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3-23-2015

## A Qualitative Analysis of Athletic Apparel and Equipment Sponsorship Related to Student-Athlete Recruitment

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### Recommended APA Citation

Davies, M. J., & Burakowski, K. A. (2015). A Qualitative Analysis of Athletic Apparel and Equipment Sponsorship Related to Student-Athlete Recruitment. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(3), 271-285.  
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2112>

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to extend previous literature on student-athlete college choice by examining part of the recruitment process as a precursor to student-athlete decision-making. More specifically, this exploratory study aimed to empirically examine the extent to which apparel sponsorships affect student-athlete recruitment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten football players at a state-supported NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution in the Rocky Mountain region. An inductive approach was used in identifying three emergent themes. These themes suggest that football players at this institution did not hold the apparel and equipment sponsorship as a deciding factor for the commitment to a school, though they did hold strong opinions towards New Balance, and the other three brands referenced during the interviews. The values expressed by these participants can provide a basis for future apparel and equipment contracts at this institution. As this study was exploratory in nature, the findings lay the framework for similar research across gender, sport, school, and conference.

### Keywords

NCAA, Student-Athlete, Recruitment, Apparel, Brand, Qualitative

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## A Qualitative Analysis of Athletic Apparel and Equipment Sponsorship Related to Student-Athlete Recruitment

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*The purpose of this study was to extend previous literature on student-athlete college choice by examining part of the recruitment process as a precursor to student-athlete decision-making. More specifically, this exploratory study aimed to empirically examine the extent to which apparel sponsorships affect student-athlete recruitment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten football players at a state-supported NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution in the Rocky Mountain region. An inductive approach was used in identifying three emergent themes. These themes suggest that football players at this institution did not hold the apparel and equipment sponsorship as a deciding factor for the commitment to a school, though they did hold strong opinions towards New Balance, and the other three brands referenced during the interviews. The values expressed by these participants can provide a basis for future apparel and equipment contracts at this institution. As this study was exploratory in nature, the findings lay the framework for similar research across gender, sport, school, and conference. Keywords: NCAA, Student-Athlete, Recruitment, Apparel, Brand, Qualitative*

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As a result of the economic downturn in the United States, college athletic administrators face the challenge of balancing a high level of competition with cost-cutting measures (DeSchraver, 2009; Fort, 2010; Lapchick, 2010). There is a substantial amount of pressure on athletic departments to produce conference and national championships, particularly in revenue-generating sports such as men's basketball and football, as a means to garner attention and build upon the reputation of their entire institution. Athletic departments act as brand ambassadors by being one of the most visible departments and as substantial revenue generators. Colleges and universities sponsor National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletics as a means to compete for athletic achievement, gain national recognition, sell tickets, increase revenues, fundraise (Martinez, Stinson, Kang, & Jubenville, 2010; Meer & Rosen, 2009), and improve the quality of university admissions (Chressanthis & Grimes, 1993; Jones, 2009; Judson, 2004; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; McEvoy, 2006; Toma & Cross, 1998). However, despite substantial budgets, most athletic departments operate in a deficit in order to achieve these operational benefits. The latest NCAA report indicated that only 23 Division I institutions generated an overall profit (Brown, 2012).

Athletic departments face pressure to realize the financial and reputational benefits of winning at the national level. In order to compete at this high level, a substantial amount of money is dedicated to recruiting blue-chip student-athletes. The top 35 spenders on student-athlete recruitment at the Division I level all spent between \$1,000,000 and \$2,229,600 for the 2011 recruitment year (Jessop, 2012). Undoubtedly, the many programs outside of this small group of high spenders cannot allocate similar funds to their recruiting efforts, which put them at a distinct competitive disadvantage. The rewards earned from winning programs are fostered by a variety of elements including coaches, facilities, and financial support, but

successful recruiting is the lifeline to an athletic program. Furthermore, “without gifted athletes, even the most talented strategist or motivator will be rendered ineffective as a coach” (Judson, 2004, p. 24). Judson’s statement emphasizes the importance for athletic departments to recruit effectively, but for the departments with tight budgets, this must also be done efficiently.

