, and one as university-branded. These findings shed light on the diverse approaches taken by Canadian higher education institutions in presenting their athletic brand identities.

Content Analysis Recorded Categories								
University-Branded		X		X			X	
Athletic-Branded	X		X		X			X
Combination-Branded						X		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Interviewed Institutions								

Table 5-1: Content Analysis Category Recordings

Interview Analysis Recorded Categories								
Deliberate Alignment				X				X
Collaborative Alignment	X	X				X	X	
Autonomous Alignment			X		X			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Interviewed Institutions								

Table 5-2: Interview Analysis Category Recordings

Two institutions as reported by participants had a combination-branded naming approach, and both of them were categorized under deliberate alignment. This finding emphasizes the significance of intentional integration of the athletic brand with the institution brand. The

observations align with the description of combination-branded naming, highlighting a strong alignment between the institution's core identity and the extension of its brand through athletics. In these cases, the two brands mutually reinforce each other and collaborate closely to present a consistent and unified brand identity. The deliberate alignment between the institution and athletic brand facilitates a cohesive brand experience and strengthens the overall brand perception.

Autonomous alignment consisted of one institution with a university-branded naming approach and another with an athletic-branded naming approach as reported by participants. Initially, both institutions were recorded as athletic-branded. This category aligns with the concept of athletic-branded, suggesting that these institutions prioritize the development of distinct brands to effectively communicate with different target audiences. Although both institutions were not explicitly reported as athletic-branded, this observation suggests that the institution may have a more significant role in governing brand extensions than initially anticipated.

Collaborative alignment consisted of three athletic-branded naming approaches according to the participants. A noteworthy distinction emerged within this category, as two out of the three institutions were initially recorded as university-branded. The variation between the self-reported and recorded naming approaches suggests a higher level of collaboration. These findings indicate that these institutions recognize the value of presenting both brand identities, as two of them reported their naming approach as athletic-branded while maintaining a visual representation of the university brand. This suggests that athletics formally acknowledges the role and value of the institution when visually displaying their brand. However, the perception of the brand differs when informally discussing the athletic brand, where the athletic-branded naming approach

emerges. The relationship between the institution and athletics units seems to have a collaborative understanding of when and how to utilize the different naming approaches, allowing for a coordinated and synergistic approach to brand representation.

5.2: Theoretical Contributions

The present research makes dual contributions to the branding literature and the literature on decision making in higher education. Firstly, this study enhances our understanding of how athletic program brand extensions are aligned within Canadian higher education institutions. In line with the concept of internal branding success proposed by (Judson et al., 2008; Judson et al., 2006) which emphasizes aligning brand messages for various stakeholders, our research builds upon this foundation and extends the understanding of brand alignment in Canadian higher education athletic programs. By developing comprehensive categories that capture different dimensions of brand alignment, this study provides a nuanced and context-bound understanding of how brand alignment is understood in Canadian higher education institutions.

Additionally, this research also extends Keller (1993) when discussing brand equity in Canadian higher education. The Customer-Based Brand Equity model Keller (1993) emphasizes the importance of developing strong brand associations through various touchpoints and highlights the role of customer attitudes and perceptions in shaping brand equity. Building upon this framework, our research extends the understanding of brand alignment in Canadian higher education athletic programs. By examining the alignment of athletic program brands within the broader institutional brand, our study provides insights into how institutions can effectively build and maintain brand equity, as advocated in Keller (1993). The findings of this study provide specific categories that illustrate how athletics can be integrated into the overall institution brand, resulting in increased brand equity for athletics among stakeholders in Canadian higher

education institutions. By establishing strong brand associations, this integration enhances the brand equity within athletic programs. The research highlights the significance of aligning athletics with the broader institution brand to cultivate positive perceptions and connections among stakeholders. This contributes to the overall goal of enhancing brand equity and strengthening the position of athletics within Canadian higher education institutions.

