Student Perceptions and Preferences of University-Affiliated Athletic Merchandise and Logos

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ABSTRACT

College sports are certainly ingrained in the fabric of American society, and a significant aspect of this phenomenon is the pageantry associated with college sports. This pageantry includes team logos and official team colors, and both are important aspects of fandom and team identification. Utilizing social identity theory as the theoretical framework for this research, the purpose of this study was to examine students’ university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logo preferences and related behaviors. Two focus groups were conducted with results showing three major themes, where students demonstrated polarizing views and opinions. These themes were (a) fashion and function, (b) orientation towards real vintage for style and nostalgia, and (c) preference for chic and official. These findings provide guidance for marketers and merchandisers to be aware of the nuances of different types of students and not to infer that the preferences of students are all the same.

Keywords: Officially licensed merchandise, Logos, Social identity theory, College students, College athletics

INTRODUCTION

College sports have certainly become ingrained in American society as more than 180 million people identify as fans of college sports (Learfield, 2021). College football attendance is close to 50 million fans with college football games dominating television ratings on fall Saturdays (Gough, 2022). College sports play a significant role in American society as evidenced by the billions of dollars spent on college sports in the form of sponsorships, media rights, ticket sales, donations, and officially licensed merchandise (Gough, 2022; Learfield, 2021).

Logos, school colors, mascots, and fight songs extend beyond their display on college football Saturdays. Display of university-affiliated merchandise is a tangible way for students to display their affiliation and fandom with a university and a collegiate sport team. Officially licensed collegiate merchandise is growing, with sales topping $7.6 billion in 2021 with apparel sales accounting for 22% of that total (Heijjer, 2022). Collegiate apparel often features a logo or other marks associated with the athletic team and provides a visual cue to help institutions communicate their
established and unique identity while also capturing consumers’ attention among other competitors (Hedlund et al., 2018; Scola & Gordon, 2018). These logos or marks also extend beyond their display on athletic merchandise. They provide a way for alumni and fans to identify with their alma mater or favorite collegiate sport team as well as provide a sense of belonging and social identity. The value of logos and affiliated marks (e.g., official mascot, color, etc.) to the student body cannot be underestimated as they represent the institution and its athletic teams that are so important to university students as fans.

The notion of utilizing university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logos to display a student’s affiliation and fandom coincides with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979). Social identity theory posits individuals tend to categorize themselves into social groups that display their in-group (and out-group) status, where social comparisons are made between affiliations (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979). Research has demonstrated it is likely that individuals as fans utilize university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logos to showcase their affiliation to such university sports teams, and detachment from other non-affiliated sports teams (Lock & Heere, 2017; McDonald et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2020). Given the need to understand these intricacies, the purpose of this study is to examine students’ university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logo preferences and related behaviors. It is clear there is a strong following of university sports among the student population, but there is not a clear understanding of how university-affiliated merchandise and logos factor into students’ fandom-related consumption behavior. Thus, there are important nuances that are particular to the college student experience that need to be understood for effective management and marketing of university-affiliated merchandise and logos. Thus, an in-depth understanding of student perceptions and preferences as they relate to university-affiliated merchandise and logos is needed to uncover the complexities of the student experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social-Identity Theory

Social identity theory, derived from Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel et al.’s (1979) research on social groups, explores how individuals tend to categorize themselves into social groups (i.e., belonging to a group or not belonging to a group). In this sense, individuals derive their sense of self from their group belonging, which is the basis of their social identity. As key components of social identification theory, individuals start through categorization and move through identification and social comparison. That is, individuals socially categorize themselves into in-group and out-group classifications, and are inclined to identify with their in-group and lack identity with their out-group. Through identification, individuals make social comparisons between identified in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel et al., 1979). In the context of student fandom of university-affiliated athletic teams, students may utilize university-affiliated merchandise and logos to showcase their in-group affiliation and in-group identification with such sports teams. University-affiliated merchandise and logos can also be utilized to make social comparisons between themselves and other non-fans of the university sports teams (e.g., competitors).