A substantial gap exists in the student-athlete recruitment literature. Researchers have investigated the college choice of general freshmen (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Servier, 1993), as well as the unique factors that affect student-athlete choice (Garbert, Hale, & Montalvo, 1999; Judson, James, & Aurand, 2004; Letawsky et al., 2003; Mathes & Gurney, 1985). While many of these studies indicate that student-athletes consider factors related to both the institution and the athletic department more specifically, the aim of this study was to extend this body of knowledge by examining the recruitment process as a precursor to student-athletes’ decision-making process. This study aimed to empirically examine the extent to which apparel sponsorships affect student-athlete recruitment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Student-Athlete Recruitment**

There is substantial literature with regard to the factors that affect the college choice of general freshmen students (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Servier, 1993) and of student-athletes (Garbert, Hale, & Montalvo, 1999; Judson, James, & Aurand, 2004; Letawsky et al., 2003; Mathes & Gurney, 1985). The primary reason cited for first year students’ college choice can be attributed to institutional characteristics, such as cost, size, distance from home, the quality of academic programs, and the availability of financial aid (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Long, 2004; Montgomery, 2002; Niu, Tienda, & Cortes, 2006). Campus solidarity and social life have been found to be important factors in the students’ college choice process (Litten & Brodigan, 1982, as cited in Jones, 2009). Students often choose a college or university based on limited information about reputation (Siegfried & Getz, 2006). Athletic programs become the focal point for many potential students to develop perceptions towards the social environment and overall campus atmosphere of a university (Toma & Cross, 1998). The literature reflects a tendency to identify broad categorizations of decision-making factors for student-athletes as well. For example, Letawsky et al. (2003) grouped college choice factors into four categories: (a) athletic and academic reputation of the school, (b) characteristics of recruiting and head coach, (c) characteristics of the campus visit, and (d) general influences of family, friends, and community. Collectively, these studies indicate that prospective student-athletes consider both the general institutional characteristics as well as factors that affect student-athletes specifically.

Previous studies analyzing the factors contributing to student-athletes’ college choice have resulted in a list of criteria that recruits use to make their commitment to one school over another. Each study has offered different insight into the criteria held by recruits. Mathes and Gurney (1985) focused on decision criteria used overall by prospective student-athletes and grouped them into five factor labels: Coach, Campus, Athletics, Friends, and Academics. Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman (2001) examined the college selection decision made by 27 football players and determined that the following categories were significant reasons for choosing their program: Academics, Facilities, Open spot, Coach/coaching staff, Schedule, Location/area, Friend on the team. Both of these studies show that there is a mixture of traditional student college choice elements, such as academics and location, but also a

prevalence of athletic factors, like the facilities, open spot, and coach. Similarly, Letawsky et al. (2003) found that the five most influential factors in choosing a college for student-athletes were: Degree-program options, Head coach, Academic support service, Type of community in which the campus is located, and the School's sport traditions. Sutton (1983) wrote about the importance of tradition in recruiting, including maintaining an established tradition, rebuilding to establish past glories, or building to establish new loyalties and hopefully future memories. Other studies which summarized one key factor as representing the decision-making factor for student-athlete recruits include: Amount of scholarship (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990, as cited in Pauline, 2010), Opportunity to win championships (Teeples, 2005), Team's ability to have their games televised (Fizel & Bennett, 1996), and first formal contact with the institution (Gerdy, 1997).

