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**Selling college: A longitudinal study of American college football
bowl game public service announcements**

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Abstract

Using ideological analysis as a frame, researchers analyzed institutionally created commercials (PSAs) that appeared in 28 U.S. college football bowl games over a seven-year period (2003-2009) to better understand the universities' brands as represented in these advertisements. They found many common elements such as showing traditional architectural elements (e.g., clock towers, grounds), highlighting areas of institutional excellence (e.g. rankings), and connecting attendance to the achievement of grandiose goals (e.g., "changing the world"). In spite of these similarities, there were also areas of difference (e.g., unique topographies, alumni) to differentiate institutions from one another. In addition, even though consistency is a hallmark of successful brands, some institutions shifted their narratives from year to year. Future research should explore the effects of these differences on the development of the brand, the role these advertisements play in the larger marketing campaigns, and if these spots contribute to students' expectations of the institutions.

Introduction

In this highly competitive higher education landscape, universities market their campuses to increase awareness of and interest in their institutions (Sevier, 2001). One key element of marketing is the establishment of a unique, institutional brand. At its most basic level, a brand is a “name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from” others (American Marketing Association, cited by Chicago AMA, n.d.). In other words, a brand is “a promise of an experience” (Moore, 2004, p. 57). Successful brands confirm the credibility of a product, connect emotionally with the buyer, motivate the buyer’s purchasing decisions, and lead them to be loyal users (Lake, n.d.; Sevier, 2001).

Talk of branding and even, more generally, marketing may make many in academia squeamish, because they do not feel comfortable thinking of education as a commodity. However, higher education “leaders are realizing that if they want to attract the right faculty, win important contracts, and recruit the desired students, a clear and consistent set of messages” is essential (Moore, 2004, p. 56). A successfully branded university or college will experience an increase in student applications, enrollments, and completions, and those students who graduate will be active (e.g., financially supportive) alumni. Yet, as Moore explains, “if you choose a college or university...based on the promise of a specific experience and then that promise is not fulfilled, the impact can be profound, embittering, and lasting” (p. 58). In some cases, that disconnect between the promise or expectation and reality may result in a student leaving an institution, or worse, dropping out of college altogether (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995). In fact, approximately 25% of first-year, full-time U.S. college students do not return for a

second year (NCHEMS, 2004–2009), suggesting inaccurate expectations could have serious implications for students and for the institutions that seek to educate them. For this reason, it is essential to explore what is promised to potential students through institutional marketing campaigns.

Several researchers have explored the messages conveyed in American college football bowl games, because they are important venues for informing the public about specific institutions. As Harris (2009a) pointed out, “no single marketing strategy or effort...reaches the sheer number of people as do televised football games” (p. 285–286). In fact, the 2012-2013 National Championship Bowl Game reached 26.4 million viewers (Associated Press, 2013). Further, research has found a relationship between institutions’ participation in bowl games and increases in their admissions applications (Pope & Pope, 2009; Toma & Cross, 1998). For example, Texas Christian University (TCU) saw a 42% increase in the number of applications weeks after its 2009 Rose Bowl run (Newton, 2011); its athletic success translated into increased interest in the school, which is one of the primary goals of marketing.

Previous studies (Clayton, Cavanagh, & Hettche, 2012; Harris, 2009a, 2009b; Tobolowsky & Lowery, 2006) have examined the university-produced 30-second advertisements—or “public service announcements” (PSAs)—that air during college bowl games to better understand how institutions market themselves to viewers and contribute to potential students’ college expectations. These advertisements “provide a unique opportunity [for institutions] to create a scripted message to potentially differentiate the advertised university from the thousands of potential competitors” (Clayton et al., 2012, p. 183).

Harris (2009a, 2009b) and Clayton et al. (2012) studied American college bowl PSAs over a single year, and Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006) studied these commercials for two seasons. But successful brands are “not built overnight” (Sevier, 2001, p. 86); they grow stronger over time. Therefore, this study takes a longitudinal approach to explore the messages conveyed in PSAs in the most watched bowl games (i.e., the Bowl Championship Series (BCS), which comprises the Orange Bowl, Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Fiesta Bowl, and the National Championship Game¹) over a seven-year period during the 2003–2009 seasons². The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the college brands as they were represented in these advertisements over a period of years, because consistency over time is a critical characteristic of successful brands. Further, successful (consistent) brands can have serious implications regarding application and enrollment decisions as well as an individual’s college expectations and persistence at those institutions, which, in turn, affects alumni support.

Literature review

Although there is limited research on college bowl advertisements, there is considerable research on related topics. The relevant research covered in this review focuses on: (a) university marketing and bowl games; (b) duplication of institutional excellence; and (c) expectation formation and college persistence.

[Place table 1 after this point]

University marketing and bowl games research

¹ The Championship Game was first played in 2006.

² To avoid confusion, the bowl games are referred to by only the fall date. For example, a game played during the 2003–2004 school term is identified as a 2003 bowl game.

In the past few years, several studies have investigated the representation of higher education in college bowl advertisements. Harris (2009b), for example, identified five themes in 2006 college bowl PSAs: campus characteristics (“size, beauty”), academics (“variety and uniqueness of academic programs”), co-curricular engagement (“exciting and fun,” “community service”), prestige building (“rankings, history/tradition”) and mission/purpose (“help achieve dreams, exploration”) (p. 291). Ultimately, he found the advertisements did not differentiate the institutions, but rather reinforced an “American collegiate ideal” (p. 296). Kirp (2003), in his exploration of higher education marketing, warned that “it is important not to romanticize academe, not to slip into nostalgia for a time that really never was” (p. 3). Other researchers noted the problem with false representations is that they can fuel unrealistic expectations of the college experience that may lead to academic challenges (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2012) and, potentially, attrition (Tobolowsky & Lowery, 2006). However, these possible effects went beyond the scope of the Harris study.

