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Sporting Faith: Exploring Displays of Faith as Part of Christian Higher Education Athletic Program Identity

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SPORTING FAITH: EXPLORING DISPLAYS OF FAITH AS PART OF CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION ATHLETIC PROGRAM IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The field of sports has multiple segments including youth, recreational, college, and professional sport. Research in these areas have produced an abundance of inquiries discussing several managerial function and capacity topics such as finance, marketing, organizational effectiveness, and leadership. While these topics have been applied to many segments of the sport world, the niche segment of sports ministry has not seen these applications. Sports ministers have challenges in that they manage all aspects of the sports programs they provide to the community, but they also supply the resources and support toward the ministry within these programs.

The current research fills a gap in existing literature by enhancing the understanding of several managerial functions and capacities of sports ministry managers. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 sports ministers throughout the United States to gain perspectives on their managerial duties with their sports ministry programs. Results and implications for sports ministers indicated that strengths were found in leadership philosophies and evaluating programming, however, role difficulties were clear in planning, managing volunteers, lack of support from upper administration and the feeling of burnout due to poor financial and human resources.

Keywords: Christianity; Faith; Branding; Identity; Higher Education

Introduction

Over the past century, higher education marketing strategy has proliferated (Tolbert, 2014), transforming into a market where students view themselves as consumers engage in active marketing initiatives (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004). This viewpoint promotes the utilization of marketing communications that connect with student-consumers exploring educational alternatives. In response, higher education institutions engage in practices aimed to convey messages generating institutional prestige (Tolbert, 2014). As a result, universities have their marketing and promotional tools available at their disposal.

The proliferation of the Internet as an information source has restructured how higher education institutions convey messages to the intended audiences and cultivate and transmit

institutional brand identities. Institutional websites and the emergence of social media allow institutions to increase mediums to communicate messages directly to their target audiences. Opoku, Hultman, and Saheli-Sangari, (2008) labeled websites as potentially being “a strong competitive weapon” (p. 127) that can assist in forming institutional identity through communications to a broad spectrum of stakeholders. In addition, institutional websites are often early, if not the first, touchpoints where individuals seek information about an academic institution (Tolbert, 2014). Meyer (2008) asserts that “the home page is the view that colleges and universities choose to present first to virtual visitors, which makes it a valuable window on the institution, its priorities, and how it wishes to be seen” (p. 142).

Opoku et al. (2008) stated that higher education institutions should take advantage of the positioning opportunities that websites offer to shape the institutional image and define brand values. Whether it is someone looking for information on the institution’s history, information about specific programs, or other aspects of student life such as campus intramural sports or intercollegiate athletics, institutional sites must convey proper messages reflecting institutional brand values, brand image, and brand personality.

This study examines how Christian higher education institutions use marketing communications on the official website to express institutional identity, mainly applied to intercollegiate athletics, within the marketplace. Athletic departments are participants in how faith-related missions are depicted through websites. These athletic department websites are touchpoints that represent the broader university brand. Specifically, this study will explore the faith expression themes illustrated in the university taglines, university mission statements, and athletic department mission statements.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed in two prevailing conceptual frameworks, the Escalator Concept and the Theory of Academic Capitalism. These frameworks address how consumers use media to develop deeper consumer involvement and brand commitment on Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) websites. The mission of CCCC is “to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth” (“About CCCC,” n.d.). CCCC institutions were used to evaluate faith expression as they are universities that actively identify with a core value of faith expression, and university members participate “in a network of like-minded, mission-driven, academically excellent Christian colleges and universities around the world” (“About CCCC,” n.d.).

Escalator Concept

Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014) presented the Escalator Concept to graphically describe the process of how marketing communication facilitates higher sport consumer involvement or participation. Media consumption is a significant factor contributing to turning a non-consumer into a light, medium, or heavy sport consumer. The messages conveyed through the media influence the consumer decision-making process. As the Escalator Concept is specific to sport consumption, turning non-consumers to light consumers using media is not confined to sport consumption. Mullin et al. (2014) describe the non-consumer as an unaware non-consumer, misinformed non-consumer, aware non-consumer, and media consumer.