### **Apparel Sponsorship**

Identifying sources of revenue that can be maximized and expenditures that can be minimized has become imperative for college athletic departments. Athletic departments at the Division I level rely on ticket sales, donations, corporate sponsorships, and TV broadcast rights for revenues (DeShriver, 2009; Fulks, 2010) and sponsorship contracts and perks have been readily documented in the media (Carty, 2007; Ott, 2009; Rovell, 2007). Nike paved the way for team apparel and equipment sponsorships with an initiative originally created to extend Nike's reach into the basketball shoe market. Nike executives recognized that the brand could increase market share by further convincing teams to adopt their shoes as part of the uniform. Careful to avoid NCAA violations, Nike developed a strategy to offer payment (initially \$2,000) to college coaches hosting basketball clinics. In addition to the cash, Nike gave these coaches shoes to give to clinic participants for free, in recognition that younger players needed to be exposed to the shoes before they would be willing to wear them in college. This approach led to Nike's practice of providing college teams with free shoes in return for further market exposure, and in essence, Nike's establishment of college apparel sponsorship practices (Strasser & Becklund, 1991).

It was not until 1994 that Nike signed an all-sport contract with the University of Michigan, the first school to sign such a contract, for \$1 million annually (Ott, 2009). Nike's early apparel deals with coaches, such as the initial University of Michigan agreement, and those that followed, were developed out of mutual interests. Universities wanted to offset rising athletic department costs, while apparel and equipment companies wanted to associate their brand with some of the best programs in the nation (Bachman, 2010). The extent to which Nike expanded into college apparel sponsorship is evidenced through contracts with athletics departments such as Boise State University and the University of Washington. In 2012, Nike committed to pay more than \$6.24 million to the Boise State athletic department over six years including equipment and apparel for all of the Broncos' sports teams and coaches (Orr, 2012). The University of Washington similarly signed a ten-year deal with Nike worth an astounding \$34,400,000 (Bachman, 2010).

Nike was not the only apparel company to seek apparel sponsorship contracts. In 2012, Adidas agreed to a four-year \$7 million sponsorship deal with North Carolina State University. UCLA surpassed Washington's Nike deal by signing a six-year deal with Adidas for \$27,412,000 (Bachman, 2010). Under Armour agreed on a deal with Auburn for seven years at \$27,450,000 (Solomon, 2010). The University of South Florida (USF) also signed a contract with Under Armour that gave the school \$1 million in products allowance, as well as \$625,000 in cash payments with bonuses ranging from \$15,000 to \$250,000 depending on postseason play. Additionally, USF was given \$150,000 in marketing spend (Teeples, 2013b). Although financial details were not disclosed, the University of Utah signed a similar

deal with Under Armour in 2013 for the football and men's basketball teams (Teeples, 2013a). The Under Armour contacts specifically highlight advertising, promotions, and marketing spend, which are largely in response to the increased TV broadcasting and alternate media exposure, like web-streaming and websites, which have put universities in a spotlight unlike ever before.

Uniforms are no longer purchased just for functionality; they are a way for a university to make a statement. The NCAA allows a logo, such as the Nike swoosh, or Adidas' three stripes to be just 2¼ square inches on the uniform, yet this logo, and the equipment it represents, often makes a huge impression on the players wearing it, and with the team's fans (Ncaa.org). Todd Stansbury, Ohio State University executive associate athletic director, suggested that the apparel deal carries value beyond money by stating, "There's also a value for how you're perceived in the recruiting process" (Bachman, 2010). Former Brigham Young University offensive lineman Jake Kuresa recently acknowledged the role apparel contracts played in his recruitment. As a football player whose initial offer list included 30 major schools, Kuresa admitted his affinity for Nike apparel contributed to his final college choice along with program staff, graduation rate, environment, and location (Teeples, 2013).

It is also worth noting that Boise State University, in addition to other prominent institutions, explicitly highlighted uniforms as a means of recruitment prior to official on-campus recruiting visits. On the website BoiseStateFootball.com, the Broncos' football program highlighted uniforms, along with the coaches and staff, facilities, summer camps, and alumni with professional football careers. The website allowed visitors to see a 360-degree picture of 10 different Boise State football uniforms designed by Nike (Boise State, 2013). Showcasing apparel suggests that either the athletic programs are proud of their team-specific apparel, or that athletic departments recognize the potential effect of brand preference or brand loyalty on prospective student-athletes. Either way, these examples indicate the importance of perceptions related to apparel and equipment sponsorship contracts.