Furthermore, this research builds upon the theoretical contributions of Van Ameijde et al. (2009) in their exploration of improving leadership in higher education institutions from a distributed perspective. By examining brand alignment in Canadian higher education athletic programs, this study not only sheds light on the decision-making processes and strategies employed by institutions for effective brand alignment but also offers insights into the broader dynamics of decision making within higher education institutions, aligning with the distributed perspective emphasized by (Van Ameijde et al., 2009). The findings produced alignment categories that promoted distributed decision-making strategies that emphasized shared responsibilities and collaborative decision-making across multiple individuals and units within the institution. The findings of this research contribute to the literature on decision making in higher education by providing a practical understanding for how sub-brands are managed in Canadian higher education institutions. Understanding the decision-making dynamics related to brand alignment in athletic programs offers valuable insights for institutional leaders and stakeholders. It highlights the importance of strategic decision making in aligning the institution's brand with athletic programs, ultimately enhancing the overall brand equity and positioning of the institution.

This integration of decision-making theories from (Van Ameijde et al., 2009) with the examination of brand alignment in Canadian higher education athletic programs allows for a

more comprehensive understanding of leadership and decision making within the realm of branding in higher education. It provides a valuable perspective on how strategic decisions can be made to align athletic programs with the institution's brand, reinforcing the distributed nature of decision making and the importance of collective efforts in enhancing brand equity and leadership in higher education institutions.

Overall, this study contributes to both the branding literature and the literature on decision making in higher education by offering a context-specific understanding of brand alignment in Canadian higher education institutions. By identifying categories of brand alignment and exploring decision-making processes, this research enhances our knowledge of how brand extensions in athletic programs are aligned and provides valuable insights for practitioners and scholars in the fields of branding and higher education decision making.

5.3: Managerial Implications

Acknowledging the information presented above, there are several practical implications of how this research can be implemented at the managerial level. Based on the branding direction of a higher education institution's communications office, the names of programs, faculties, or units will impact how the overall institution brand identity is perceived. Identifying how an institution incorporates, manages, or aligns multiple brand identities is a core competency in developing a more competitive brand offering. Additionally, the athletic program of higher education institutions may benefit from restructuring the official program name to provide a clear, distinct, and impressionable brand identity within the loud marketplace that is higher education branding.

The findings of this research present how athletic brand alignment is viewed within an institution and the categories of alignment describe the practice of alignment within these institutions. The research has not only theoretical applications but has also revealed a number of managerial implications as they relate to athletic brand strategy alignment in Canadian higher education institutions. The most valuable practical implication of this research for higher education marketing professionals is the presented category dimensions of brand alignment. The brand alignment categories of dependent, collaborative, and autonomous alignment provide valuable insights for athletic and communication decision makers on how to establish stronger alignment between the athletic brand identity and the institution's brand identity. For instance, in scenarios where a higher education institution finds itself situated in a metropolitan area surrounded by rival institutions or professional sports teams, it may adopt a deliberate brand alignment strategy. This approach aims to seamlessly integrate the athletic brand identity with the stakeholders on campus. Failure to align the athletic brand with the institution's overall brand identity in such competitive environments can potentially weaken the connection stakeholders feel towards the institution's athletic program.

The findings derived from understanding the brand alignment categories can provide valuable insights for central communications and athletic marketers, enabling them to better comprehend their operational relationship. By gaining a deeper understanding of the alignment dynamics, these stakeholders can identify opportunities to foster a more collaborative branding effort. This enhanced collaboration opens avenues for joint initiatives and coordinated messaging, ultimately strengthening the overall brand positioning and brand experience for both the institution and the athletic department.