The unaware non-consumer does not attend or participate due to their lack of information. The misinformed non-consumer has received information incorrectly, usually through unofficial brand communication such as word-of-mouth, and chooses not to participate or attend given the incorrect information. The aware non-consumer may use the website to learn more about the university, or the athletic department may decide not to attend a site visit. For example, the faith expression or lack of faith expression may trigger the consumer to consider their future involvement level. Lastly, the media consumer uses the media or a website to participate with the brand as a precursor to future higher commitment levels.

The Escalator Concept provides the theoretical framework justification to quantify CCCU media messages' faith expression through the university tagline, athletic department mission statements, and university mission statements (Kazoleas, Kim, & Moffitt, 2001; Kittle, & Ciba, 2001). While this study does not directly measure the actual media consumption or awareness of those who choose to attend these universities, quantifying these universities' current faith expression would be a foundational element to establish. Accordingly, the researchers conceptualize the messages used to describe these organizations' missions through the communication mediums by quantifying the content message.

Theory of Academic Capitalism

Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) Theory of Academic Capitalism reflects that higher education institutions readily embrace marketing in response to industry demands. This theory suggests that higher education institutions adopt marketing terminology and correspondingly allow marketing culture to transform how higher education institutions understand students and interrelate with desired stakeholder groups (i.e., students, alumni). This theory recognizes higher education institutions' ability to promote education as both a service and a lifestyle (Tolbert, 2014). Higher education promotion in terms of being a service and a lifestyle can significantly influence consumers and other institutional stakeholders. It can be particularly applicable at faith-based institutions conveying associations to Christian service and evoking a Christian lifestyle.

Review of Literature

Marketing in Higher Education

The notion of higher education implementing self-promotion is not a new phenomenon. For example, Bok (2003) reported that American higher education institutions have engaged in self-promotion since the early 20th century. However, over time as higher education institutions become more entrepreneurial, the role of marketing, including public relations, within higher education has increased (Lee, Miloch, Kraft, & Tatum, 2008), resulting in various challenges presented in the trajectory toward higher education commercialization. For example, Newman et al. (2004) identified that higher education institutions must contend with various challenges, such as shrinking enrollment and reduced financial support (e.g., governmental agency support).

As contemporary higher education must contend with "an already shifted paradigm" (Anctil, 2008, p. 2), universities are to denote a new business-based market system vying for student-consumers, enhanced institutional reputation, and funding opportunities (Newman et al.,

2004). Accordingly, higher education comprises a marketplace where institutions aggressively market themselves to student consumers who “shop” for educational options (Tolbert, 2014).

Krackenberg (1972) advised institutions to embrace strategic marketing practices, apply market research, and maximize available resources. For higher education institutions, Levy and Kotler identified marketing strategies that create favorable impressions to desired stakeholders (i.e., students, government entities) and increasing market share (i.e., enrollment, funding, reputation). Kotler (1979) recommended employing guiding marketing agendas that would serve as institution-wide planning strategies cognizant of markets in which the academic institution exists. This engagement includes analyzing market factors such as institutional missions, external market demands, and accessible resources to understand institutional positioning in the marketplace better. In this sense, institutions can move from simply a system of advertisement and promotion to a strategic branding-based planning focus.

University Branding

Typically higher education institutions are isomorphic (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016; Rutter, Lettice, & Nadeau, 2017), making them difficult to distinguish and differentiate from a branding perspective as they offer similar educational programs and services (Vincent, Lee, Hull, & Hill, 2020). “However, all service organizations, including colleges and universities, want to build distinctive and meaningful connections with key target audiences to gain competitive advantages in the marketplace” (Vincent et al., 2020, p. 100). These connections can be generated through strategic communications, including advertising, marketing, and branding initiatives (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Higher education institutions routinely engage in “branding campaigns” to convey particular messages to stakeholders (Tolbert, 2014). Such higher education branding efforts aim to establish, manage, and develop the created emotional connections (Chapleo, 2010). Sharing institutional brand identity and generating these associations helps define the academic brand’s unique selling proposition (Vincent et al., 2020).