### **Purpose**

The body of college choice literature provides substantial explanation of the factors student-athletes consider when picking a college, as well as an understanding of how these factors are similar and different from those factors that affect the general student body. Despite what is already known, there is a need for a deeper empirical analysis of the role these factors play in the college choice process. This study specifically investigated the role that apparel sponsorship contracts play in the college choice decision making by student athletes. This was done for four reasons: (1) The prevalence of apparel sponsorship contracts is pervasive throughout all levels of NCAA competition, (2) The amount of money dedicated to athletic recruitment is substantial for all athletic departments, (3) Anecdotal evidence suggests apparel sponsorships matter to perspective student-athletes, and (4) There is a lack of empirical research on this topic. More notably, the student-athlete voice is missing from the current body of literature, in that a qualitative analysis has not been used to get a rich description of how student-athletes view apparel sponsorships during recruitment. The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the significance of athletic apparel and equipment sponsorship for football recruits at a NCAA Division I Football Championship Series (FCS) institution. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. In what ways do athletic apparel and equipment contracts impact student-athletes' attitudes towards the athletic department?

RQ2. In what ways do athletic apparel and equipment contracts impact the student-athletes' recruitment process overall?

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007) was used to gain a better understanding of the impact that athletic apparel and equipment sponsorships have on the student-athlete college choice decision-making process. This study was designed to be exploratory in nature, as the body of college choice literature does not address the role of athletic apparel and equipment contracts in student-athlete recruitment. The qualitative tradition was selected in order to understand the meaning student-athletes have constructed in their social world of NCAA Division I FCS football (Merriam, 2009). A phenomenological approach was used in order to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the student-athlete recruitment by a group of football players (Creswell, 2007), and as the approach suggests,

If we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning. (Crotty, 1998, p. 78)

In order to suspend any prevailing notions of college athlete recruitment, the football players were guided through semi-structured interviews that began with questions about their experiences which led to the participation in college football at their institution. For example, the participants were asked to discuss their high school football experiences, and then their recruitment process at the institution they chose to attend. Questions pertaining to how the recruitment process at their current institution differed from the process at other schools occurred at a later time during the interview. These questions were asked in order to make sure the experiences being described were that of the student-athletes, as opposed to suppositions by the researchers. The nature of the semi-structured interviews allow for the possibility for new meaning to emerge, as we readily asked follow-up questions to counter generalized and broad sweeping answers on the part of the participants.

### **Participants**

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the participants were ten male undergraduate football players at a state-supported NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution in the Rocky Mountain region. Limiting the origins of the sample to one institution was a purposeful decision made by the authors in an attempt to control for intervening variables that could affect the participants' recollection of their decision-making process. For example, all participants were recruited under the same core group of coaches and, therefore, the authors could reliably believe that the recruitment process and on-campus visit at the institution of choice was similar for all players. Additionally, all players were experiencing the same outcomes of team performance, which reduces the likelihood that team performance perceptions would drastically differ. This was important in that the players' current emotional state had the potential to intervene with the degree to which players experience cognitive dissonance with respect to their final college choice.

Football players were purposefully selected for this study to lay the groundwork for future research involving the athletic apparel and equipment sponsorships seen in other

schools and divisions across the NCAA. The authors believed that the football players at this institution were likely to be presented with more than one full or partial scholarship offer at the NCAA Division I or Division II level. It was logical to think that this sample of student-athletes participated in several official and unofficial college visits that included some conversation about apparel and equipment sponsorship contracts and, therefore, the topic would be salient to such players.