While social identities can include characteristics such as race, gender, and ethnicity, there has been several research studies indicating that individuals can categorize themselves according to their fandom (e.g., Lock & Heere, 2017; Prayag et al., 2020). That is, individuals can group or categorize themselves as a fan of a particular sports team or sporting event, which reflects their perceived identity and in-group status (Prayag et al., 2020) and subsequent consumption behavior (Katz et al., 2020). Despite a well-established understanding of the tenants of social identity theory, there is still a need within the literature to understand the sports fan experience as it relates to group behaviors (McDonald et al., 2022). This research helps to fulfill this research gap in its investigation of students’ perceptions and preferences of university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logos.

Team Identification and Logos

Wann (2002) defines sport fandom as the extent to which a person identifies with the role of being a fan of sports in general or of a specific sport, i.e., baseball, football, or golf. Team identification is the next step in this process and is conceptualized as the extent to which a person (i.e., a fan) feels a psychological or emotional connection to a specific team (Wann & James, 2019). Sport fandom and team identification are critical aspects of the experience of sports fans as these concepts lie on the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk & James, 2001, 2006, 2016). This model
describes the process of developing a psychological or emotional attachment to a team or a player thus moving from a casual interest to being a fan (Wann & James, 2019). The model posits that a person moves through four stages (awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance) during the process of becoming a sports fan while developing devotion or loyalty to a specific team or athlete.

Team identification is also central to a person’s own identity. Team identification is exhibited or made known publicly through the display of team colors or logos on clothing, hats, or personal accessories. This expression of support for a specific team is important for fans to identify themselves as a fan of a specific team. This concept of self-presentation is rooted in Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He proposed that individuals perform backstage and frontstage. Backstage refers to a person’s behavior or actions in private that are not known publicly. Frontstage refers to calculated decisions in how a person displays their image in public. Thus, when a person decides to display team colors or logos, they want to create an image of being a fan of a particular team. This outward display of fandom and team identification is important for fans regarding their own self-presentation and forming their identity (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Wann et al., 2000)

Officially licensed merchandise is a tangible way for fans to display their affiliation with a university and a collegiate sport team and thus confirm their team identification. Officially licensed collegiate merchandise sales is a multi-billion industry, and most likely that apparel will feature a logo or other marks associated with the athletic teams (Heijjer, 2022). Branding is critical to the success of a product or organization, and brands are mostly identifiable by their names or logos (Dommer & Parker, 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Logos attached to a particular branded product or service provide a visual cue to help businesses, organizations, and institutions communicate their established and unique identity while also capturing consumers’ attention among competitors (Hedlund et al., 2018; Scola & Gordon, 2018). Branding is critical to the success of a product or organization, and brands are mostly identifiable by their names or logos (Dommer & Parker, 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). The importance of logos is essential as consumers often identify a product or organization based on the visual representation a logo provides (Dommer & Parker, 2023). A visual clue, such as a logo, often leads to the identifiability of a product or organization thus establishing the importance of a logo in building product awareness (Anderson, 1983). Thus, it is important for marketers to cultivate a favorable impression of a logo, and then leverage that impression to gain product favorability in the marketplace.

Some logos are iconic in college sports such as the Longhorn logo of Texas, the script A used by Alabama, and the tiger paw representing Clemson. One other such logo is the Power T, which represents Tennessee. The letter itself has had different iterations with the current version adopted in 2015. The Power T made its debut on Tennessee’s football helmets in 1964, which was the year Doug Dickey assumed the head coaching duties for the Volunteers. The orange Power T on the teams’ white helmets was appropriate as the university’s official colors of orange and white were adopted in 1891, and the Volunteers have been wearing orange jerseys since 1922.