5.4: Limitations and Future Research

The study's geographic distribution of the interviewed institutions can be perceived as a limitation. Initially, the aim was to include two institutions from each USports conference. However, the recruitment of institutions beyond Western Canada proved to be problematic, resulting in only two institutions outside of Western Canada being included in the sample. If a larger sample was recruited from the additional conferences, alternative perspectives or geographic distinctions may have arisen. Thus, the small sample size beyond Western Canada and the uneven geographic distribution limit the generalizability of the study's findings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this study is a limitation, as it relies on subjective experiences and perceptions of participants rather than quantitative data. The findings are therefore limited to the perspectives and experiences of the participants and may not be generalizable to all Canadian universities or USports affiliated institutions.

Future research could explore the nuances and complexities of athletic branding through in-depth case studies or ethnographic research. These qualitative methods can provide valuable insights into the decision-making processes and communication strategies employed by Canadian universities when developing their athletic brands. Such research would also be useful in identifying potential gaps or areas for improvement in current branding practices. Future research could use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data with quantitative measures, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of brand strategy development in Canadian higher education institutions and USports affiliated institutions. This approach would allow for specific data testing and a more in-depth exploration of the relationships between possible variables. Such research could yield valuable insights and contribute to the ongoing development of effective successful brand measures in Canadian higher education athletics.

Finally, the scarcity of literature focused on Canadian higher education athletic branding underlines the potential value of replicating this study within the American NCAA context. Such an analysis may reveal further insights regarding the relationship between athletic and institutional brands due to the fundamental differences in governing bodies. Top NCAA Division 1 institutions have already integrated a high degree of athletic identity into the institutional identity, and exploring the critical distinctions of this phenomenon would provide a useful comparison to the USports context. Thus, this study has the potential to contribute significantly to the body of literature on brand strategy in higher education athletics in both the Canadian and American contexts.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The results from this research produced context-bound findings describing the various strategies of athletic brand alignment that exist within Canadian higher education institutions. The study produced significant managerial and theoretical contributions and outlined areas of future research. The study sheds light on the alignment between athletic brands and institution brands within Canadian higher education institutions, providing valuable insights into the strategies and practices employed in this context. By examining the different alignment categories, dependent alignment, collaborative alignment, and autonomous alignment the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how the athletic brand is integrated and what determines the degree of integration.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the management and strategic planning of athletic branding efforts in Canadian higher education institutions. The identification of different alignment categories highlights the importance of deliberate and intentional integration between the athletic brand and the institution brand. It emphasizes the need for close collaboration, clear communication, and shared goals between the athletics department and the central communications team to ensure a cohesive and consistent brand experience. The study underscores the value of understanding the unique audience and communication needs of the athletic brand, distinct from the academic and business-focused aspects of the institution. This recognition allows institutions to tailor their branding strategies and messaging to effectively engage and resonate with different stakeholders, including students, athletes, alumni, and the broader community.

By recognizing the diverse approaches to athletic brand alignment within Canadian higher education institutions, this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge on

branding in the higher education context and explicitly in the Canadian context. It provides a framework for institutions to assess their current alignment practices and make informed decisions about how to strategically align their athletic brand with the overall institution brand. The insights gained from this study can assist Canadian higher education professionals in establishing stronger and more cohesive brand identities, fostering greater engagement, pride, and loyalty among stakeholders. As institutions navigate an increasingly competitive landscape, understanding and effectively managing the alignment between athletic brands and institution brands becomes crucial in enhancing their overall brand reputation, differentiation, and success.

Appendix A: Participant Consent Form (Study 2)



Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:
Branding Athletics at Canadian Universities

Student Researcher(s):

Kyle Hertes
Graduate Student, Management and Marketing
University of Saskatchewan, Edwards School of Business
Krh725@usask.ca

Principal Investigator/Supervisor:

Lee Swanson
Faculty, Management and Marketing
University of Saskatchewan, Edwards School of Business
swanson@edwards.ca, 2124

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

This study investigates how Canadian universities develop or manage their institution and athletics brands to understand how the brand portfolio is managed. The findings from this research will provide valuable information to understand how higher education institutions manage brand extensions under the institution brand portfolio. The results of this research will be reported in my MSc thesis, reported in journal publications, and shared with interview participants.