### **Setting**

The interviews were conducted at locations on-campus which would be convenient for the student-athletes, and resemble a natural setting in reference to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In order to receive detailed perspectives from the participants, it was important to build a positive rapport, which was partially achieved by maintaining a comfortable environment (Creswell, 2007).

### **Procedure**

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, all thirty-two of the current freshmen and sophomore players at the university were contacted through e-mail and requested to participate in an interview for the study. Freshman and sophomore players were targeted based on the assumption that these players might have had a more clear recollection of why they chose the institution than could juniors or seniors. Any interested participants who replied were then scheduled for an interview. Student-athletes understood the interview was voluntary, and that they would not be compensated for their participation, based on their signing of the informed consent form prior to each interview.

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted by both authors. Interviewing was deemed appropriate for this study because we cannot observe the feelings that the football players have, or had, at the time they were being recruited (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, we avoided a focus group approach so that we could hear the individual viewpoints from the student-athletes without any influence from their peers with regard to their experiences and attitudes held during the recruitment process. Participants were briefed on the interview process, and any concerns or questions were answered before each interview began, to avoid confusion during the interview. To protect the anonymity of the participants, a pseudonym was provided by the researchers for each of the interviewees. All the interviews were digitally recorded with the approval of the interviewees and the signing of a consent form allowing us to use this information. The individual interviews differed in length of time due to the personality differences and the salience of the topic to the participants.

An interview guide consisting of five primary questions was supplemented with several follow-up questions. The interview guide was piloted with a senior class football player from the same university, after which slight alterations were made to the interview questions so that the researchers would garner richer data from participants. The semi-structured approach allowed researchers to gain the specific information desired from all participants by way of the more structured questions, but also allowed for a majority of the interview to be guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored in the order or direction that the individual participant steered toward (Merriam, 2009). In addition to the semi-structured interview questions, visual aids were used to garner descriptive words from the participants, as they were presented with the New Balance, Nike, Under Armor and Adidas logos.



## **Trustworthiness**

Attempts at developing a thorough interview guide were made through the use of a pilot study and through consultation with an expert in qualitative research. Triangulation (Merriam, 2009) was used as the findings emerged, by utilizing multiple investigators, peer examination, and through the use of artifacts. Peer examination was used particularly to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study by cross-checking the researchers' interview transcription coding, asking two colleagues to comment on the findings, and to ensure the findings were understandable as the themes emerged. In recognition of the small sample size, thorough consideration was taken by both the researchers and the consulting colleagues. While reviewing the findings, special attention was paid to the number of comments made that related to each theme. Themes were determined with respect to the percentage of participants that provided comments in order to ensure that findings were not determined with as little as only two participants' supporting data.

## **Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted over a four-week period, each of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the two researchers. The inductive process of using the data to develop an understanding of the participants' experiences (Gratton & Jones, 2010) began with the data transcription when each researcher was able to listen to the interview in total. Data from the transcriptions were then analyzed for themes through open coding. The open coding process involved brainstorming possible meanings within the data and attaching code names to data segments (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The two researchers engaged in this process separately and then came together to compare codes. During this session, a set of common codes was determined. The data were shared with a colleague who readily engaged in and published qualitative research. A comparison was made between the colleague and researchers' codes to confirm appropriate interpretations of the data. Any discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was agreed upon and a final code was determined for such elements of the data.

Following these discussions, both researchers were involved in the axial coding of the data. This process involved identifying patterns and connections among the open-coded terms, and then grouping these terms into meaningful clusters (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As the body of literature has not explored this topic before, the researchers looked for themes to emerge from the data, rather than using a deductive method. Initially, the data reflected five themes. In consideration of these themes, the researchers transitioned focus from the data to a critical reflection of data collection process, coding, interpretation, and the researchers' roles in conjunction to each. The data were then reexamined, at which point, three themes were determined to have substantial support, while two of the original themes were determined to be areas of interest to be mentioned in the findings, but not distinct themes. The data were then shared the same colleague previously mentioned to facilitate a comparison of the findings. This was done to again increase consistency and to confirm appropriate interpretations of the three emergent themes in the data.