A recent phenomenon though has been the emergence of vintage or retro logos in collegiate sports (Scola & Gordon, 2018). It has become rather common for teams and organizations to re-introduce vintage or retro logos to appeal to the nostalgia of fans as well as take advantage of marketing opportunities. This often comes in the form of celebrating a specific event or specific athlete in team history. Major League Baseball’s Atlanta Braves celebrated the life and legacy of Hank Aaron during the 2023 season by wearing specific uniforms and logos associated with Aaron (*Hank Aaron Week*, 2023). Retro-marketing also comes in the form of “Throwback Games” where specific uniforms and logos are used for a game, and this may be accompanied by other promotions that are connected to that era in team history (Scola & Gordon, 2018). This creates a line of consumer merchandise utilizing the retro logo. The introduction of this type of marketing in sport emerged near the turn of the 21st century and has become a staple in the marketing strategy for many brands and organizations (Brown, 2013).

This research examines the emergence of such retro logos at the University of Tennessee and the historical significance of the logos. This understanding is important because proper implementation of collegiate logos can enhance consumers’ positive attitudes towards a collegiate sports team, and in turn, such engagement can help athletic programs’ financial performance and resilience to fluctuations in team identification regardless of team performance. Scola and Gordon (2018) provided a framework to examine the use of vintage or retro marketing with two of the
dimensions applicable to this study being imagery and merchandising. Imagery refers to the use of throwback uniforms by teams and the use of retro logos on other types of team apparel or items for consumption by fans. Merchandising is the planning and promotion of a product using a vintage or retro logo by providing products to consumers through advertising campaigns.

METHOD

Research Design and Interpretive Approach

An exploratory qualitative research design using focus groups was conducted to investigate students’ in-depth perceptions and behaviors (Kvale, 2006; Rashid et al., 2016). Qualitative research helps to shed light on research phenomena that are not yet well understood in academic literature (Rashid et al., 2016). Students (n = 14) were recruited as the target population for two focus groups using a convenience sampling method. This number of participants is in line with recommendations (Denzin, 2017; Hodges, 2011) and allows researchers to use a more in-depth and extensive exploration of participant experiences (Crouch & McKenzie, 2016). The participants ranged from freshman to graduate student status. Two focus groups took place at an on-campus retail location, that included university-affiliated apparel and accessories. A range of university apparel and accessories were used as visual examples in the focus groups to prompt conversation using a series of questions (see Table 1). Focus groups were semi-structured and began with a brief introduction, overview of the study, and informed consent. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour in length, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Focus Group Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Details</th>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>Can you describe your University of Tennessee fandom?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When did you become a fan?</td>
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<td>• What is your preferred sports team at the University of Tennessee?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How strong is your fandom?</td>
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<td>Clothing Preferences</td>
<td>Can you share a bit about your clothing/accessory preferences?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What characteristics do you look for in products (e.g., quality, style, design,</td>
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<td>logo prominence)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What is your price range for products?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Where do you typically shop?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Where do you get your inspiration from?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>When selecting University of Tennessee clothing/accessories, what characteristics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>do you look for in products?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Logo details (prominence, style, type, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Where do you learn about new logos (social media, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Authenticity of color/design</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Retail outlet choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logo Preferences</td>
<td>From the selection of products, can you share a bit about your preferences, likes,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and dislikes?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Why do you think you have these preferences?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Logo recognition</td>
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<td>• What logo draws your attention?</td>
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<td>• What are your thoughts on the vintage logos?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Authenticity?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Design elements?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Where would you wear such products? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interpretive Data Analysis Procedures

Audio recordings derived from focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were analyzed through an iterative process of analysis, including coding for common meaning, which were compared, contrasted, and developed into themes as part of the interpretation of data (Spiggle, 1994). Through this iterative process, transcriptions were analyzed through back-and-forth comparisons and contrasts to group common experiences or contrasts between participants. Codes were then developed to explain common themes and subthemes among the individual participants (Spiggle, 1994). The first author conducted the focus groups and the second author acted as an independent interpreter. Both authors met several times to ensure systematic findings emerged from the data (Kvale, 2009). To protect the anonymity of the participants, participant numbers were used.

FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged from data collected from focus groups. All emergent themes were on a continuum, where students expressed polarizing experiences on each of the three major themes identified. These themes were: (a) fashion and function, (b) orientation towards real vintage for style and nostalgia, and (c) preference for chic and official.

Fashion and Function

Several students expressed a great preference towards the fashion-focused nature of university-affiliated sport products, especially on occasions where they were choosing their apparel for home football games. These students expressed their participation in the “game-day dress up culture” and preference for wearing “something unique, something cool, something trendy, something new,” where “the whole day is revolving around [their] outfit…it’s the biggest thing” (P3). These students planned well in advance for a unique and dressed-up look, mainly so their fandom could be shared on social media and be noticed by others. Students orientated towards “rare, different” (P3) clothing and accessories preferences and expressed that they “don’t go near the [official] orange” (P5). Instead, these students preferred a “variety of oranges they’ve gotten from a boutique” (P5), where they jokingly stated they “convince themselves it’s orange” (P3).

In a polarizing view, several students also expressed a great preference for the functional nature of university-affiliated sports products. These students expressed their deep desire to be affiliated with the university and affiliated sports team through their use of the official brand logo, stating associated feelings: “you can proudly say that you’re wearing the [official logo] on your chest” (P8) because it “holds a lot of meaning” (P5). To them, the official university logo meant “looking powerful and has a strong meaning” (P7). These students also enjoyed the recognition of the official university logo and how it brings “random people saying like ‘Go [university team]’” (P5). For this reason, this group of students “didn’t want to look different than anybody else” (P6) when supporting their university sport teams. Instead, students prefer wearing what they called, “a college student uniform” (P6), described as a university polo shirt with an official university logo paired with khakis. These students showed a preference for using clothing and accessories as a functional strategy to include themselves as part of a fan group, gravitating towards the most recognized and utilized university-affiliated logo. Interestingly, these students also seemed to personally know several team players. This strengthened their need to be authentic in their attire.

Orientation Towards Vintage for Style and Nostalgia

To stand out among their peers and display an element of unique style, several students expressed a strong preference towards “real” vintage (i.e., official university sports products from a previous decade or more), stating particular requirements in their preferences as it relates to the material used, where the logo is placed on the garment, and where pockets were stitched. These students had a preference towards and clear distinction with “true vintage” for its style-related characteristics, stating that “sometimes you can just tell the way that things are made” (P4), like the “tag is a little faded” (P3), and the “color has faded” (P2), sharing a “love for a worn out, dingy, faded sweatshirt” (P3) that provides nostalgia and “way more complements” (P4). In contrast, newer vintage (a.k.a. vintage logos on new garments) were described as “too crispy and fresh out” (P3), which was not generally preferred among these group for its lack of uniqueness related to its style.
However, in contrast, another distinct group of students was interested in vintage for its nostalgic orientation, regardless of whether garments were authentic vintage or faux vintage. For these students, vintage logos were tied to a specific time in sport history that brought upon a “euphoric feel” (P7), sharing that “you remember, maybe wearing the [logo] because [athlete] wore it and you want to support that, and I wish I was part of that. It honors the decade that we were really good. Having the old vintage logo represents that” (P7). These students also noted that a vintage logo was often released after a competitive game, and explained that because of this, they “cherished that memory” and that the item was “a special commemorable thing” (P4). For these students, they recognized that to them, there “was not a huge difference” (P8) between authentic vintage versus new or faux vintage and that price was a motivator to “gravitate towards the new vintage” (P6), while also recognizing that an authentic vintage product means that “no one else is going to be wearing it on gameday…and it kind of sticks out a bit more” (P5). These students recognized the importance of the memory or nostalgia they attach to the logo, whether real or faux vintage, rather than the style associated with vintage products and logos.