Procedures:

This is a qualitative study using semi-structured in-person or virtual interviews with participants from Canadian higher education institutions and athletic programs. Masks will be optional for in-person interviews, as per participant requests. Interviews will be conducted with executive level leadership involved with developing or managing the branding strategies for university athletics or the university as an academic institution. All interviews will be audio recorded. At any point during the interview, the participant may request the audio recorder be turned off. Interviews will be transcribed using the automated transcription software Otter.ai and manually corrected to ensure transcription accuracy. Transcripts will be analyzed using NVivo to conduct a thematic analysis to identify themes that will identify how the brand portfolio of a higher education is

developed and managed. Interviews will be conducted in-person when applicable, or virtually through web-conferencing software.

Interviews will be conducted in person when applicable or hosted through Zoom or Microsoft Teams web conferencing platforms. Please refer to the links below if you wish to review the privacy policy for Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Otter.ai. Otter.ai is an automation transcription software that automatically transcribes meetings, interviews, or conversations. Otter.ai manages user confidentiality through secure networks and storage of data. Otter.ai audio recordings are automatically encrypted within the application and the service does not share transcripts or audio recordings without researcher authorization. We will not provide authorization for Otter.ai to share the transcripts or audio recordings from this interview. Researchers will be identifiable to Otter.ai through their account subscription, participants will not be identifiable through this source. Please refer to the privacy link below for more information on the Otter.ai privacy policy.

[Privacy | Zoom](#)

[Microsoft Teams Privacy - Microsoft Teams | Microsoft Learn](#)

[Otter.ai Privacy Policy | Otter.ai](#)

Key Details

- Interviews will take approximately 60 minutes.
- With participant consent, interviews will be audio recorded.
- Participants have the right to withdraw consent at any time during the data collection process.
- Researchers will be conducting virtual interviews from a private location. We recommend you are in a private location as well.

Funded by:

This research is not funded.

Potential Risks:

This research study will pose minimal risk from research ethics perspective, and there are no foreseeable ethical implications for the participants involved. Participants will enter the study voluntarily and will have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study has received research ethics approval and, during all phases of research, will remain in accordance with ethical regulations. It is possible you may be identified as a participant in this study given the limited participant pool. Although the pool of potential candidates is limited, we believe the participant pool is large enough that maintaining confidentiality will not be a concern. Second, we expect some overlap between responses from different institutions when there are similarities between institutional and athletic branding strategies. This will further eliminate a report reader's ability to identify who was involved in the interview.

Potential Benefits:

The results from this research will provide insight into how an academic institution may manage their brand portfolio and further develop branding strategies between brand extensions.

Compensation:

N/A

Confidentiality:

Researchers can not guarantee the privacy of data with the use of web-conferencing software. Although unlikely, a data breach to Zoom or Microsoft Teams remains a possibility. Your confidentiality will be protected by removing identifying information from transcripts. Only the researchers will have access to the interview transcripts. Participant data will be disseminated in a thesis document. Researchers expect data may also be used to publish journal articles. All participant quotations used in the final copy of the thesis will be introduced in general terms and without individual's names to protect anonymity. If you do not consent to the interview being recorded, researchers will take notes during the interview.

Storage of Data:

The electronic data will be stored by Dr. Lee Swanson on a University of Saskatchewan server in a password protected file that is regularly backed up. Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years as per the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines. After the minimum five-year storage term all data related to the research study will be deleted.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position (e.g., employment, academic status, access to services) or how you will be treated.
- Should you wish to withdraw, the information you provided will be deleted and disregarded from any future analysis.
- If one party from your academic institution withdraws voluntary consent, all participant data from this institution will be removed from the study.
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data has been pooled. Data will be pooled within two weeks of the interview date. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred, and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

To obtain results from the study, please contact the researchers directly.