Alessandri (2001) postulated that the projected image that an institution conveys leads to developing identity and, stretched throughout time, ultimately the formation of reputation. Bosch, Venter, Han, and Boshoff (2006) identified institutional brands as being shaped by strategic intent, encompassing the institution’s vision, mission, and value statements. Higher education institutions implement Bosch et al.’s (2006) conception of strategic intent by conveying messages that describe institutional points of distinction that differentiate from referent other institutions.

Higher education institutions provide a service to a vast assortment of stakeholders, including students (including student-athletes), parents, alumni, athletic fans, donors, and corporate partners (see Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, & Synowka, 2009; Gregg, Pierce, Lee, Himstedt, & Felver, 2013; Lee et al., 2008; Toma, 2003). When seeking to attract students, these stakeholders can be viewed as customers who view a higher education institution individualized by their personal needs and interests (Tolbert, 2014). Marketing these customers should be strategic, and Bosch et al. (2006) contend that higher education institutions employ market research to ascertain stakeholder perceptions and use the results to guide marketing communication strategies. Dehne and Profy (1999) attested to this notion by explaining that marketing efforts conducted without proper consideration for specific consumer demand simply serve as a means to “merely to flatter the institution” (p. 227).

Roper and Davies (2007) recommend that higher education institutions implement “a stakeholder-specific approach” (p. 88) that focuses on divergent audiences strategically. Roper and Davies (2007) further suggest that targeting messages to specific stakeholder groups is more advantageous “than trying to ensure that the same aspects of the corporate brand are equally valid for all groups” (p. 88). Thus, for example, specific attention to detail should be given to key stakeholder groups, such as prospective students, prospective student-athletes, current students, current student-athletes, alumni, faculty, staff, donors, governing bodies, political influencers, and other desired publics as such specification is instrumental in generating authentic brand-building messages (Clark et al., 2009; Gregg et al., 2013; Toma, 2003).

Creating a “brand” is an essential mechanism for communicating what stakeholders can envisage from an academic institution (Tolbert, 2014). Brand-building strategies and tactics can influence the perceptions of higher education institutions (Tolbert, 2014). At face value, some observers may view an institution’s brand in overly simplified forms, such as simply focusing on the visual representation of itself (“visual identity” – such as logos, colors, and fonts) (Lee & Alessandri, 2018). However, branding is a much more comprehensive concept. Simplified views of institutional branding practices, which focus on visual identity touchpoints, are myopic by nature. Brand-building, instead, involves communication and understanding of an institution’s essence and how a school meets critical stakeholder’s needs. Conveying this message may be presented in various forms, including words, images, personal interaction, strategic messages, and customer service (Tolbert, 2014).

Institutional brand identities are cultivated from the unique institutional characteristics and traits that cultivate higher education brands (Bosch et al., 2006). Therefore, higher education institutions should embrace institutional distinctiveness for faith-based institutions as such distinguishing characteristics set these institutions apart from their secular counterparts (Tolbert, 2014). To date, various studies (see Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2019; Tolbert, 2014; Woodrow, 2004; 2006) have examined marketing and branding implications in faith-based higher education.

Woodrow (2004; 2006) examined Christian academic considerations, included looking at institutional identity and image (2004) and mission (2007). In specific, Woodrow (2004) looked at the practice of Christian liberal arts colleges and universities changing their names to new monikers that omit blatant religious affiliation from the institutions’ names. This article’s findings concluded that the higher education institutions engaged in name changes that result from “conscious choices to omit religious connotations from their official names, most due to the value of marketing themselves to broader audiences for varying reasons, their mission and environment remain firmly Christ-centered” (p. 115).

