

A Qualitative Investigation of Academic/Athletic Brand Representations: Applying Lovemarks Theory to Cultural Symbols

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Abstract: The current study applied Robert's lovemarks theory of branding to interpret a photo-elicitation approach of two academic/athletic brand representations. Three major themes emerged from the participants ($N = 88$) in the study of the *Thinkman* logo image: (a) Intellectual Enhancement, (b) Athlete, and (c) Hard Work. By eliciting responses from the participants ($N = 75$) regarding the term *Scholar-Baller*, the following three themes emerged: (a) *Amazing Scholar & Exceptional Athlete*, (b) *Top Student*, and (c) *Student-Athlete*. The current findings indicate that many of the participants responded favorably to the photo-elicitation of two academic/athletic terms and logos. The participants also critiqued both representations in the context of the broader and specific discourses about the student-athlete experience in American higher education. Implications and recommendations for scholars and practitioners are suggested.

Keywords: scholar-baller, student-athletes, brand personality, photo-elicitation, higher education

Retire the term student-athlete . . . There is no more need to call them student-athletes than there is to call members of the marching band student band members. The words that faculty use to refer to athletes should not be determined by the public relations needs of the NCAA. Replacing the term with student or college athlete in university documents is an action faculty can take immediately. (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005, p. 115)

Little academic research has been conducted on the marketing, representation, and language of the words related to conceptions of academics and athletics, which is surprising considering the impact athletes have on American society at all competitive levels. Recent examples of this phenomenon are: the United States Women's National Soccer and Ice Hockey teams forcing conversations about equal pay for women; the University of Missouri's football team helping to drive campus conversations about racial tensions in higher education; and a high school soccer captain from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, Jamie Morris, asking U.S. Soccer to honor a fallen member of their team at the SheBelieves Cup Final in Orlando, Florida to inspire conversations on gun reform in the U.S.

In terms of how these athletes are represented, some early attention on the topic reveals that the social perceptions of sports figures focus on dumb jocks, flawed heroes, and superstars (Long, 1991). The caricature in American folklore surrounding athletes is centered on the identity of the tramp athlete, jock, and dumb jock (Beezley, 1985). Hence, as Kissinger and Miller (2009) highlighted, "There is little to no research that documents well the intellectual capacity of student-athletes" (p. 6).

In light of the limited research on the intellectual capacity of student-athletes, the current study attempts to build on research by Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera (2001). In this seminal study, researchers examined how brands/logos represent academic/athletic brands and are perceived by college students. Findings revealed that brands/logos represent values, such as cultural symbols and cultural products. Observing how college students perceive brands/logos that portray representations of student-athletes is crucial because focusing on the emotional relationship built on love and respect between a consumer and a brand is the basis of Robert's (2005) lovemarks theory.

Additionally, it is important to note how individuals connect with certain brands. As McCracken (1986) suggested, "[c]onsumers might search for brands with a personality that coincides with and reinforces the self-concept they wish to project, offering additional considerations for the impact of the brand personality concept" (p. 74). Brand personality, a concept relevant to the current study, is defined as: "A set of human characteristics that consumers associate with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 350). The most successful brands have descriptors and adjectives assigned to them by research participants that encompass personality traits (Aaker, 1997; Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005). Our study aims to evaluate the brand personalities ascribed to brands that represent student-athletes to draw larger conclusions about the way that student-athletes are perceived within their wider communities.

Qualitative methods are an ideal analytical lens for discovering what brand personality is assigned to brands/logos that represent student-athletes (Jones, 1997; Smith & Stewart, 2001). Qualitative approaches measure emotion and subjective consumer perceptions and can potentially assess the emotions, perceptions, and feelings surrounding an image or representation of words (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006; Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Current research has given brands and logos a great deal of attention with empirical implications for researchers and practitioners in marketing and sports marketing (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). Meanwhile, less attention has been given to scholarly inquiry using qualitative methods, which could more

adequately capture the nuanced and idiosyncratic nature of brand personality across various contexts (Arora & Stoner, 2009, p. 272). The use of qualitative methods in the current study represents a unique approach to studying brand personality and consumer perceptions of well-known brands.

Using a multidisciplinary approach that crosses disciplines, such as psycholinguistics, sociology, sport marketing, and the most recent literature on brands, the current study asks the following research questions:

- (a) How might lovemarks theory inform a qualitative investigation of two words/images that represent a range of perceptions and emotions related to academics and athletics?
- (b) What qualitative data themes emerge based on participants in the study who articulate how they associate with the two words/images related to academics and athletics presented to them through photo-elicitation?