Questions or Concerns:

Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be

addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975.

Signed Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Oral Consent:

I read and explained this consent form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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Appendix B: Interview Guide (Study 2)

Interview Guide

Outline

The following interview guide was developed by Kyle Hertes, Master of Science of Marketing student at the Edwards School of Business. The guide was developed to answer the research question: *How do Canadian universities assess their success in developing, implementing, and aligning their athletic branding strategies with institutional branding strategies?*

Consent

This study investigates how Canadian universities develop or manage their institution and athletic brands to understand how the brand portfolio is managed. The findings from this research will provide valuable information to understand how higher education institutions manage brand extensions under the institution brand portfolio. The results of this research will be reported in my MSc thesis, reported in journal publications, and shared with interview participants.

The interview will be conducted in-person and will be approximately 60 minutes in length. Masking remains optional as per your comfortability. I would like to record the interview for transcription purposes. At any point during the interview, the participant may request the audio recorder be turned off. Interviews will be transcribed using the automated transcription software Otter.ai and manually corrected to ensure transcription accuracy. The session recording will be saved on a University of Saskatchewan managed device and moved to OneDrive for secure long-term storage. Access to the recording will be restricted to myself and my supervisor Dr. Lee Swanson. You may withdraw from this research project at any point during the interview or by emailing me after the interview has been completed. All notes, interview transcripts, recordings and any other relevant data collected during the interview process will be deleted immediately upon receiving your request to withdraw from the study. Please note that approximately two weeks after the interview date your perspectives, opinions, and ideas will have become part of the anonymized dataset and it may not be possible to withdraw your input from the study.

Your confidentiality will be protected by removing identifying information from transcripts. Only the researchers will have access to the interview transcripts. Participant data will be disseminated in a thesis document. Researchers expect to use the data to publish journal articles. All participant quotations used in the final copy of the thesis will be introduced in general terms and without individual's names to protect anonymity. If you do not consent to the interview being recorded, researchers will record the interview using descriptive notes. Your personal and professional privacy and safety throughout this process is my utmost concern. I will ensure your consent to participate in this research is stored separately and securely from all other data to protect your identity. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential and stored in de-identified encrypted files on university-licensed OneDrive cloud servers. All data related to this research project, including audio recordings and transcripts, will be retained and stored by Dr. Lee Swanson for up to five years after publication of this MSc thesis, at which point all files will be deleted.

Your participation is completely voluntary and there is no financial compensation for your participation. If you have any questions prior to proceeding, please contact the Student Investigator, Kyle Hertes at krh725@usask.ca, or contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Lee Swanson at swanson@edwards.usask.ca for additional information. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975.

Do you have any questions about the purpose of the study, your participation in the study or potential risks associated with participation?

Your verbal consent indicates you understand the purpose of the study and any risks associated with participation. Do you consent to participate in this research study and for this conversation to be recorded?

Interview Questions

Overview

1. Tell me about yourself and your job.
 - a. What is your current job title?
 - b. How long have you been in your role?
 - c. How long have you been with your institution?
 - d. What is your experience with branding?

Main Institution branding

2. How does (X university) manage its overall brand identity?
 - a. What does the reporting process look like at the institution level?
 - b. What levels of control does the institution have?
 - c. Does (X University) have a multi-year brand strategy plan?
 - i. What does this look like?
 - ii. Are there specific goals or targets for this branding strategy?
 - d. Has your institution's brand identity evolved or changed since you started your position?
 - i. If so, in what ways?
 - e. What changes have you made/ want to make to the brand identity? (institutional only)
3. Does the institution communications office work with external units to develop a cohesive brand strategy?
 - a. Do external units ever develop branding strategies that are independent of the institution strategy?

Institution + subcomponents branding

4. How is the brand portfolio managed at (X University)?
 - a. What does the reporting process look like between units?
 - b. What levels of control does each unit have?