Preference for Chic and Official

Some students sought specific products that they felt were chic and unique. These students overwhelmingly gravitated towards products where there was seemingly, “intentionality of the designs” (P4). These students reported their preference for more curated and unusual types of products and logos, rather than the current official logo, which was described as not preferred due to its “modern” look (P3). These students described their preference for chic and unique products and logos due to the rare opportunity to distinguish themselves from other similar universities or among their peer groups. The current official logo, as they see it, “feels too like academia” (P3) and is “overused” (P3). Furthermore, they make a call that the official logo is a “little more masculine” (P3), looks a bit “computerized” (P4), and is mainly used for men’s clothing. On the other hand, these students describe being drawn toward chic products and logos that were perceived as “more feminine, more unique” (P4). They also declared their preference for products described as “cute, simple and soft” (P2), with a personalized touch, almost as if “somebody hand drew [the logo]” (P4). Interestingly, these students also had a preference for consumer products with a chic shade which was close to the university's official color, but not the official color.

Conversely, some students differed in their preferences and sought official logos and colors, regardless of their ability to be chic and trendy. For these groups of students, it was more important to them to showcase their official affiliation, rather than obtain and wear products that were flattering to them. For example, a student stated, “I can't imagine wearing like [another university shade of official color], or any other shade [other than official university color]” (P8). Other students chimed in, stating, “[rival universities], that’s an ugly color. Why would you wear that? I love our [official color]” (P6). It was quite important for these students to “represent the right shade if you’re on campus” (P6). Students even pointed out that one of the items shown in the focus group didn’t look like the correct official color.

DISCUSSION

Based on this investigation to understand students’ university-affiliated sport clothing and logo preferences and related behaviors, it is clear that students are orientated towards varying and often polarizing perspectives and preferences at it relates to their university-affiliated athletic merchandise and logos. Although with varying preferences, students touched on important aspects related to logo adoption. For example, some students emphasized the importance of a fashion-forward look, where they selected an unofficial shade of the university’s color that complemented their outfits. They preferred a non-logo look, particularly at football home games, and spent significant time planning a unique look to wear to the game. To them, true university-affiliated vintage clothing and corresponding logos contributed to establishing their unique look. On the other hand, another polarizing group of students highly preferred showcasing official university-affiliated logos, specifically. To these students, showcasing logos to onlookers meant showcasing their team affiliation and was a source of team pride. These students gravitated towards a uniform-type look where fitting in, rather than uniqueness, was a priority. In this way, wearing and displaying the official team orange was important for these students.

Additionally, while all students recognized their interest in vintage logos and university-affiliated apparel/accessories products, students varied in how they expressed different attitudes towards vintage. Some students sought true vintage products for their unique qualities that allowed them to stand out among their peers. These students clearly
distinguished between true and new (i.e., vintage logo on new apparel/accessories) vintage products from their details in stitching, logo placement, and product quality, and gravitated towards true vintage for their uniqueness. On the other hand, another group of students didn’t show a strong preference for true or new vintage products; instead, these students focused on the logo and the meaning behind the logo. In other words, these students tied vintage logos with specific historical events that produced a sense of nostalgia. To them, a logo held the meaning of sports events that took place at the time the logo was used.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to an understanding of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979). While it is clear from ideas derived from social identity theory that individuals tend to categorize themselves into social groups (i.e., belonging to a group, or not belonging to a group), which can include social groups according to one’s sports fandom (Lock & Heere, 2017; Prayag et al., 2020), this research points to the notion that categorization of social group affiliation can be reflected in various, and often polarizing ways. This research indicates that students desire to categorize and identify with their university sports team, but display their affiliation through university-affiliated merchandise and logos on a continuum. Meaning, rather than a unifying definition of what it means to be part of an in-group, there can often be contrasting interpretations of socially categorizing members. For example, some students categorize and identify with their university sports team through a fashion or functional-oriented merchandise assortment. Additionally, some students perceived real vintage to possess more authority than faux vintage, while other students did not see any difference between real and faux vintage in their display of affiliation. In this sense, some students sought a chic approach to merchandise and logo display, whereas for others, it was more important to wear and display official merchandise and logos. While all students believed their preferences and perceptions of university-affiliated merchandise and logos helped to categorize and identify themselves as university sports fans, it is clear from the results that interpretations vary among students.