Clayton et al. (2012) conducted a content analysis of 115 PSAs that aired during the 2010 football season. They identified nine variables that were similar to those in Harris’ study: “Scenic Beauty, Individuals in Lab, NCAA Athletics, Performance Arts, International Reach, Students in Classroom, Graduation, Belonging, and History/Nostalgia” (p. 197). They suggested that even if the commercials included similar elements, institutions could still differentiate themselves by identifying a unique mission or experience. Yet, the effort to reach a broad audience “risks watering down the message” (p. 198), which they suggest was the case in the PSAs they studied.

Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006) studied 48 different institutional advertisements that aired in the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 football seasons. They looked at bowl games airing from late December to the national championship games in early January. As in the Harris (2009b) and the Clayton et al. (2012) studies, their findings underscored a consistent focus on tradition and quality, architectural elements, rankings, curricular and co-curricular efforts, and future goals. Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006) went beyond these similarities, however, to discuss important differences between the advertisements. They found examples where the visuals contradicted the narratives (e.g., Purdue University's narration discussed a technological revolution with a visual of a planted field), which led to a confused institutional message. Other spots highlighted faculty rather than students (e.g., an Ohio State University's faculty member selected a movie at a video store); a singular invention (e.g., University of Tennessee's innovative tail light); or did not show students or the campus at all (e.g., University of Southern California). The authors noted the differences, but because of the limited time frame for the study, they were not able to determine if the PSAs remained consistent over time or were anomalies.

Taken together, these studies suggest that there is a challenge for higher education marketing to successfully differentiate campuses and capture and promote a more realistic representation of the college experience. The current study is unique in that it focuses on how the institutions differentiate themselves in spite of common elements depicted in these advertisements and if the portrait of (a) college depicted in these PSAs is consistent and realistic over time.

Duplicating “excellence”

Toma (2009) suggested that the goal in higher education marketing may not be differentiation, but rather for institutions to identify characteristics in their own institutions that are similar to more prestigious schools in order to help improve their reputations. Increased prestige brings with it similar benefits to branding: it affirms an institution’s quality, increases the public’s awareness of an institution, and motivates students to apply and enroll (O’Meara, 2007). Kirp (2003) contended that institutions gain these “tangible benefits” (p. 4) whether a campus depiction is accurate or not. This may explain why the diverse group of institutions (e.g., in terms of setting, ranking, location) participating in football bowl games has presented themselves as more similar than dissimilar in the bowl PSAs. As Toma (2009) stated, “they are all chasing the same goal” (p. 10).

But this begs the question: What does “quality” or “prestige” mean? As Carlson (2010) explained, “‘quality’ means different things to different people” (n.p.). Ideally, students may look for schools that offer specific programs and/or environments and would see quality in institutions that offer those things over other institutions that do not. But national rankings, with all of their flaws, “play a strong role in public perceptions of quality” (Carlson, 2010, n.p.). Likewise, Conard and Conard (2000) found that academic reputation plays a key role in potential college students’ perceptions of institutional quality. Volkwein and Sweitzer (2006) reported a number of characteristics associated with prestige, including the SAT/ACT scores of entering freshmen, high school rank, acceptance rates, faculty productivity, retention and graduation rates, and institutional resources, which are often the same metrics used in rankings. They concluded that

“older, larger, and wealthier institutions have an edge in the competition for faculty, students, and prestige” (p. 143).

According to a national survey of first-year freshmen conducted between 1972 and 2006, the perception of a good reputation leads students to enroll in particular institutions, and the belief that “graduates get good jobs” is nearly as important (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). Other items rounding out the top factors in students’ enrollment decisions are whether the institution offers “special educational programs,” provides “financial assistance,” has a “good reputation for its social activities,” and is a school of a certain size (p. 64–65).

Because these factors are so important in college choice decisions, it is reasonable to assume that institutions will address them in their marketing campaigns. For instance, many campuses emulate higher prestige schools in their architecture, and a specific campus look communicates a sense of quality. Biemiller (2010) explained that many colleges build new buildings to look like old buildings and design campuses with “a matched set of buildings grouped around an open space,” because this design dates back to colonial colleges and “came to represent a[n]...ideal of campus design” (p. B6). This feature is often displayed in advertisements—indeed, this was a theme in all three of the key studies mentioned above. The current research builds on this topic by exploring the ways institutions may or may not communicate prestige in their PSAs.

[Place the summary table anywhere after this point.]

Expectation formation and college persistence

When colleges and universities communicate certain characteristics, it may do more than lead to institutional gains. These symbols of prestige and other messages may

contribute to students' college expectations. Some research has focused on the important role that expectations play in college student success. Braxton et al. (1995), for example, reported that "expectations for a *collegiate atmosphere*...does exert positive direct effects on both subsequent institutional commitment and commitment to the goal of graduating from college" (p. 605, emphasis added). But what is a collegiate atmosphere? In their study of the impact of high profile college sports on admission decisions, Toma and Cross (1998) noted that these events "embody the popular customs and rituals associated with collegiate life" (p. 633). Therefore, these findings suggest that bowl games, and the PSAs airing during the games, contribute to students' expectations of a college "atmosphere," which can have a major impact on college persistence.

Although these expectations may have positive results as mentioned above, Tinto (1993) contended, "when [college] expectations are either unrealistic and/or seriously mistaken, subsequent experiences can lead to major disappointments" (p. 54). Sevier (2001) called this sort of mismatch a performance gap. Tinto added that when there is such a gap between expectations and reality, students may "feel betrayed," which may lead to their decision to leave college (Tinto, 1993, p. 54).