## **Findings**

The findings below represent the themes and additional areas of interest that emerged from the data. The three main themes that emerged from the data were (1) Performance versus Image, (2) Brand Familiarity, and (3) Gratitude.

### **Theme One: Performance versus Image**

Many of the participants held clear opinions towards the brand of apparel and equipment companies that they preferred. The reasons for these preferences, however, differed, which resulted in the emergence of two secondary themes under the category of performance versus image. The first of the secondary themes is the perception held by many of the participants that *you must be good if you have good stuff*. There was an overwhelming response towards the Nike brand, followed closely by Under Armor, as being the superior brands for football. Roger said for example:

[It's] usually pretty big schools are sponsored by Nike. I mean, you're not going to see schools like Alabama or USC sponsored by New Balance.

His perception seems that in order to be sponsored by a brand that he respects, like Nike, that he must belong to a well-regarded program, such as the University of Alabama. Similarly, Ian said:

Those programs probably have a lot of money because Nike is top notch...I just feel like in order to get the best, you have to be the best.

Another participant felt opposed to these statements and shared that he felt the brand was nothing more than a logo, and it was no indication of how good the team or the school was on the whole. Chris said:

That obviously [doesn't] mean that just because they look good doesn't mean they're going to play good out on the field.

In addition to the perceptions held towards a program based on the apparel and equipment brand sponsorship, participants held various opinions towards the performance and overall style that some of the brands had over others. This was the second of the sub themes, that while the brand may or may not have an influence out on the field, the consensus was that, related to the participants own self-image, they *wanted equipment that worked and apparel that was stylish and current*. Tom expressed:

With New Balance, it wasn't like trendy, I guess.

Sam supported the brand Under Armour specifically because it is a newer brand than New Balance. Many comments revolved around the "old" element of New Balance. In terms of the implications this can have on program perceptions, Sam shared:

You gotta get that look good, feel good, and play good. Maybe get a whole new outlook on the program a little bit.

The consensus was that there is an element of trendiness that goes into whether a player feels good in the apparel and equipment.

### **Theme Two: Brand Familiarity**

A second theme that emerged from the data was brand familiarity. This theme can also be broken down into two secondary categories: (1) *Appreciation for the brand*

*participants were familiar with*, and (2) Mentions of brands that the *participants connected with being “football brands.”* Brand familiarity and allegiance was represented by the participants, who often mentioned the brand they wore prior to attending university. Joel shared:

I’ve just grown up with Nike...I’ve worn it my entire life, it’s all I’ve ever worn.

New Balance is one of the lesser recognized apparel and equipment sponsors in college athletics, so it is no surprise that the participants of this study did not have previous experience using their products in the football context. Some of the participants referenced the hesitancy to change from their “familiar” brand to New Balance. Roger was a prime example of a participant who relied on his previous perceptions of brands, as being both familiar, but also as a “football brand” when forming opinions about the apparel and equipment sponsorship at his institution. When presented with the Nike logo during the interview, he said:

That’s football right there. That’s athletes at their finest performing in Nike...When it comes to football, the brand is Nike or Under Armour.

Roger wasn’t the only participant who referenced Nike, in particular, as representing a “football brand.” Some of the other statements included:

Nike; everybody knows Nike now from Oregon’s uniforms. So, they got the top-of-the-line uniforms...so they’ve drawn a lot of attention to that respect. Probably the front runner of them all. (Ryan)

Everyone really wears Nike. Top of the line. You know, pros, everyone’s wearing it. (Tom)

An indication as to how these opinions might translate to the athletic department, and the university come from a statement by Chris when he was presented with the Nike Swoosh during the interview. He responded by saying,

Swag on the football field. Wearing Nike, just cuz I know it’s Nike it woulda made me more comfortable in the moment with my own swag on the field.

