Equity Matters: The Role of Sponsored Athletic Apparel in Collegiate Athletic Programs

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Keywords: Athletic Apparel, Collegiate Athletics, Gender Equity, Apparel Sponsorships

The current athletic apparel industry is worth approximately $135 billion, with Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour holding an overwhelming share of the market at around $70 billion in total revenue (Jensen, Wakefield, Cobbs, & Turner, 2016). As an outgrowth of the industry, sports sponsorship expenditure has reached over $62.8 billion dollars globally (Kelly, 2018), with collegiate apparel brand contracts worth up to $16 million each (Jensen, Weight, & Popp, 2017). Again, Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour are the top brands among those most frequently engaging in large scale contracts with academic institutions across the United States. Although such contracts may appear to be simple business transactions, brands like Nike view them as partnerships and "integral parts" of the company (Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1999, p. 258). The large, multi-year contracts being offered to universities typically include major provisions of apparel and accessories to be provided to athletes and coaching staff members, as well as performance-based product bonuses (Jensen et al., 2016).

Although the university's athletic department is often responsible for negotiating the contracts, student-athletes experience first-hand the impact of the institution's brand choice by adhering to the expectations of wearing team apparel, footwear, and accessories. While the brand sponsorship contract is a critical first component of the student-athlete's exposure to team apparel, the coaching staff is an intermediary component that works to marry the requirements of the contracts with those of the student athletes. Despite the role of sponsorship contracts and coaches in determining brands worn by student athletes, and the resulting potential for brand loyalty to develop both during and after college, the topic of athletic apparel brand sponsorship has remained largely overlooked in the sports as well as brand literatures.

In light of these gaps in knowledge, the two-fold purpose of this study was to explore (1) the role of branded athletic apparel in collegiate athletic program sponsorship agreements, and (2) how these agreements are managed within collegiate athletic programs. Because there is very little research that exists on the topic, a qualitative approach was used to address the purpose. A triangulation of methods was used in the data collection process, including document analysis, website content review, and in-depth interviews. The first two methods included (1) document analysis of 50 institution-brand contracts and (2) review of the Equity in Athletics Data Analysis (EADA) website information for each of those 50 institutions. This website provides information on revenue and expenditures by collegiate athletic programs in the US. The third method used was in-depth interviews with current and former collegiate coaches, as they are largely responsible for overseeing adherence to the sponsored product requirements within the contracts.

The fifty contracts were retrieved from a dataset compiled by Jensen et al. (2017) and included contracts from public colleges and universities representing 10 athletic conferences across the United States. Each contract was reviewed for mention of monetary contribution to the school, product allowances, and product discounts in order to better understand the exchange between the brand and the institution. For each of the fifty contracts, information regarding the athletic department was gathered from the EADA website, which included the sports offered at the institution, the revenue generated from them, and total spending by the athletic programs. With IRB approval from the researchers' university, interviews with a total of 20 past and present collegiate coaches were conducted (Polkinghome, 1989). Because coaches are a very tight network of individuals (Occhino, Mallett, & Rynne, 2013) participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The interviews were semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) and questions included, *What brand sponsors your university athletic department?* and *Do you have any rules about what brands or types of apparel your players can wear?* Interviews were audio-recorded, conducted in person and by telephone and lasted between 20-60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and both open and axial coded alongside the data from the other two sources to identify categories of meaning within and across the data (van Manen, 1990). Two primary themes, *Gender Matters* and *Sports of Significance*, emerged from the data and shed light on the wide range of provisions that the sponsorship agreements afford.

Gender differences emerged as key theme across the data on two levels. On the team level, gender is reflected in terms of what student athletes were expected to wear during the sport, regardless of brand. For example, participants did not seem to enforce explicit dress codes for their teams. However, Valerie, a cross country and women's volleyball coach pointed out how gender is an implicit factor in women's team apparel rules in general, saying that "They couldn't wear running bras without a shirt…we tried to get that changed. It didn't seem fair the boys could go without a shirt." Second, obvious gender disparities exist in terms of the product-related incentives written into the contracts at the institution level, incentives which are directly tied to revenue. For all 50 institutions considered, EADA information revealed significant disparities in revenue between men's and women's teams, with men's teams having significantly higher revenues. For example, one major west coast university's men's team's revenue was over $54 million, while revenue of the women's teams was just over $5 million. This particular university signed a contract with Under Armour in 2016 that provided very different performance bonuses for its men's and women's teams. For example, the men's basketball team receives $50,000 for making the NCAA Tournament's "Sweet Sixteen" round, while the women's team receive $10,000 for the same. The significant financial differences mean that teams can purchase varying amounts of apparel, placing the female team at a disadvantage by receiving a fraction of the bonus that the men's team receives.

Perhaps not surprisingly, which sport is included in the sponsorship emerged as a key theme. Different sports were acknowledged differently by the agreements and specific apparel needs were not always reflected in these agreements. Clauses regarding only football and basketball were present in all 50 brand contracts, despite all schools having a minimum of five sports, as found in the EADA data. In most contracts, only a few sports (football, basketball, baseball/softball) were individually acknowledged through monetary and/or product bonuses. In Nike contracts, a university's football team is typically afforded a 2-for-1 discount on gloves and shoes. That discount did not usually apply to other sports, despite those, like basketball, that have particular athletic wear needs. For example, Saint, a basketball coach, stated that his players "had strong feelings about shoes," due to the importance of shoe functionality to the sport. Despite the need, his team does not receive the same access to product discounts as the football team. Thus, how the brand partner contractually acknowledges the significance of a given sport impacts the extent to which the agreement addresses the different apparel needs of the teams at a given school.

This study is among the first to examine the impact of branded apparel sponsorship agreements and specifically to include the perspective of the coaches, as they are largely responsible for overseeing agreement outcomes. Findings reveal how apparel brand sponsors do not treat both genders and all types of sports in the same way. In particular, disparities were found within contracts pertaining to financial and product provisions, thereby pointing to the need for more equity in contracts with collegiate institutions. Further research on the topic is needed, and in particular, the perspective of the athlete himself/herself. Given the large amounts of money and products involved, and considering pending changes to the NCAA's requirements regarding contracts as well as the potential move to allow athletes to choose their own brand sponsors, it is important to better understand the impact of sponsorship on collegiate athletes and programs.

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