More recently, Kuh, Gonyea, and Williams (2005) addressed similar issues and found that "students appear to be reasonably accurate in terms of how they will manage the transition to college," but they "are less accurate" in "estimating the nature of the campus environment" (p. 37). In fact, many first-year students maintain expectations "that are more positively toned than the actual experience of being in college" (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985, p. 94). Kuh et al. (2005) and others have referred to this "phenomenon" as the "freshman myth" (p. 37). A disconnect between reality and the

myth is more likely to result in a student's departure decision. Therefore, "it is to an institution's advantage to describe clearly to prospective students what they can expect from [a particular] college" (Kuh, 1991, p. 76) or risk losing disappointed students. (See table 1 for a summary of key literature review themes.)

[Insert figure 1 no later than this point.]

Methodology

The overarching goal of this qualitative study is to better understand the branding messages conveyed in PSAs that air during major college bowl games over time. It uses ideological analysis as a guide. This theoretical view sees commercials as a text that "specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs, and ideas" (White, 1992, p. 163). In other words, this study views brands as represented by these PSAs as cultural texts that inform viewers about the values of individual institutions, in particular, and higher education, in general. Therefore, the specific research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do higher education institutions use PSAs during U.S. football bowl games to brand or differentiate themselves?
2. How do institutions use PSAs to connect with prestige institutions?
3. What characteristics of colleges and college life are presented in the PSAs?
4. Do institutional branding strategies change over time?

The data for this study were PSAs that aired in a total of 28 bowl games over a seven-year period from 2003–2009 (2005 data were not recorded and, therefore, were not available for analysis). The Orange, Rose, Sugar, and Fiesta Bowls and the National Championship Game (see Table 2) were selected because they have the highest

viewership of all U.S. college football games. Thirty different universities played in the games. Twelve institutions played in more than one bowl game, so they had the opportunity to air different advertisements in their multiple appearances. Thus, unlike previous research, the study's time frame allowed for an exploration of the consistency of the messages in the PSAs, which is an important characteristic of branding.

[Insert Table 2 and 3 somewhere near here]

Public service announcements are 30-second advertisements produced by an institution and shown at the discretion of the network free of charge at some point during a televised athletic event, in this case, a major football bowl game (DeBonis, 2005; FCC, 1980). The commercials vary by budget, production quality, and style. Typically, the college bowl PSAs include shots of the campus, students, faculty, and resources. The individual shots could be close-ups, medium shots, long shots or all three. Quick edits between many shots are common in these advertisements; therefore, a simple retelling of the advertisement's visual story frame by frame is difficult.

The PSAs were recorded and the researchers, working independently, viewed them numerous times and wrote field notes capturing the visual elements and the text, both written and spoken. Then, the researchers coded the data through chunking followed by a line-by-line analysis for a more refined interpretation of the narrative and visual elements (Creswell, 2013). The goal of the ideological analysis was to better understand the values, beliefs, and ideas conveyed by these commercials.

The coding schema was based on three sources: common themes identified in the work of Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006), Harris (2009b), and Clayton et al. (2012); emotional appeals, which are an element of successful brands and were not discussed in

the previous studies; and codes that emerged directly from the data. Following the coding phase, the researchers came together to share their themes. When there were differences regarding the application of the schema or the interpretation of the data, they viewed the segments again and talked until a compromise was reached (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Ultimately, these are the findings discussed below.

There are two main limitations to this study. The first relates to the number and types of schools studied. This study investigated only the spots that aired during a limited number of college bowl games. Institutions have the opportunity to air PSAs at other times, including during other televised athletic events, and those spots may vary throughout a season and by sport, which may affect the representation of the school. Further, focusing only on institutions participating in the major college bowl games biases the study toward large state universities that are football powerhouses. Importantly, however, this bias may actually help reveal how similar types of institutions differentiate themselves, which is the goal of branding. Looking at a wider range of institutions could cloud these differences. Second, the goal of this analysis was to understand the representation, not to draw any direct links between the advertisements and student expectations, enrollment, or college completion. Investigating potential effects, which are also goals of successful branding, should be the focus of future research. Nevertheless, in spite of these limitations, this study offers valuable insights into how colleges and universities portrayed the college experience at their institutions for a broad audience over time.

Findings

Public service announcements (PSAs) represent individual institutional brands while also depicting a general portrait of the college experience. The key characteristics of successful branding are that institutions confirm their credibility and connect emotionally with their target audience. The findings begin by focusing on these two general areas and then conclude with a discussion of the representation over time. Similarities and differences between the spots are discussed within these themes.

Confirming credibility

Institutions promoted their credibility through their links to the past, depictions of campuses, and links to learning. Each theme reinforces the notion of institutional quality.

Links to the past

As Biemiller (2010) found, college campuses tend to replicate architectural elements that are associated with the earliest U.S. colleges. This was evident in the PSAs as well. Many classical architectural elements were visible in most of these spots, often prominently displayed. Structures like clock towers or steeples (visible in 26 institutional advertisements), columns (12), and gates (1) connected these campuses with the historical campuses of Europe and the American Ivy League. Because these stately, historical structures suggest notions of stability, security, and quality, even newer schools used these iconic images to convey these qualities. For instance, University of Oklahoma's (2003) advertisement showed a clock tower with more modern lines, but that still referenced the images of the past that carry connotations of quality.

Some institutions more directly evoked ties to the past by showing stills of the campus through the years. For example, the Ohio State spot (2009) showed snapshots of students from the past to the present as the narrator said "It started out as a simple

football cheer....Today, it has become more...much more.” Thus, the spot connected current students with students from the past.