This comfort, as opposed to hesitancy might translate into better performance, which, as the literature suggests, is an important element for universities in terms of recognition and a variety of other benefits an athletic department receives during winning seasons.

### **Theme Three: Gratitude**

A third theme emerging from the data was the sentiment of gratitude towards the apparel and equipment sponsorship. Many of the participants shared their experiences in high school, or at junior college, where there was no sponsorship, and the athletes were required to purchase their own apparel and equipment. In these cases, the perceptions towards the athletic department, and recruitment to the school were not influenced by the apparel and equipment sponsor, because the student-athletes were just grateful to have the opportunity to

play football, and even to attend university in the first place. The following statements represent this gratitude team:

It doesn't matter too much about how I look. You know, as long as I'm playing college ball. That's a blessing. (Ryan)

I wasn't super excited about New Balance, but it didn't really matter to me because coming here from like a junior college, we didn't have any kind of sponsorship or anything so I was just happy to get anything free. (Joel)

### **Other Influential Factors**

In support of the literature which reports a wide range of reasons why recruits might make their college choice (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990; Fizek & Bennett, 1996; Gerdy, 1997; Judson, 2004; Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman 2001; Letawsky et al., 2003; Teeples, 2005), the participants of this study also described an array of reasons unrelated to the apparel and equipment sponsorship that led them to choose their institution. The list of these factors in random order includes: family influence, friends at the university, academic programs, academic reputation, scholarships, opportunity to play, geography, proximity to home, relationships (primarily with head coach), community, and sense of fit. This theme is one that would be expected to be most dynamic given the unique characteristics each university offers. At this institution, the more frequent reason reported by the athletes interviewed was the relationship built with the coach who recruited them. Some of the statements used to express this were: "I came here for the coaches. I clicked with them" (Ryan). "It felt like they [coaches] wanted me to be better, not only as a football player, but as a man in life" (Paul).

Additionally, many of the participants referenced the ability to play football, or even attend college at all, as being a major influence in their reasons for choosing this institution. This does not implicate towards apparel and equipment. It does, however, highlight points of reference for future research to compare elements of college choice.

### **In what ways do apparel and equipment sponsorships matter?**

Though this question did not emerge as a specific theme, many of the participants' responses can be pulled into answering the overall question of whether student-athletes felt that apparel and equipment sponsorships impacted the college choice of recruits. One football player suggested that apparel and equipment sponsorships *could* have influenced his college choice decision by saying,

I mean, I'm not gonna lie, it probably woulda had an effect if they said, 'oh, we're Nike' or something. I probably woulda started leaning towards them...If they told me they were New Balance, I woulda started fading away maybe if I did know about it then I woulda walked away. (Sam)

Another student-athlete explained:

Every other school I was talking to was Nike...Yeah, it definitely played a role in where I decided to go, but in the end it came down to where I was gonna be happy at. (Roger)

Joel explains that brand apparel and equipment sponsorships do have something to do with recruitment, but that it may not be an actual deciding factor.

Yeah, I would think about it. It would run through my mind, but I don't think it would be *the* deciding factor. It would be a really, really, really small factor...I definitely think they [apparel and equipment sponsorships] play a big part in recruiting.

The responses from participants which reflected sentiments that apparel and equipment sponsorships *don't* influence student-athlete college choice included:

You can't take the whole experience and base it off a brand... It's a jersey. It just has a little stitch on it that says something different. (Tom)

I just, you know, I come here to play football...I just felt like it was a Nike cleat with the New Balance name on it. (Paul)

Lastly, Ryan expressed a very pragmatic perspective regarding college choice and apparel sponsorships:

Would I like to have Under Armour or Nike? Of course, who wouldn't? But, still again, like everything else fit for me at this university, so like, the fact that we didn't have the top of the line stuff, you know was kind of like, I wish we would, but it wasn't like, 'Okay, well I'm not going to come here' just because of one little thing. (Ryan)

The data indicated that players share feelings toward brand names and the equipment they wear. Player recall indicated that Nike and Under Armour were thought of as "football brands", while New Balance was not. However, responses varied with respect to the impact that their feelings about each of the apparel brands had on actual recruitment and college choice decision-making. The degree to which apparel and equipment sponsorship contracts appeared to play in the decision-making process differed drastically from one student-athlete to the next.