Review of Literature

The History of the Term Student-Athlete

Student-athletes have the unique responsibility of balancing the daily tasks required of a full-time student and a full-time athlete. Representations and images of this academic/athletic balance vary in the American mind (Harrison, 2002). These students engage in classroom and academic activities while also being involved in an organized competitive sport. This unique group of students, particularly those at the collegiate level, receives more publicity and campus awareness than students who do not participate in interscholastic athletic competitions (Duderstadt, 2009). Due to the fact that they are faced with a unique set of pressures and obligations, student-athletes often relate more strongly to other student-athletes, creating a complex social and political system. Furthermore, males and females who participate in both academics and athletics at the highest level often identify themselves as student-athletes in a gradient of ways. It is important to understand the institutional beginning of the term “student-athlete” to then comprehend the identification process, self-affirmation, and stereotype threat that follow in the positive and negative identity formation of this popular label.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the most prominent regulatory body of the collegiate athletic sector, first introduced the terminology of student-athlete in the 1950s (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The NCAA was created to maintain the integrity and amateurism of collegiate athletes, and to protect athletes from serious injuries that commonly resulted from playing collegiate football. Researchers have analyzed the motives of the terminology creation and have begun to refer to the term student-athlete as propaganda that the NCAA created to convince workers’ compensation boards and the influential public sector that scholarship athletes are students, not employees (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Scholars claim that the language is part of the original NCAA strategy to circumvent negative publicity and political pressure and has been enforced through communication methods that discourage rational analysis. The term student-athlete has become a deeply embedded term within the culture and is seen by many as a badge of honor, particularly by athletes themselves. This honorary title, however, does not represent all student-athletes, as many identify more strongly with one aspect of the term over

another. These variances relate to self-identity, self-affirmation, and stereotype bias (Harrison et al., 2009).

While the term student-athlete has become significant to many athletes globally, there is more than one interpretation of the terminology. Research has shown that male and female athletes have distinct values and selection criteria for choosing a university, which can translate into different identification meanings for each student-athlete based on gender (Judson, James, & Aurand, 2004). Male student-athletes place a higher value on athletic characteristics of a university whereas female student-athletes tend to focus on the academic characteristics (Judson et al., 2004). Understanding the aspects student-athletes focus on when selecting a university is important insight for recruiters and coaches, and will ultimately ensure a better selection of school for the respective athlete. A more appropriate match will lead to increased satisfaction and productivity, and possibly higher graduation rates as well.

While student-athletes identify strongly with the terminology, the “student-athlete” label also has the potential to lead to stereotypes and stereotype threat. There have been numerous studies that demonstrate the detrimental effects of being the target of a negative stereotype. Stereotype threat exists when performance suffers due to the anxiety individuals feel when they risk confirming a negative stereotype (Steele, 1997). For student-athletes, they are often faced with the negative stereotype of being less intelligent, less engaged, and being a “dumb jock.” Researchers discovered that student-athletes often assume different identities, including the identity they were primed for and the identity that best fits the task at hand (Harrison et al., 2009; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

The literature on student-athletes in the context of branding and marketing theories is scarce. Much of the attention on the identity of student-athletes focuses on the impact of the term related to academic performance (Stone, 2012; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), rethinking of the term in academic research and scholarship on the topic (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005), and the strategic marketing of the university campus to student-athletes (Judson et al., 2004). None of the past research has focused on the imagery, representation, or language with the concept of student-athlete and how audiences, consumers, and student-athletes perceive the cultural branding of the term. This represents a gap in the literature that the current study seeks to address. In the next section, we examine theory related to the current topic and how it might help fill this gap in the literature.