Ten of the institutions referenced the past by mentioning successful alumni. This approach established a link between attendance and future success. For instance, the Wake Forest PSA (2006) highlighted alumni including Arnold Palmer, Maya Angelou, and the current football quarterback to create a chain of success from past to present. Specific alumni not only represent future success, but they also become agents for the school. For example, Gloria Estefan (University of Miami), Rowdy Gaines (Auburn University), and Marilyn Horne and Paul Orfalea (University of Southern California) were highlighted in their alma maters’ spots. These examples – from Latin pop and opera singers to athletes and the founder of Kinkos– would undoubtedly appeal to different potential students. Thus, though the method used was similar, the individual alumni were likely to attract different applicants based on their goals and interests. In all, these links to the past architecturally and/or through alumni showed that the schools reflected quality (i.e., prestige), history, and a tradition of success.

Depictions of campus

In addition to referencing traditional campus layouts, participating schools often showed expansive, beautifully manicured, and lush campus grounds (33 advertisements), which provided the lure of curb appeal as well as a sense of safety and quality. Carlson (2010) discussed how students are attracted to institutions that provide a “bubble” of safety in an urban environment. For example, in 2007, University of Southern California (USC), located in Los Angeles, showed the students in the park-like areas of campus, rather than its more urban surroundings. Only Boise State (2006) took what some may

see as a disadvantage, being in a city, and sold its campus as being set in a “dynamic” urban location. However, in its repeat bowl visit in 2009, Boise State’s new PSA focused on the scenic elements of campus and omitted any narrative reference to the city. Thus, Boise State, like the other institutions, concentrated on the beauty of its campus.

Strange and Banning (2001) noted that just showing water features is a draw to potential students. Thus, not surprisingly, beachfront institutions showed their proximity to water (e.g., University of Miami, 2003; University of Hawaii, 2007); even landlocked campuses used fountains to appeal to viewers, too (e.g., Penn State, 2009; Virginia Tech, 2007). Thus, these campuses used their physical spaces to convey idyllic images of safe, inviting, and prestigious campuses. Yet, in spite of these similarities, it is also important to note that these visuals conveyed the uniqueness of each campus. Miami’s beachfront setting and palm trees set it apart from the stately trees on Michigan’s campus, for example. So, even though there were thematic commonalities between advertisements, the topography of each campus made it unique.

Links to learning

Previous research has reflected the importance of academic reputation in students’ college choices (Conard & Conard, 2000; Pryor et al., 2007). This was important in the PSAs as well. It was very common for the institutions to focus on their rankings, a nod to the value of prestige. For instance, USC (2006) noted its students were in the 93rd percentile in SAT scores. The University of Georgia’s advertisement (2007) focused exclusively on the school’s two Fulbright Scholars, while other colleges made mention of the number of prestigious scholars they enrolled (e.g., National Merit Scholars at University of Oklahoma, 2006) and the types and numbers of their students who received

awards (e.g., Rhodes, Truman) (e.g., Kansas State, 2003; West Virginia University, 2007).

Other universities alluded to academic excellence without offering specifics. For instance, the University of Iowa (2009) PSA said they were a “top-tier research institution,” while Virginia Tech (2008) was the “place to do undergraduate research.” Sometimes institutions with widely varying rankings used similar appeals regarding their academic reputations. For instance, using *US News and World Report* rankings from 2012³, Notre Dame (ranked 19th) encouraged potential students to come and “make a difference,” while the University of West Virginia (ranked 164th) asked, “What will you start?” (see Table 3 for complete rankings information). In other examples, the University of Oklahoma (all years) (ranked 101st) was “the flagship of excellence”; the University of Illinois (2007) (ranked 45th) was “one of the great public universities” that was “getting even better.” Again, this language reflects their aspiration to be associated with more selective colleges and universities (Toma, 2009). In fact, the University of Alabama (2009) (ranked 75th) noted that their students were “the best and brightest,” a saying coined by David Halberstam (1972) to refer to students attending Ivy League institutions. Harris (2009a, 2009b) spoke about the rewards that accompany quality brands, so perhaps these institutions hoped to garner the same benefits as highly selective schools, even if their rankings did not support that conclusion.

Although the language was vague in many instances, in some cases schools found excellence in less traditional areas. For example, Kansas State University (2004) noted that according to Yahoo they were one of the “Top 100 Wired Campuses.” They also

³ Few spots actually referred to exact *US News* rankings, so we have used 2012 numbers to demonstrate the variability in rankings.

stated that they were one of America's most recommended schools according to *Newsweek* and the *Kaplan Report*. The University of Oklahoma's (2003) advertisement talked about having the highest graduation rate in the Big 12, but also noted that it was building what would be one of the world's largest weather research centers, reflecting a unique achievement. Ohio State University (2006) mentioned that a student set the "land speed record." These particular accomplishments suggest excellence and quality, but also carve out a unique niche for each school. If that niche is important to a potential student, it may set the school apart from the others.

Interestingly, although the narratives claimed these were institutions of academic excellence, rarely did the PSAs show learning occurring inside traditional classrooms. In fact, many of the spots depicted malls or grassy areas where students congregated informally to study, talk, or play (e.g., Kansas State, 2003; University of Miami, 2003; Virginia Tech, 2008). For example, Louisiana State University (LSU, 2006) showed students sitting and studying with other students in a variety of settings on its tropical campus. The University of Michigan (2006) went one step further by showing a class meeting outside on green grass with trees and shrubbery behind them and large imposing buildings behind the trees. Thus, these advertisements showed how learning occurs outside the confines of a classroom on lush campus grounds, and those grounds looked very different depending on the campus location.