Woodrow (2006) followed up his earlier study by examining Christian college and university mission statements as these school identifiers have “the power to transform people’s values, motivations, and actions into a positive outcome” (p. 313). This investigation examines the role of mission statements at Christian higher education institutions through the developed “identification of nine essential components of effective mission statements” (p. 313). The mission statements were collected from each respective university, and a content analysis was conducted of more than 105 schools representing the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities by assessing the incorporation of these components into the respective institutional mission statements. The subsequent analysis of the institutional mission statements presented “a variety of research findings and observations relevant to the Christian higher education community” (p. 313), including recognition that mission statements were at times difficult to

locate, suggesting “that widely communicating institutional mission is not a high priority for every CCCU member” (p. 324). Additional findings included presenting mission statements rarely identified the higher education institutions commonly appreciated specific constituents and history. Finally, Tolbert (2014) examined CCCU institutions’ marketing, investigating how missions were reflected in the printed recruitment materials, websites, and admissions portals. Tolbert’s findings concluded that faith-based institutions could benefit from being cognizant of gaps that exist in brand communication tools, as “[b]rand building includes translating the essence of an institution and how it meets the needs of its constituencies into messages” (p. 247).

Pizarro Milian and Rizk (2019) researched Canadian Christian colleges and universities presented themselves via their institutional home pages. In this study, the authors examined how Christian colleges and universities present themselves via institutional home pages. The exploratory thematic analysis of 93 Canadian Christian colleges and universities showed variation in the extent to which the institutions leveraged religiosity as a means for constructing and communicating identities. Given the findings of Pizarro Milian and Rizk (2019), Tolbert (2014), and Woodrow (2004; 2006), our study plans to investigate further messages conveyed at Christian universities across intercollegiate athletic and university websites.

Intercollegiate Athletic Branding

Intercollegiate athletics can compose a considerable role in the life of American higher education institutions. Higher education institutions use athletics programs to associate with key stakeholders such as students, alumni, faculty and staff, parents, boosters, and community members (Clark et al., 2009; Gregg et al., 2013; Toma, 2003; Vincent et al., 2020). "By presenting the university in a positive light to influential stakeholders, it's more likely that a positive assessment of what is distinctive about the university is achieved" (Gregg et al., 2013, p. 156). Such actions help construct an image that can inspire favorable stakeholders' perceptions of higher education institutions, particularly as successful intercollegiate athletic programs have increased exposure while enhancing institutional and athletic brand recognition (Frank, 2004). Furthermore, impact factor metrics related to institutional goals, including student and student-athlete recruitment, commercial partnership procurement, and further development initiatives with boosters, alumni, and other key stakeholders, help enhance the positive institutional brand image (Clopton & Finch, 2012; Hull, Lee, Zapalac, & Stillwell, 2017; Lee et al., 2008; Toma, 2003; Vincent et al., 2020).

Providing opportunities for athletic programs to be more visible can subsequently allow academic institutions to build greater institutional brand identification. Creating a visible athletic brand image can benefit enhanced institutional exposure opportunities for the overall institution – not just athletic programs. Successful and visible athletic programs can produce grander exposure for institutions while supporting enhanced institutional brand identification and awareness (Czekanski & Lee, 2017; Gregg et al., 2013; Hull et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2008; Vincent et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Based on the previous information, the following research questions (RQs) are brought forth:

RQ1: What is the faith expression on university taglines on CCCU websites?

RQ2: What is the faith expression on university mission statements on CCCU websites?

RQ3: What is the faith expression on athletic department mission statements on CCCU websites?

The visual identity elements of taglines and mission statements are meaningful communication tools for sharing information with institutional stakeholders. Taglines are short phrases or a sentence usually located in the proximity of the brand name on the university's home webpage. Mission statements are publicly available and commonly located using the About tab on the college and university home webpage. The athletic department mission statements are also publicly available and usually located using the "About" tab or "Inside Athletics" tab on the university's athletic department's web page. These research questions are significant because it helps quantify the faith expression message across various institutional touchpoints that students may encounter when exploring prospective institutions. It would be advantageous for CCCU institutions to use all messaging opportunities to display institutional faith as a core value. If the faith expression is lacking or inconsistent, the consumer/stakeholder could potentially miss the desired message or receive mixed messages – lack of congruence.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study utilized content analysis to quantify the marketing of faith-based higher education institutions by investigating how universities and athletic departments integrated faith-related impressions in presenting institutional missions statements on the websites. During the analysis process, the researchers collected data in the fall semester and re-visited the data in the spring semester, checking for accuracy and updating appropriately. Re-checking for accuracy and updating as needed (i.e., tagline changed after the initial data collection) allowed for data to be the most accurate and current information before analysis. In addition, the taglines are updated more frequently due to recruiting practices between the fall and spring semesters.