Athletics branding

5. Is there any meaning behind the naming structure of (X University) athletic program?
6. How does (X University) Athletics manage its brand?
 - a. What does the reporting process look like at the athletics level?
 - b. What levels of control does athletics have?
 - c. Does the athletics brand strategy have a multi-year plan?
 - i. What does this look like?
 - ii. Are there specific goals or targets for this branding strategy?
 - d. How does (X University) Athletics define their brand identity for athletics at (X University)?
 - e. How does the athletic brand identity fit into the institutional brand identity?
 - i. How does the athletic branding strategy fit into the multi-year plan?
 - f. Has your athletics brand identity evolved or changed since you started your position? (athletics only)
 - i. If so, in what ways?
 - g. What changes have you made/ want to make to the brand identity? (athletics only)
7. Are there any differences between managing the athletic brand and the institution brand?
 - a. Tell me about any challenges you face developing the athletic brand strategy with the institutional brand strategy in mind?

Assessing branding

8. How do you know if your branding strategy was successful?
 - a. Are there measures in place?
 - b. Are there any specific success factors?

Final Question

9. Is there anything else on this subject or about your branding strategies you would like the researchers to know?

Debrief

Thank you for sharing your experience with us today. Your responses will be extremely helpful for my thesis. The interview was audio recorded and will now be transcribed for future analysis. While your valuable perspectives will be included in the final report, all identifiers will be removed. There will be no way to identify you or to link you to any of the comments or ideas shared in the final report. If you have any questions or concerns after we end our session, please feel free to reach out to me at any time.

Do you have any final comments or questions as of now?

Thank you for your time and participation in my research study. I appreciate your openness and willingness to share your experiences with me.

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Subject: MSc Marketing Thesis Recruitment- Branding Athletics at Canadian Universities

Good afternoon, (Participant Name),

My name is Kyle Hertes, and I am a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan completing my Master of Science in Marketing through the Edwards School of Business. I am conducting research for my thesis and am seeking volunteer participants from Canadian Universities. I am researching branding in higher education by identifying how institutions and athletics programs work together to develop or manage their brand and brand identities. The goal of this research will identify how a Canadian university's brand portfolio is managed and developed to provide insight for future branding strategies.

Your experience and expertise as the (Participant Role) will provide valuable insight to how branding is managed at (X University). Along with your participation, an additional individual will be interviewed at (X university) in the (Athletics or Communications) department to provide a dual perspective of institutional branding. (X University) will only be eligible for participation after receiving consent to participate from both Institution and Athletics representatives respectfully.

The study consists of an approximately 60-minute interview, conducted virtually.

If you have any questions or concerns or require additional information, please contact Kyle Hertes at the email listed below.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free at 1-888-966-2975.

Student researcher: Kyle Hertes, Graduate Student, Edwards School of Business.

Email: krh725@usask.ca

Thank you in advance,

Kyle Hertes

Appendix D: Ethics Approval Certificate



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 25-Oct-2022

Certificate of Approval

Application ID: 3651

Principal Investigator: Lee Swanson

Department: Department of Management and
Marketing

Locations Where Research
Activities are Conducted: Saskatchewan, Canada

Student(s): Kyle Hertes

Funder(s):

Sponsor: University of Saskatchewan

Title: Branding Athletics at Canadian Universities

Approved On: 25-Oct-2022

Expiry Date: 25-Oct-2023

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Consent Form

Recruitment Email

Interview Guide

Acknowledgment Of: TCPS2 Core Certificate (Hertes)

Review Type: Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2018). The University of Saskatchewan Beh-REB has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the current approved protocol. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures must be reported to the Chair through submission of an amendment for Beh-REB consideration in advance of implementation.

To remain in compliance, a status report (renewal of closure form) must be submitted to the Beh-REB Chair for consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the Research Ethics Office website for further instructions and current forms.

*Digitally Approved by Clinton Westman
Vice-Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board
University of Saskatchewan*

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