When students in the spots were shown meeting inside with faculty, they were rarely in classrooms. For instance, students met with faculty over a computer in a smart conference room (LSU, 2006) or in a living room-like setting (University of Oklahoma, 2006). Further, in the rare instances where classrooms were depicted, the spaces tended

to be modern smart rooms or, as in the case of Texas Christian University (TCU) (2010), a cross between a seminar room (with only a few students) and a media room with cushy upholstered chairs and a large screen up front. In these examples, the look of the classroom was one aspect of the campus that was not traditional.

Most often, students pursued their interests independently in these advertisements. For example, they were shown conducting experiments in labs (Ohio State, 2006, 2009), building homes (West Virginia, 2008), covering news (TCU, 2010), participating in mock court (Michigan, 2003), or out on archeological digs (Michigan, 2003; Ohio State, 2009). These visuals suggested that learning is not the result of lecturing, but the outcome of hands-on experiences. Thus, teachers may provide guidance, but students are free to explore their intellectual passions as far as they want to take them. Finally, it is worth noting that many schools showed experiential learning opportunities, but the uniqueness was in the type of experiences offered on each campus. If a potential student was looking for a particular experience, an institution offering that specific hands-on opportunity might appear more interesting.

Connecting emotionally

The other key characteristic associated with successful branding is to connect emotionally with the public. These PSAs did this in a number of ways, from showing links to family, friends, and life events; depicting a rich student life, and connecting to students' high aspirational goals.

Connections to family and friends

Very few spots overtly attempted to make emotional appeals. Ohio State was one of the few institutions that did so in most of its advertisements. The spots varied each

year, but starting in 2007 they connected the school with family traditions by showing small children wearing OSU t-shirts around the Christmas tree as well as senior citizens bearing the colors as they traveled the world. In these spots, the people had their arms up in a similar pose, indicating they were proud Buckeyes. In 2009, the advertisement also showed a wedding party making the OSU sign. These depictions of long-standing alumni, children, and students proudly displaying their loyalty to OSU as they travelled and at key moments in their lives reflected the important role the school plays in a family's life, which suggests a more personal connection.

Another emotional approach was evident in the University of Florida PSAs that focused on the importance of the school in forging close friendships. In one spot (2008), two elderly men met in a coffee shop to catch up. In another spot a year later, two middle-aged women sat together on a couch looking at old wedding pictures. Thus, the spots suggested that the friendships formed in college were still strong years later.

Depicting a rich life

Carlson (2010) noted that DePaul University found that potential students look for institutions that offer a “balance between the academic and social experience” (n.p.). Many of the bowl advertisements attempted to make a similar statement. Perhaps the most apt example of this merging of the academic with the social was in the University of Utah's spot (2009). In this PSA, a young woman wore a white lab coat and protective glasses as she sat at a table in a lab surrounded by numerous beakers of bubbling liquid. She checked her watch and proceeded to take off her glasses and lab coat while donning a ski mask and grabbing her ski boots. She smiled and exited. The narrator of the PSA talked about Utah being a top research and recreational university, thus selling the fact

that the school's location offers strong academics and great skiing. In this advertisement, there is no struggle to balance personal and academic demands.

Not surprisingly, given the placement of the PSAs in televised football games, other institutions showed the merging of academics and sport. For example, the narrator in LSU's spot (2005) talked about a "great game plan on and off the field," which linked the goals of the elite football team to academic goals. The University of Louisville's commercial (2006) used the language of football to describe academics—for example, the school was "*tackling* medical issues" and "*coaching* students to make a difference" (emphasis added). Thus, these institutions linked the ideas of excellence in sport and academics.

There was also a visual, rather than narrative, correlative to this connection in many of the advertisements. These PSAs linked football and academic success by connecting images of crowds at football games to shots of crowds at graduation (e.g., Cincinnati, 2009). In fact, graduation was one of the most common themes represented (17 advertisements). In these spots, whether at a football game or graduation, the crowds were cheering; students were surrounded by friends and families; and everyone exuded joy. There were no dropouts or football losses shown, only graduates and completed passes and touchdowns. Thus, the commercials reflected the commonalities between these seemingly different traditions. Both events were filled with excitement, fun, and a sense of achievement and community (Toma, 2009).

Connecting to personal goals

The Pryor et al. study (2007) revealed that one reason students chose a particular institution was its reputation for graduates finding employment. But the PSAs suggested

much grander achievements tapping into individuals' innermost passions. For example, many of the advertisements talked about college being a place for students to "discover it for yourself" (Cincinnati, 2009) or seek your "endless potential" (Oregon, 2010). Still other PSAs went a step further, stating that students who attended their institutions would not only fulfill their potential, but would end up doing "something great" (Ohio State, 2009) or "changing the world" (Texas, 2004; TCU, 2009). Thus, college was portrayed as a place where students could stretch themselves and accomplish amazing things. USC (2004), for instance, concluded that their students are the people who will be "tomorrow's leaders, creators, inventors, and scholars." Virginia Tech's advertisement (2007) talked about "inventing the future." Other spots spoke to college being the fulfillment of a dream. For instance, Penn State (2008) proclaimed the school was a place where "dreams come true." Therefore, the outcomes represented in these spots suggested that the college experience has long-lasting personal and societal effects beyond mere employment. They tapped into dreams of exceptionalism, which may have remained dormant if not for attendance at a particular school. This type of emotional appeal would undoubtedly connect with a certain type of viewer.

(In)consistent brands over time

Because brands gain strength if they are fairly consistent over time, this study provided the opportunity to see how institutions represented themselves over a seven-year period. Twelve out of the 30 institutions included in this study had more than one major bowl game appearance between 2003 and 2009. Five of them aired fairly consistent advertisements over the years.