To exemplify Christian higher education themes, a content analysis using SPSS Modeler 16 Text Analytics was employed to assess the qualitative nature of a) the tagline, b) the university mission statement, and c) the athletic department mission statement. Content analysis aims to quantify frequencies of items and themes used in media and marketing content (Neuendorf, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2018). The content analysis methodology has more recently been used to quantify social media marketing strategies to improve the clarity of marketing communication, increase consumer engagement and provide more targeted content to their consumers (Peruta & Shields, 2018). The data collected in this study were used to quantify and describe the faith expression that occurred on the CCCU websites.

The higher education institutions examined in this study comprised 112 out of 141 CCCU institutional members that compete in sanctioned intercollegiate athletics programs (e.g., NCAA, NAIA, NCCAA). The member institutions were removed for the following reasons: 11 higher education institutions did not have an athletic department; 13 had an athletic department but no athletic department mission statement on the website; and five did not have a recognizable university tagline on the website. The data was collected by retrieving the information from the CCCU websites.

The publicly available content was collected verbatim from the CCCU websites into a data sheet. Each data cell represented each CCCU website content. For example, the tagline, university mission statement, and athletic department mission statement were across three cells in one row.

Table 1

Sample Institution Taglines and Mission Statements

University	Tagline	Athletic Mission Statement	University Mission Statement
Tabor College	Decidedly Christian.	Creating an environment for student-athletes that supports learning, promotes excellence and stimulates Christian growth.	Preparing people for a life of learning, work, and service for Christ and His kingdom.
Anderson University - SC	Knowledge for the Journey	To support the overall mission of the University by providing a competitive intercollegiate athletic program that attracts, nurtures and graduates student-athletes who, under the guidance of a quality staff, represent Anderson University with character and integrity while pursuing excellence in their respective sports.	Anderson University is an academic community, affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, providing a challenging education grounded in the liberal arts, enhanced by professional and graduate programs and a co-curricular focus on the development of character, servant leadership, and cultural engagement. This is a diverse community that is Christ-centered, people-focused, student-oriented, quality-driven, and future-directed.
Colorado Christian University	Faith. Knowledge. Adventure.	At CCU, we play to win. But most of all to honor God, our Audience of One. At CCU, we place a high value on the academic success of our athletes. We also place a high value on the mentoring process and the integration of faith in sport so that in all things, we accomplish our mission: "To glorify God by following his guidance in transforming lives through	Colorado Christian University cultivates knowledge and love of God in a Christ-centered community of learners and scholars, with an enduring commitment to the integration of exemplary academics, spiritual formation, and engagement with the world.

		discipleship, academic accountability, and excellence in intercollegiate athletics.”	
Southern Nazarene University	Character - Culture - Christ	The Athletics Department is committed to the mission of Southern Nazarene University, which is to transform lives through higher education in a Christ-Centered Community. A goal of the Athletics Department is preparing student-athletes for life by developing a commitment to aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical values. The Athletics Department will operate under the institutional control of the university and will always place the health and welfare of the student-athletes, coaches and staff first in decisions regarding the athletics program. Academics are the student’s first priority and sportsmanship and ethical conduct are taught, promoted and expected.	To make Christlike disciples through higher education in Christ-centered community.

The data descriptors were reported with the frequency of descriptors and documents in Table 2. The descriptors are key phrases that were identified using linguistic programming within SPSS Modeler 16 Text Analytics. The descriptors are words that collectively describe a specified theme. Each descriptor is used to determine the frequency of the themes identified within the documents assessed. The document number indicates the frequency of institutions that demonstrated these descriptors. The themes identified were not mutually exclusive, as mission statements and taglines typically express and streamline several vital ideas. The findings were then reported based on the themes identified and the co-occurrence between the most frequently utilized themes. These co-occurrence frequencies provide a more in-depth description of how the types of themes were used.