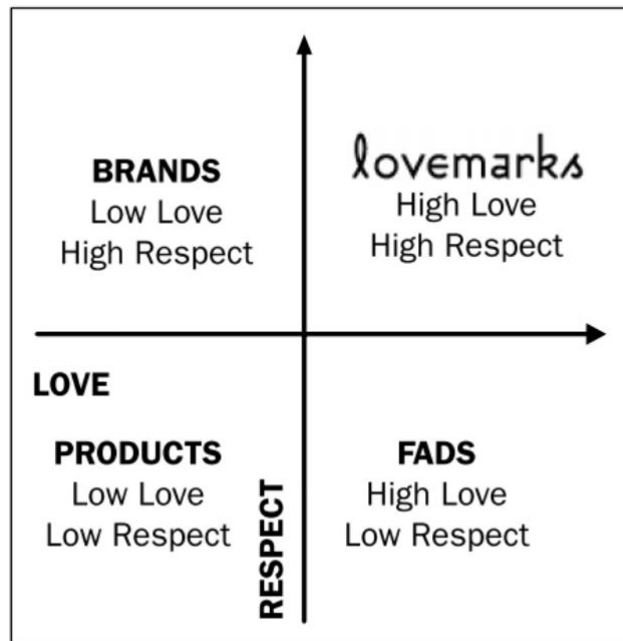
Lovemarks

Brand awareness and effective advertising have relied heavily on the feelings and thoughts of customers. By positioning certain products and services in relation to emotional sentiment, brand communication is more effective and ultimately leads to greater business success. As individuals become more intelligent within the marketplace, advertising must adapt to the purchaser’s needs. This requires a focus on emotional intelligence and technological advances.

Roberts (2005) explained the importance for brands and companies to focus on creating a relationship with consumers built on love and respect. Love is influenced by the three factors of intimacy, mystery, and sensuality, while respect is built on trust, reputation, and performance

(Roberts, 2005). In this fashion, lovemarks create this sense of “loyalty beyond reason” because the consumers respect the lovemark (Pawle & Cooper, 2006, p. 39). This respect is derived from the initial trust that a consumer lends to the lovemark regarding what its good or service will provide. Performance can then be derived from the lovemark fulfilling the promise that was made to the consumer, and a reputation is formulated as a lovemark delivers or does not deliver on its original promise to the consumer.

Figure 1. Adapted from Pawle and Cooper (2006).



Lovemarks, however, are not solely created through respect (see Figure 1). To generate a lovemark high in love, brands need to have the three crucial components of love: mystery, sensuality, and intimacy. In this manner, lovemarks will keep the consumer intrigued, will appeal to the main senses, and will remain personal for the consumer. Many purchasing decisions are influenced by emotion, rather than reason. This intuitive, or “gut feel,” builds a strong emotional foundation in consumers. Brands should build a similar foundation for their consumer-brand relationship. When this foundation occurs between a brand and a consumer, the relationship becomes deeply personal, as it intertwines passion with an emotional bond. To achieve the high love and high respect components of lovemarks, both *functional* and *emotional functions* must exist. Emotional factors drive love, whereas functional, or performance-related attributes, drive respect (Roberts, 2005).

Thus, combining both love and respect can increase brand loyalty. Increased brand loyalty can positively influence the chances of a brand becoming a lovemark. The increased chances of a brand becoming a lovemark can increase a consumer’s purchase intention that can subsequently increase volume and sales.

Scholar-Baller and Lovemarks Theory

The *Scholar-Baller* movement seeks, in part, to integrate education through the popular culture constructs of sport and entertainment. The organization does this by partnering with colleges, universities, and high schools to reward athletes who earn a 3.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) or higher each semester. Those who earn the stated GPA are then awarded “Academic Performance Recognition Incentives” in the form of certificates, patches to place on their uniforms, and stickers to place on their helmets to reward the athletes for their academic and athletic achievements. It differs from a Dean’s list in that it honors not only the athlete’s academic success, but also awards their athletic prowess as well.

Based on the positive responses the *Scholar-Baller* movement has received from both student-athletes and non-athletes anecdotally, we aim to formally analyze the perceptions associated with its brand in this study through the lovemarks framework. Previous scholarship on this framework has centered on several tenets. Roberts (2005) put forward that brands without emotional ties wear thin. This description is contrasted with the term “student-athlete,” as the origins of this term is based on the NCAA protecting themselves from using athletes as unpaid labor and is not based on any emotional ties (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The term “scholar-baller,” on the other hand, has been able to form emotional ties with its consumers and examples of these ties can be viewed in Figure 2. Another tenet that Roberts (2005) discusses asserts that brands should be about consumers and the relationships consumers have with brands. This tenet sheds light on the need for a stronger message that highlights the relationship between college athletes and the depth with which they connect to academics/athletics.

Figure 2. Lovemarks Theory and Example Stories.