IMPLICATIONS

These contrasts in findings produce interesting implications for university-affiliated apparel and accessories retail outlets, and the question arises of whether both groups of students can be targeted to maximize sales opportunities. Some students showcased there were fans that are utilizing sports as an opportunity to dress in a unique way. These findings demonstrate that there may be a missed opportunity for university-affiliated retail outlets to produce products that are non-casual in nature. The findings demonstrate that students desire and want more than the typical college casual shirt or sweatshirt, i.e., athletic-type apparel. There appears to be a robust market among students for clothing that is fashionable and represents the university. This may be in the form of trending styles, new designers, or clothing that is typically not conceptualized as athletic team apparel. Marketers and merchandisers should actively seek student input to explore what types of styles and apparel students want.

University-affiliated retail outlets tend to sell more casual apparel (e.g., polos, sweatshirts, etc.), but there is a market for more semi-formal wear. While logistics may pose a challenge, true vintage is also a worthwhile market to enter to target fans who seek uniqueness in their apparel choices. Additionally, to target those who avoid official colors that do not seem complementary to them, it is recommended that products be included with colors such as white, grey, or black, with subtle hints of the official color or logo. This was an intriguing finding in that many students were not adamant regarding the official university colors. Thus, marketers and merchandisers should use this information to their advantage as well by offering products with complementary colors or different hues of the official team colors.

Other students sought a traditional or uniformed look (e.g., described as a polo shirt). It is recommended to have a wide product selection within the polo shirt category or a similar category for this target market. This way, fans have some choice while seeking to fit in at the same time. This group of fans can be targeted through group-type messaging that includes the university name, official logos, and mascot imagery. While vintage logos are still important, marketing messaging or apparel imagery should depict an iconic event or season while utilizing the vintage logo.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates the importance of understanding students’ university-affiliated sport clothing and logo preferences and related behaviors, particularly among different student groups. However, more research is needed to further understand how each logo is interpreted by different groups of students for future target marketing. Universities
should avoid having too many official logos, but there is a sweet spot where the amount and design of each logo will produce the most effective outcome.

This provides implications to marketers not only in collegiate athletics but also for businesses considering aligning themselves as an official sponsor of a collegiate athletic team. The implications also expand to professional sports teams that routinely implement the use of vintage and retro logos. Marketers and merchandisers should be aware of their target markets and seek input from a variety of stakeholders. The participants in this study have a wide range of preferences in the type of merchandise, logo, and color they prefer. This relates to Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation concept as calculated decisions are made by students regarding their frontstage image portrayals. Preferences for the type, color, logo, and style of merchandise certainly matter to students.

There were limitations to this study, most notably this research was conducted at a specific university using the merchandise from that university. Thus, the findings can certainly be applied to other universities and students, but it would be best to conduct a similar study at other universities to explore the topic more in-depth. The findings also are derived from the conduction of two focus groups. Focus groups certainly have merit in research but do come with drawbacks. The moderator is a part of the research environment and may have some influence on the direction, tone, and topics during the focus group session. There may be members of the focus group that are more outspoken, which could influence another participant’s reluctance to offer an opinion. The demographic composition of the focus group could also influence the conversation and the comments by the participants. It is known that gender can influence consumer perspectives (Nalbantis et al., 2017; Steiner et al., 2023). This should be examined more in-depth and used as a variable during the data collection process and analysis.

Future research should examine the topic in a more broad-based sense by using surveys and conducting multiple focus groups at multiple universities. It would also be beneficial to examine the perspective of merchandisers and marketers and their views on retro-marketing. It would also be interesting to gauge consumer attitudes toward what type of retro-marketing campaigns are the most well-received as well as the general principle of using retro-marketing and vintage logo as a marketing tool.

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