Results

The results are organized below by each of the research questions. The themes that emerged are listed in Table 2 and detailed in the subsequent section:

God/Faith. Descriptors in this theme described a Christian environment or faith expression.

Education, Training, & Development. Descriptors in this theme described a learning environment or the educational experience.

Change the World. Descriptors in this theme described leaving an impact on the world or making a difference in the community.

Behavior. Descriptors in this theme described building positive behaviors associated with maturing as an adult in the workforce and becoming a leader.

Unique location/campus life. Descriptors in this theme described a location or unique aspects of campus life specific to the university.

Sport/Student-Athlete. Descriptors in this theme described a sport or the student-athlete.

No Theme. Descriptors in this theme did not describe any of the themes as mentioned earlier or did not occur frequently enough to be categorized into a theme.

Examples of descriptors provided in Table 2 were actual phrases that were analyzed with the emerging themes. For example, using the themes and phrases described in Tables 1 & 2, one would code Tabor College in the following way; RQ1: God/Faith in the Tagline, RQ2: Education/Training/Development and God/Faith in the university Mission Statement, and RQ3: God/Faith, Education/Training/Development, and Student/Student-Athlete. Thus, Tabor College is an example of a streamlined faith expression message across all touchpoints. In the following paragraphs, the results are presented for each research question.

Table 2

Themes with Descriptors and Documents

	University Tagline Themes		University Mission Statement		Athletic Mission Statement	
	Descriptors	Documents	Descriptors	Documents	Descriptors	Documents
God/Faith- Christian environment or faith expression. (i.e. Faith, Christian, Spirit, Christ-centered)	46	53 (47%)	165	112 (100%)	79	76 (67%)
Education, Training, & Development- educational experience (i.e. intellect, scholarship, learning, and wisdom)	41	46 (41%)	227	106 (94%)	108	94 (80%)

Change the World- leaving an impact on the world (i.e. transforming lives, change the world, personal journey)	18	25 (22%)	39	70 (62%)	12	27 (23%)
Behavior- building positive behaviors. (i.e. developing leaders, leadership inspired, character, growth)	19	24 (21%)	137	86 (76%)	100	93 (79%)
No Theme- did not display any of the above		12 (10%)				
Unique location/campus life- location or unique aspects of campus life. (i.e. community, professional environment, location)			97	61 (54%)	63	56 (47%)
Sport/Student- Athlete- sport or the student-athlete (i.e. athletic abilities, sport, student- athletes)					148	105 (93%)

RQ1: University Tagline Themes

Only 53 of the 112 (47%) CCCU higher education institutions mentioned a faith expression phrase in the university's tagline. This finding indicates that 53% of the higher education institutions do not specifically include Christian faith expression phrases in one of the most frequently marketed phrases. Four themes emerged from the tagline phrases; God/Faith (n = 53, 47%), Education/Training/Development (n = 46, 41%), Change the World (n = 25, 22%) and Behavior (n = 24, 21%). Twelve taglines were labeled "No Theme" because they

did not have any similarity with the themes already identified and no connection between the items within this group.

The four themes were also examined to understand how these themes were used in conjunction with each other. Only two combinations of themes were utilized more than 10 times. God/Faith and Education/Training/Development were used on 24 occasions. God/Faith and Change the World was used on 10 occasions.

RQ2: University Mission Themes

University mission statements most frequently included God/Faith (n = 112, 100%), Education (n = 106, 90%), and Behavior (n = 86, 73%). These results indicate that faith expression is a core value that universities try to convey along with training and behavior change.

Two major themes, God/Faith & Education/Training/Development, were identified to have several co-theme occurrences. God/Faith was utilized with 103 Education/Training Development occasions, 83 Behavior occasions, and 69 Change the World on 69 occasions. Education/Training/Development was conveyed with Behavior on 77 occasions and with Change the World on 63 occasions.