The University of Oklahoma (5 years), University of Texas (3 years), University of Florida (3 years), Louisiana State University (3 years), and University of Cincinnati (2 years) reflected the philosophy that brands are more successful if they are consistent over time. For example, in each of Oklahoma's spots, the university's president discussed areas of excellence such as the number of endowed professorships, the quality of its art museum, and its excellent students. All of these items are common measures of academic excellence in national rankings. Significantly, even though the PSAs were essentially the same over time, they did reflect minor changes, such as increases in the number of endowed chairs or the amount of research dollars coming to the institution. The University of Texas (UT) advertisements were basically the same over the years as well. Although they all included different aerial shots of the city ending on the famous UT tower, the commercials proclaimed variations on the idea that UT was "a rallying cry for thinkers and doers" (2004, 2009) and "what starts here changes the world" (2008, 2009). The University of Florida offered different stories from the Gator nation, but each showed that Florida graduates are "everywhere" making a difference, large and small. These spots reinforced the notion that graduates could "start a Fortune 500 company" or "write the great American novel" (2006) or "leave no mark at all" except with the friends one makes as a student (2008, 2009). LSU (2003, 2006, 2007) offered different visuals, but the message was that their successful game plan on the football field extended "beyond the gridiron." The University of Cincinnati's spots (2008, 2009) stressed the location, graduation, and a variety of educational opportunities, always ending with its tag line, "Proudly Cincinnati."

Seven institutions (USC, Ohio State, Michigan, Boise State, Alabama, Utah, and Virginia Tech) produced very different PSAs for each of their bowl game appearances. For example, in 2003 USC used an animated advertisement that included no shots of the campus or its students. It focused on being the place for students who will be the leaders of tomorrow and used the tag line that USC was the “University for the 21st Century.” The animation seemed fitting for a spot about the future. In the following year, however, they used special effects to combine real campus images with superimpositions of Tommy Trojan, the mascot, riding a horse through campus past huge superimposed portraits of former alumni. This advertisement’s content linked the unknown future to these well-known alumni, saying USC is what they all have in common. In 2006, USC returned to animation, but the copy was very different. It talked about USC students being the brightest and most diverse student population while highlighting institutional rankings and reputation. This sentiment was continued in the commercials shown in 2007 and 2008, but the unique element here was the diversity depicted in the actual shots of campus and students. It visually represented USC as a place where all students can achieve their dreams, regardless of race and ethnicity.

Ohio State made five bowl appearances and the advertisement shown in its first appearance was quite different from those presented later. The 2003 spot started with the title, “Simple tips for picking a movie.” Then, it identified a professor in close-up stating, “In the decision-making process, one must consider the conditional properties of an information source’s success. Through the use of techniques such as collaborative filtering, we can develop more sophisticated and accurate electronic recommendation agents...” At this point, the camera pulled back to reveal the professor at a video rental

store talking to the confused looking college-age employee. The spot concluded with the superimposed comment “Really smart people doing really smart things.” It could be argued that this early advertisement, in fact, showed faculty as pedantic and out of touch, which one would guess is not what was intended. In contrast, the later spots (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) were thematically consistent and focused on the important role of the school in a family’s life.

The University of Michigan’s three ads highlighted different strengths. The first spot (2003) showed students in space, on archeological digs, and in moot court, with the narrative declaring, “If it’s being explored by anyone, anywhere, it’s happening here.” The second advertisement (2004) had different visuals and concluded with “Our students move on, but the spirit stays with them.” The final spot, in 2006, showed students in class on the lawn, volunteering, in labs, and at graduation, and their images were connected with the copy: “To the inspirers of minds, and the minds they inspire. To those that bring hope to the world today, and give hope to tomorrow...Hail. For there is truly a Michigan difference.” Thus, the first commercial focused on the school as the epicenter of innovation and change, the second discussed the strong feelings that alumni have for their school, and the third talked about the campus offering unique opportunities. Each was vastly different from the others.

The other schools with multiple advertisements offered a dizzying number of views of their institutions. Boise State, with two appearances, made dramatic changes to its PSAs. The first spot (2006) highlighted its location in a “dynamic” western city, while its later advertisement (2009) focused on campus attributes. The University of Alabama’s two spots (2008, 2009) focused on points of pride. The first included many

shots of the students and campus that were connected with ideas associated with the school: “Crimson is...tradition, innovation, discovery, fellowship, creativity....Crimson is the University of Alabama.” The second advertisement used a different visual technique; it had fewer cuts and showed crimson-colored smoke leading the camera from the campus to the map of the state and beyond. Its focus was on showing that the University of Alabama plays a global role.

The University of Utah’s two spots differed dramatically as well. The first (2004) offered a tour of campus while the second (2009) never ventured outside, showing a woman leaving a lab to go skiing. Virginia Tech’s commercials were equally distinct. The first spot (2005) had students talking about their future dreams without showing campus while the second (2008) showed a diverse group of students and faculty on the campus grounds identifying themselves as members of the Virginia Tech community.

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate whether any of these evolving campaigns were successful in appealing to potential students and differentiating the schools. However, Sevier (2001) stated that “brands can be changed, but only infrequently and only very carefully” (p. 86). Thus, these dramatic changes would seem to work against the development of a successful brand.

Discussion

These findings suggest that PSAs that air during college football bowl games contribute to individual institutional brands as well as to a more general portrait of higher education. The former may influence college choice decisions and the latter may affect students’ college success. Both are significant. This section describes how the advertisements

achieved both goals by discussing brands across institutions and the specific higher education portrait.