## Discussion

The results from this study suggest that football players at this FCS institution did not hold the apparel and equipment sponsorship as a deciding factor for the commitment to a school, though they did hold strong opinions towards New Balance, and the other three brands referenced during the interviews. New Balance was never noted as the favorite brand, especially with respect to football, yet each of the participants did ultimately choose to attend the university sponsored by New Balance, so intuitively, the apparel contract was not the final college choice determinant for any of the student-athletes in this study. Given that this study is a qualitative analysis, it should not be generalized to all student-athletes, though the research could be transferable to other college institutions. Apparel and equipment contracts vary by school, conference and division, each of which could present separate priorities for prospective student-athletes.

## **Implications**

The remarks made by the participants about apparel and equipment brands have implications for athletic administrators and coaches who make decisions regarding apparel and equipment sponsorship. The idea that players indicated that the brand name of their team's equipment could influence their comfort on the playing field, for example, is useful for coaches looking to gain a competitive advantage. The specific phrase "look good, feel good, play good" came up several times during the interviews, as a reflection of the way football players want to feel wearing their team's equipment and jerseys.

Using the results from this study, as well as future research, athletic administrators may benefit through the better design of apparel and equipment contracts that meet the demands of recruits, in order to best utilize recruitment resources. If prospective student-athletes feel strong respect for and familiarity with Nike, as was the case in this study, it would make sense for coaches to pursue contracts with Nike, even if it means that the financial benefits are not as lucrative. This attention to detail on behalf of the coaches and athletic administrators may be the contributory difference in signing a blue-chip athlete and winning championships. An apparel company should use the comments revealed by this study to better understand what was important to these players in order to guide where their money and future contract negotiations would be best appropriated. The participants of this study referenced the preference for brands which represented a "football brand." These companies (i.e., Nike, Under Armour) should continue to reinforce these perceptions through marketing dollars spent towards football applications. Likewise, the brands that were listed as not representing "football brands" (i.e., New Balance, adidas) could drive marketing dollars towards football product exposure.

## **Future Research**

The results of this study should be used as a basis to construct future studies. Specific recommendations for future study include: expanding the sample to populations across all FCS conferences; consider the effects of sponsorships at other NCAA competition levels such as FBS or Division II; investigate the importance of sponsorships in recruitment for student-athletes in other NCAA-sponsored sports, particularly in men's basketball; and comparing sponsorship perceptions as they relate to gender. Lastly, a quantitative approach to understanding the extent to which athletic apparel and equipment sponsorships play a role in college choice could be beneficial to future administrators.

While this study opened the door to exploring the phenomenon of college choice by football recruits, with respect to apparel and equipment sponsorship, there were many additional observations related to the attitudes the football players at this institution had towards the Nike, New Balance, Under Armour and Adidas brands specifically. In general, the participants highlighted the function and style of the brands they preferred, as a priority over the logo itself. They also were looking for a brand that they were familiar with and more importantly, one that represented a "football brand." Contrastingly, some of the participants rejected the notion that brands were important, and rather, expressed their gratitude towards having free gear. Along the lines of these insights, a long list of elements not related to apparel and equipment contracts were cited by the participants as being reasons they chose to attend this university.

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### **Article Citation**

Davies, M. J., & Burakowski, K. A. (2015). A qualitative analysis of athletic apparel and equipment sponsorship related to student-athlete recruitment. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(3), 271-285. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/3/davies7.pdf>

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