RQ3: Athletic Department Mission Findings

Only 76 of the 112 (67%) institutions that had an athletic department mission statement referenced a Christian phrase (e.g., God/Faith), whereas all of the 112 higher education institutions mentioned an athletic term (e.g., Sport/Student-Athlete). These results indicate that the athletic department's mission statements do not demonstrate the same faith expression level as the university mission statements provided.

Sport/Student-Athlete and Education/Training/Development were used most frequently in combination with various other themes. Sport/Student-Athlete was utilized with Education/Training/Development having 86 occasions, 83 Behavior occurrences, and 62 God/Faith occurrences. Education/Training/Development was utilized with 74 Behavior occurrences and with God/Faith having 58 occurrences.

Discussion

The faith expression of CCCU institutions is crucial to the survival and sustainability of faith-based universities. This study quantifies the faith expression in CCCU website taglines, university mission statement, and athletic department mission statement. Faith expression was lacking in 53% of taglines and 33% of athletic department mission statements. We have likewise reported the additional themes found with and without faith expression. Study results reflect that CCCU member institutions should streamline the faith expression of the university mission statement into the message conveyed in the tagline and the athletic department mission statement.

The Escalator Concept (Mullin et al., 2014) was used to justify the faith expression message. Hence, if the stakeholders are not receiving a faith-expression message, they are not likely able to distinguish or identify faith as the core value. Given that a media consumer actively searches online information for consumer decision-making purposes, the amount and type of

faith expression would be a factor to consider. The potential student would likely visit the different websites as a media consumer of the prospective colleges and determine if they will seek out more information or attend a campus visit. Therefore, the presence of faith expression or lack of faith expression would be pertinent to their decision-making process for these CCCU institutions. Examples of taglines with faith expression lacking were, “Momentum of life, Seeing beyond the start, Beyond the Mind, Light the way, and Mysteries made known.” These taglines did not display the core value of faith and may provide an inconsistent message from the mission statement. The current study benchmarks the amount of faith expression utilized and identified a lack of faith expression in university taglines and athletic department mission statements.

Generally, the university mission statements included in this study conveyed faith expression as a core value. However, the media user would encounter inconsistencies in faith expression on some of the CCCU institutional taglines and athletic department websites. The Theory of Academic Capitalism suggests that higher education institutions should provide clear messages to develop a distinguishable service and lifestyle brand. Furthermore, the intention of training the next generation of Christian leaders into highly skilled and potentially profitable individuals should not be a missed message by the consumer. Especially if the consumer is actively determining if they want to attend a CCCU institution, having the CCCU distinction means that the institution actively identifies and cooperates within a Christian network. Tolbert (2014) recalled previous research that had reinforced the idea that higher education institution communication is only part of a higher education institution's brand presence. Kazoleas et al. (2001) accordingly postulated that higher education institutions could positively impact the image by focusing on consumer relations and community relations as elements of institutional marketing agendas.

Additional themes such as Education/Training/Development, Change the World, and Behavior was also present in the taglines, university mission statement, and athletic department mission statement. As these themes are relevant to describing and communicating the university's mission, the lack of faith expression in 53% of taglines and 33% of athletic department mission statements are concerning. The Theory of Academic Capitalism suggests that when universities fail to properly identify their unique and distinguishable assets in communication approaches to stakeholders, they miss the opportunity for long-term financial sustainability. Regarding the findings from this study, faith expression consistency is needed across all touchpoints to more purposefully display faith as a core value of CCCU institutions.

Practical Implications

The university tagline lacks the most in faith expression in marketing material, followed by the athletic department mission statement. As God/Faith themes are expected to be seen in the mission statement, the university tagline and athletic department mission statements lack congruency with the university's Christian higher education stated purpose in faith expression. As these two communication methods are used strategically differently in the marketing process, a streamlined faith expression would reinforce the university's mission statement's messages. CCCU institutions should set the standard in conveying their faith expression in every aspect of their universities' marketing efforts.