Branding by institution

The PSAs included in this study addressed two key characteristics of branding: they confirmed credibility and connected emotionally to viewers. The advertisements achieved those goals by focusing on excellence of all sorts—including academic achievements—and by tapping into personal desires tied to family, traditions, friends, and the future. Although there were many themes repeated in these commercials (e.g., the beauty of campus, the traditional architectural elements, self-discovery, experiential learning), the most repeated theme was connected to institutional prestige and quality. The prevalence of this idea suggests institutions tried to leverage excellence in any form. This finding supports the view expressed by Toma (2009) that institutions want to connect with higher prestige schools and, as a result, gain similar benefits. Clearly, traditional views of excellence remain a valuable currency in higher education. So, institutions that did not have *US News* rankings to support their quality used other narrative and visual elements to represent excellence.

Although there were many commonalities between the spots, schools were able to differentiate themselves in a variety of ways. At a very basic level, the campuses are physically different and this was evident in the PSAs. For example, the architecture and landscape of the University of Michigan looks very different than the LSU setting, even if both advertisements showed students studying on the campus grounds. The spots also highlighted particular achievements that were unique to each campus. Whether a

commercial touted technological or recreational advantages or specific experiential opportunities, the schools made unique claims for excellence whenever possible.

Do these differences matter to an audience? Although this question goes beyond the scope of this study, media theory explains that people are more likely to notice (i.e., selective perception) and remember (i.e., selective retention) information that is “consonant with strongly held attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 80). Thus, a particular institution that presents information that supports beliefs held by viewers may result in favorable college decisions, particularly if it is unique in presenting that specific message.

The University of Florida’s PSAs, for example, were the only ones that focused on how college friends became life-long friends. Therefore, if this attribute is important to potential students, seeing this spot may play a role in their decisions about college applications and attendance. Similarly, different messages may appeal to other students. For instance, a student interested in conducting research on Alzheimer’s disease might choose West Virginia University where this work is taking place; a student drawn to the visual beauty of the University of Hawaii campus, which was on full display in its advertisement, might be compelled to apply to that school. Some of these characteristics, such as making long-lasting friendships, may not seem groundbreaking, but they may still be important to potential college students with particular interests. Although media research suggests these spots would be effective if they tapped into viewers’ belief systems and interests, future research should determine whether the PSAs do contribute to institutional differentiation for future college students as they select institutions and/or whether the advertisements contribute to their general views concerning college.

College experience

Although each of the PSAs represented the individual brand of an institution, the themes cut across the specific advertisements to reflect the branding of higher education itself. Many themes represented were strikingly similar. They depicted safe, beautiful campuses designed much like colleges from the earliest days. In these spots, college was a place for individuals to pursue their dreams and change the world. The academic environment was focused on individual initiative and field experiences that would allow students to reach their dreams. And, though the academic experience would be challenging, it would not require any personal sacrifices. As the University of Utah advertisement showed, there is time for skiing and scholarship.

This articulated image of college life may be possible, but one could argue that it is also overly idealistic. In fact, during the 2003–2009 period of this study, the United States experienced a long-running war, a financial meltdown, high unemployment, foreclosures, major bankruptcies, and a gridlocked government. Campuses were not exempt. As state support declined, public institutions resorted to increasing tuitions and focusing on research to gain funds and prestige. Increased prestige would have the added benefit of attracting better students who would be more likely to graduate and succeed after graduation—an important consideration, given that unemployment for people aged 20–24 was at an all-time high (Theodossiou & Hipple, 2011). Yet, these PSAs showed no signs of the tensions affecting higher education. Rather, the collective representation conjured up an overly romanticized view of the college experience about which Kirp (2003) warned us.

In truth, it is not surprising that these marketing efforts conveyed positive views of the institutions they represented. They are, at their core, advertisements.

Nevertheless, there are implications associated with these common representations of higher education. Most significantly, these longstanding and repeated romanticized images may affect students' unconscious perceptions of what it means to attend college in general, not just at a particular school and, most significantly, these views can affect their persistence.

Implications and conclusions

This study is unique from previous work on college football PSAs for two primary reasons. First, previous studies looked at one or two years of data, which is insufficient to develop an understanding of an institution's brand. The current research explored the messages conveyed in these advertisements over time, which allowed the researchers to explore consistency – a hallmark of successful brands. Second, it looked at how the commercials differentiated the institutions as well as noting areas of commonalities. Previous research focused on similarities, giving little space to points of distinction.

Studying the PSAs over the seven years (the 2003–2004 through 2009–2010 seasons) revealed that the institutions promoted, in major and nuanced ways, areas of differences between these large, public institutions. From identifying unique attributes (e.g., a weather research center at the University of Oklahoma) to depicting special topographical qualities (e.g., ocean views at the University of Hawaii), the institutions distinguished themselves from each other. The unique points may seem minor—touting one alumnus over another, or palm trees over oaks—but each still represents a particular

campus and may appeal to different potential students. The effects of these differences should be the subject of future research.

Perhaps more surprising were the ways the institutions touted common elements, such as promoting high aspirational goals and academic reputations regardless of their differing levels of success in these achievements. The focus on these aspects suggests these strengths are important metrics of quality for the public. As a result, participating in these high-profile football games allows these institutions to leverage their public exposure to attract potential students looking for similar features generally associated with elites (e.g., increased applications, stronger faculty, more grant funding), because they are synonymous with quality. In short, the television exposure helped extend the reach and power of the brand. The fact that the focus of some of these advertisements changed over time suggests a dilution of the brand, which future research should explore. Specifically, future research will have to determine whether what appear to be small differences in the PSAs have a major impact on students' college choice decisions.