- 1) *T-shirts at ASU (2001)*. This was the beginning of the Scholar-Baller partnership with its first athletic team. Many on the Division I football team stood up with enthusiasm and positive energy when asked who is a baller in the team meeting room. When asked who was a scholar, many sat down. When asked who was a scholar-baller, some stood up, while some others stood halfway up and were not sure if they should stand up or sit down due to both identity constructs merging together as one identity.
- 2) *Morgan State University and Sewing Kits (2004)*. The equipment manager of the opponent agreed to sew the patches on Hampton University's football team, while Morgan State University's equipment manager refused to sew the patches on for those players deemed a scholar-baller with 3.0 or higher Grade Point Average (GPA). The next day on the way to the game, the 15 scholar-baller at Morgan State got up earlier than the rest of the team so that they could get individual sewing kits from the concierge at the hotel and put the SB patches on their jerseys.
- 3) *Defensive Back steals Scholar-Baller/Jordan Brand shorts (2004)*. A defensive back without the status of a legitimate scholar-baller steals the Scholar-Baller/Jordan Brand shorts.
- 4) *Citrus player/no patch no game (2011)*. One male football student-athlete from an urban environment noticed prior to a game that his patch was missing and refused to put his pads on and compete until his jersey had the Scholar-Baller *Thinkman* logo on it. His request was honored by the equipment person at Citrus.
- 5) *Citrus players and Bucchi tipping point (2008)*. Only one Citrus Community College basketball player had earned the patch going into the start of basketball season. After the fall semester, six others earned the patch and asked if they could wear it for the remainder of the season.
- 6) *Diana Taurasi: I have to go back and finish my degree in communications at UCONN. (2005)*. During the *Coach Carter* film screening with Paramount Pictures/Rush Philanthropic/Scholar-Baller/NCAA/Women's Sports Foundation/WNBA, Diana Taurasi's initial response upon meeting the Scholar-Baller Executive team at the event while shaking their hands was "I have to go back to school and finish my degree." Diana did return to finish her degree and received a Scholar-Baller hat from the organization.
- 7) *El Camino Volleyball State Champions find the Banner 2007*). Three volleyball players during the post-game celebration noticed the Scholar-Baller corporate banner hanging up from the ceiling and stood next to it with their Scholar-Baller patches on their jerseys.
- 8) *SEMO Chants are Gender Inclusive (2006)*. The football team sees two Scholar-Baller executives in the cafeteria on campus and begin the organization's chant while clapping, "When I say Scholar you say Baller, Scholar---Baller---Scholar---Baller." Then the volleyball team at another table, inside the cafeteria, begins clapping and then the entire team of women participate in the same chant.
- 9) *Kyle Long and Falling Short Twice but Graduates (2012)*. Current NFL player of the Chicago Bears, Kyle Long twice attended schools that were Scholar-Baller participants and told two Scholar-Baller Executives "Man I have missed being a Scholar-Baller twice at Saddleback and now Oregon." The two executives then told him, "that's okay because he competed in the classroom and earned his degree."
- 10) *Rudy Burgess and Art Project (2005)*. Art major, Scholar-Baller, and all Pac-10 running back, at the time, Rudy Burgess makes a *Thinkman* logo out of wire for a class project. The final product remains in the ASU athletic department glass case dedicated to the partnership between Scholar-Baller and Arizona State University.
- 11) *ASU athletic department branding makes school cool (2012)*. The Scholar-Baller concept, first fully implemented at ASU in 2001, is significantly branded throughout two main floors in the Athletic Department Office of Student-Athlete Development and Football.

The last tenet relates to a brand's need to progress. Hence, the term "student-athlete" and the meanings conveyed from this term, language, and imagery need to evolve and progress from its origins. This evolving progression does not have to be limited to *Thinkman* (see Figure 3) and *Scholar-Baller*. Evidence, however, should be gathered from the representations of words, logos, and brands that affirm the highest level of connection to cultural performance(s) in academic/athletic realms. The above framework, as well as the organization's mission of breaking the negative stereotype that athletes are not successful academically, motivated the methodology used in the current study to evaluate the perceptions of the *Scholar-Baller* brand name. The *Scholar-Baller* brand name and *Thinkman*, the logo of *Scholar-Baller*, were shown to the participants in this study to elicit their initial responses towards both the logo and the name.

Methods

Keller and Lehmann (2006) explained, "[r]elatively limited effort has been directed toward exploring the financial, legal, and social impacts of brands" (p. 754). The current study explores the social impact of brands through a qualitative approach. Qualitative research consists of various forms of inquiry, which assists researchers in understanding the meaning of social phenomena (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative techniques, including the use of open-ended questions, allow participants to share the meaning they have constructed within their natural setting and their personal conceptualizations about a particular topic (May & Finch, 2009; Merriam, 1998).