For example, in 2021, Tabor College changed its tagline on the website to the actual mission statement of the university. Thus, when a current or potential consumer opens the Tabor College website, they are boldly reminded of the core value and mission. This is an excellent

example of streamlining the faith expression message for the consumer. While the researchers are not suggesting all mission statements be one sentence and also the tagline, the actions of Tabor College provide an undeniable example of how to streamline the messages conveyed to media consumers. If the faith expression is clear and consistent across the university mission statement, university tagline, and athletic department mission statement, higher-education administration would assume that students, parents, and community stakeholders would be appropriately informed consumers. Conversely, a lack of clear and consistent faith expression in brand communication could lead to consumer behavior and preferences not associated with faith, a core value of CCCU. Hence, the retention of students or the recruitment of retainable students may be positively or negatively influenced by the faith expression.

The use of co-themes indicated that most universities try to communicate at least one or two themes well, thus providing a unique brand message. University taglines generally focused on using both God/Faith and Education/Training/Development together. As this is the most apparent and most predictable tagline theme expected, these were only identified together 24 out of the 53 times God/Faith were utilized on university taglines. This finding may indicate that only one theme is likely to be described in the tagline or that the tagline is limited to two themes. Simultaneously, the university mission statement identified God/Faith and Education/Training/Development themes to co-occur with several other themes. Such can be expected given the mission statement's length compared to the tagline and its practical use on the website.

Sport/Student-Athlete was exclusively identified on the athletic department mission statement and did not show up as a significant theme in the university mission statement. As these results are not surprising, the quantification of the themes and how they are utilized differently across the websites clarifies the message conveyed to current and potential consumers. In addition, the absence of faith expression from major communication touchpoints demonstrates missed opportunities for streamlined communication. Therefore, the recommendation from the authors is to streamline the themes in the taglines and mission statements for consistency across communication platforms at CCCU institutions.

Future Directions and Limitations

This study is the first of its kind to evaluate faith expression across CCCU websites. Future research would need to focus on a follow-up (e.g., five-year) re-examination of the faith expression displayed on these CCCU websites. The data presented in this study does not offer a description of the current trend moving toward or away from faith expression. This study is also limited because the themes and co-themes could be further understood if faith-based and non-faith-based institutions were examined simultaneously. Quantifying the different themes communicated at faith and non-faith-based institutions would further clarify the actual collegiate market. A non-faith-based institution comparison group was not utilized in this study as no natural comparison group exists. Future researchers could develop a comparable institution for each of the institutions included in this study. However, this was not the purpose of the current study. Another limitation is that the study analyzed the athletic department mission statement and may only concern student-athletes in their decision-making process for enrolling in a CCCU institution. As student-athletes are a sub-population of the institution, mission statements on Student life or Student Engagement websites could be investigated to determine the faith

expression. Inconsistency in location or presentation of mission statement on Student Life or Student Engagement websites may make this portion of data collection problematic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided an academic benchmark for examining institutional faith expression on CCCU institutions websites. Inconsistent faith expression may be detrimental to institutional marketing goals and can hamper the ability to thrive (health, sustainability, etc.). If Higher Education institutions that are explicitly Christian do not adopt faith expression in parts (i.e., taglines and athletic department mission statements) of their communication, the opportunity to convey the core value message to foster relationships with stakeholders and recruit targeted consumers, such as prospective students and student-athletes as well as their families, may be missed. The findings presented provide a snapshot of faith expression lacking in taglines and athletic department mission statements and include suggestions of increasing faith expression in these areas. These findings may provide institutional marketing administrators a way to assess the messages being conveyed across different touchpoints.

If faith expression is lacking on the CCCU institutional taglines and athletic department websites, what message are they conveying instead? Based on the additional themes identified, one could argue that when the distinguishing features of a Christian university are no longer distinguishable, the university just becomes a university. While this study does not examine the consumers' perception of faith expression, faith expression would be lacking from a little over half of the taglines and a third of the athletic department website mission statements. Furthermore, this leads the researchers to believe that the consumer would have to learn about the Christian university's faith expression from a source other than the official website's tagline or athletic department mission statement. This indicates that some CCCU member schools are leaving the most valuable asset and core value of faith to be communicated in a different method or not communicated at all.

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