Branding includes all marketing interactions with the public, and PSAs are only one element. Thus, other research should look more broadly at institutional marketing campaigns to see how PSAs contribute to the overall branding efforts of the institution, because branding includes all the marketing interactions with the public of which the PSAs are only one element. In addition, future audience reception studies may be able to identify the role these types of advertisements play in the formation and/or reinforcement of prospective students' college expectations and the public's attitudes regarding higher education.

In summary, ideological analysis was a helpful guide in the exploration of the values and beliefs conveyed through these advertisements. This study found that PSAs that air during football bowl games do provide nuanced views of individual campuses while painting a more generalized portrait of higher education. Recognizing that these are still advertisements designed to sell an idealized image of college life, administrators must find ways to address the gap between romanticism and realism in order to help students make successful adjustments. One place these efforts can be addressed is in student affairs programming (such as orientation), or in transition courses for entering students. Ultimately, if institutional marketing campaigns and their brands create unrealistic views of the college experience that sell a myth, the cost is felt not only by the institution, but the students as well. And the price for both is too high.

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Table 1

Summary of key elements that reflect to PSA content and importance

Primary Areas	Major themes
University Marketing and Bowl Games	<p>Common elements of PSAs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus characteristics (e.g., beauty, architecture), Academics (e.g., laboratories, students), • Co-curricular engagement (Arts, sport) • Quality/tradition (e.g., prestige-building, rankings, history) • Graduation <p>Unique elements in PSAs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contradictions between visuals and narration • Focus on singular invention • No visuals of students or campus
Duplicating Excellence	<p>Focus on prestige and reputation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics of prestige (e.g., SAT/ACT scores, high school rank, retention, campus architecture) • Benefits of prestige (e.g., increased applications, faculty hires, grant support, alumni support)
Expectation Formation and College Persistence	<p>Expectations of campus atmosphere affect persistence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituals of college life reflect atmosphere (e.g., college bowls are one ritual) • Met expectations are more likely to lead to student persistence. • Unmet expectations more likely to lead to dissatisfaction, transfer, and/or drop out.

Figure 1 Relationships between PSAs and Prestige and College Expectations

Table 2

Institutions of higher education and BCS college bowl game appearances, 2003–2009

Year	Date	Bowl	Institutions
2003	2 January 2004	Fiesta	Kansas State University and Ohio State University (OSU)
	1 January 2004	Orange	Florida State University and University of Miami
	1 January 2004	Rose	University of Michigan and University of Southern California (USC)
	4 January 2004	Sugar	University of Oklahoma (OU) and Louisiana State University (LSU)
2004	1 January 2005	Fiesta	University of Utah and University of Pittsburgh
	4 January 2005	Orange	USC and OU
	1 January 2005	Rose	University of Michigan and University of Texas (UT)
	3 January 2005	Sugar	Virginia Tech University and Auburn University
2006	1 January 2007	Fiesta	Boise State University and OU
	2 January 2007	Orange	University of Louisville and Wake Forest University
	1 January 2007	Rose	USC and University of Michigan
	3 January 2007	Sugar	LSU and University of Notre Dame
	8 January 2007	National Championship	University of Florida and OSU
2007	2 January 2008	Fiesta	West Virginia University and OU
	3 January 2008	Orange	University of Kansas and Virginia Tech
	1 January 2008	Rose	USC and University of Illinois
	1 January 2008	Sugar	University of Georgia and University of Hawaii
	7 January 2008	National Championship	LSU and OSU
2008	5 January 2009	Fiesta	UT and OSU
	1 January 2009	Orange	Virginia Tech and University of Cincinnati
	1 January 2009	Rose	USC and Penn State University

	2 January 2009	Sugar	University of Utah and University of Alabama
	8 January 2009	National Championship	University of Florida and OU
2009	4 January 2010	Fiesta	Boise State University and Texas Christian University
	5 January 2010	Orange	University of Iowa and Georgia Tech University
	1 January 2010	Rose	OSU and University of Oregon
	1 January 2010	Sugar	University of Florida and University of Cincinnati
	7 January 2010	National Championship	University of Alabama and UT

Table 3

Rankings, number of appearances in bowl games, and number of different PSAs by Institution

Institutions (N=30)	<i>US News</i> Rankings (2012)	Years in Bowl Games	Number of different PSAs during study period (n=48)
University of Alabama	75	2008, 2009	2
Auburn University	82	2004	1
Boise State University	67 regional	2006, 2009	2
University of Cincinnati	143	2008, 2009	2*
University of Florida	58	2006, 2008, 2009	3*
Florida State University	101	2003	1
University of Georgia	62	2007	1
Georgia Tech University	36	2009	1
University of Hawaii	164	2007	1
University of Illinois	45	2007	1
University of Iowa	71	2009	1
University of Kansas	101	2007	1
Kansas State University	143	2003	1
Louisiana State University	128	2003, 2006, 2007	3*
University of Louisville	143	2006	1
University of Miami	38	2003	1
University of Michigan	28	2003, 2004, 2006	3

University of Notre Dame	19	2006	1
Ohio State University	55	2003, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 *	2*
University of Oklahoma	101	2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008 *	1*
University of Oregon	101	2009	1
Penn State University	45	2008	1
University of Pittsburgh	58	2004	1
University of Southern California (USC)	23	2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008 *	4*
University of Texas	45	2004, 2008, 2009 *	3*
Texas Christian University (TCU)	97	2009	1
University of Utah	124	2004, 2008	2
Virginia Tech University	71	2004, 2007, 2008	3
Wake Forest University	25	2006	1
West Virginia University	164	2007	1

Notes:

* Reflects thematic similarities