Visual (or photo) elicitation is a qualitative technique in which photographs are used to stimulate a discussion between participants and the researcher(s) (Snyder & Kane, 1990). College students' perceptions of the meanings associated with photographs can function as powerful representations of the students' personal experiences and thoughts. Harper (2002) supported the use of the photo-elicitation technique because "images evoke deeper elements of human experiences than words alone" (p. 20). According to Loeffler (2004), "[p]hoto-elicitation is a collaborative process whereby the researcher becomes a listener as the participant interprets the photograph for the researcher" (p. 539). Photo-elicitation has been utilized to perform research in anthropology, education, health, psychology, and sociology (Carlsson, 2001; Harper, 2002; Perka, Matherly, Fishman, & Ridge, 1992). Various sport and leisure scholars have used this technique (Bowling, 2002; Curry, 1986; Gonzalez & Jackson, 2001; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; Loeffler, 2004) and it is gaining in popularity.

Procedure

The photo-elicitation technique was used in the data collection by prompting the participants with an image and a short script, which is outlined in the following sections. Participants were allotted five minutes to report their written response for each logo. Therefore, data collection took a maximum of ten minutes per participant. Initially, participants were presented with a photograph of the *Thinkman* logo (see Figure 3), along with the following script and directions: "Please write a response based on the image below in terms of what it means to you personally."

Figure 3. *Thinkman* logo.



Secondly, participants were presented with the term “*Scholar-Baller*” (see Figure 4), along with the following script and directions: “Please write a response based on the term listed below in terms of what it means to you personally.”

Figure 4. *Scholar-Baller* term.

SCHOLAR-BALLER

Participants

Participants in the photo-elicitation of *Thinkman* logo ($N = 88$) and the *Scholar-Baller* term ($N = 75$) were male and female college students all receiving class credit for their participation in the study. There were 89 total students enrolled in the class and the participation rate was 88/89 (99%) for the first photo-elicitation and 75/89 (84%) for the second photo-elicitation. Participants were from one large public university in the southeast, located in the United States, and all participants were recruited by the instructor of the course. Participants consisted of 45 females (51%) and 43 (49%) males in the *Thinkman* photo-elicitation and 38 (51%) females and 37 (49%) males in the *Scholar-Baller* photo-elicitation. Participants’ mean age was 21. The participants’ classification in college was as follows: 58 (66%) sophomores and 30 (34%) juniors for the *Thinkman* photo-elicitation and 48 sophomores (55%) and 27 juniors (31%) for the *Scholar-Baller* photo-elicitation. This study did not control for race or socioeconomic status. All of the participants were business majors. The current study used a convenience sample of college students to investigate their perceptions of academic/athletic logos, which is in alignment with other work that has examined college athlete issues with the general student body.

Data Analysis

First, a four-member investigative team was formed. All members (coders) were involved throughout the data analysis process. Data were transcribed to create three separate Microsoft Word documents. The established unit of analysis was one to six sentences. Then, each coder independently read each of the units of analysis line-by-line to get a sense of the responses (Glaser, 1978). Then, the process of “open coding” was used as coders identified potential themes by locating examples from the participants’ responses (Bernard, 2011). The third independent reading of the data involved a “memoing technique,” and the coders formed code notes. The investigative team met to interpret and identify key themes. Next, the team identified a total of six major themes across the two sets, and therefore three themes per brand emerged from the data (see Table 1). The *ATLAS* software program was utilized to verify and assist with the accuracy of determining the number and percentage of participants that responded within each of the major themes based on the students’ responses (see Table 1; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Table 1

Students’ Perceptions of ThinkMan Logo Image Major Themes: Descriptive Percentages of Transcripts

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Sample Quotes
Intellectual Enhancement	56	63.6%	<i>Even with no facial expressions, by his body position he looks like he’s focused on school work.</i>
Athlete	40	45.5%	<i>He looked to be athletic, as he seemed larger than the desk.</i>
Hard Work	23	26%	<i>He seems to be focused on the task at hand.</i>

Note. $N = 88$. Please keep in mind that participant transcripts ranged from one to three sentences. Each of the transcripts included several key concepts that coincide with the major themes of the study. Very few participant responses exclusively coincided with only one theme.

Results

The participant pool ($N = 88$, $N = 75$) provided responses that ranged in length from one to six sentences; only a few responses exclusively coincided with one theme. The major themes represent participants’ perceptions based on the photo-elicitation images and terms. Each section outlines the themes and provides participants’ quotes. Two sets of major themes emerged from the data based on the following: (a) *Thinkman* logo image ($N = 88$), and (b) *Scholar-Baller* term ($N = 75$). The titles of most of the major themes are directly from the participants’ words, which is a technique termed “in-vivo coding” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At the end of each of the two sections, there is an indication of the number and percentage of the participants that reported responses coinciding with the major theme of that section (see Table 1).

Thinkman Logo Image Themes

Three major themes emerged, which are descriptive of the participants' ($N = 88$) perceptions of the *Thinkman* logo image: (a) *Intellectual Enhancement*, (b) *Athlete*, and (c) *Hard Work*.

Intellectual enhancement. The theme *Intellectual Enhancement* involved participants' perceptions that the image represents athletes who excel in the classroom. This also includes the idea that the athlete in the image successfully completes schoolwork and studies outside of class. The following examples from participants are illuminating:

This logo to me is a guy at a desk studying or doing schoolwork. He looks like maybe an athlete because he has a ball cap on. He looks like he is studying or doing school work for a college or university. [It] could be a student-athlete trying to prepare for a class and or test. (Student 56)

This logo seems to represent a modern-day student-athlete trying to get some balance of an education. It says that the individual is trying to do his best in the classroom setting. (Student 67)

Participants also received powerful messages from the image. Consider the following comments:

A student at his desk. Someone taking a test. Be relaxed when taking a test. Stay in school. Do your homework. Pay attention. (Student 66)

It represents school. It says stays in school. (Student 72)

Participants ($56/88 = 63.6\%$) perceived that the *Thinkman* image emphasizes an athlete succeeding in the classroom. Participants also gained the message that education is significant (see Table 1).

Athlete. Within the theme of *Athlete*, participants recognized that the image displayed an athletic, in-shape, muscular man. Participants also mentioned that the athlete in the image must exercise. Consider the following comments:

I see a man that looks like he is studying. He looks like he may work out a lot because he does have a lot of muscles. I can also say he might be a student-athlete in study hall. He could be taking a test also, so it can represent an organization that helps student-athletes in college to succeed in academic career. (Student 12)

It looks like a student sitting in a desk. It looks like he is writing something down. You can also assume he is athletic or into sports b/c of his dress. Looks pretty big, looks like he has worked out. (Student 13)

Students noticed that athletes could be strong but also focus on academic participation.

An athlete participating in class. It says to me that even though one is big and strong, sport doesn't have to be the only focus. (Student 19)

Shows a man who is athletic and takes time to work out, but at the same time he is making time to study. (Student 27)

Participants (40/88 = 45.5%) expressed that the image represents an athlete who is big and strong; they also sensed an athletic man who focuses on academics (see Table 1).

Hard work. The theme *Hard Work* involved participants' recognition that the image depicts a person who works hard, is determined, and is focused on accomplishing his goals. Consider the following quotes:

This logo represents a young mind working hard at work getting his education. This logo says to me that no matter who you are or where you have been, but as long as you continue to stay focused on the task at hand, you will be able to achieve any of your goals. (Student 49)

A guy looking at something or writing something. Logo represents study hard and do work. It says to me that I should do my work diligently. (Student 23)

Participants recognized the athlete in the image is studying and determined.

It represents working hard to better yourself, determination, and the grind. (Student 52)

Hard work, work hard. A student doing work in a classroom. He is focused on the paper/project whatever it is he is doing. The logo represents to me an athlete that is studying. "Student-Athlete" comes to mind. (Student 44)

Participants (23/88 = 26%) reported that the athlete in the image is a hard worker and determined to succeed (see Table 1).

Scholar-Baller Term Themes

Three major themes emerged which are descriptive of the participants' ($N = 75$) perceptions of the *Scholar-Baller* term: (a) *Amazing Scholar & Exceptional Athlete*, (b) *Top Student*, and (c) *Student-Athlete* (see Table 2).

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of the Term "Scholar-Baller:" Major Themes: Descriptive Percentages of Transcripts

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Sample Quotes
Amazing Scholar & Exceptional Athlete	55	73%	<i>They are high achievers and are able to balance school with sports and do well in both.</i>
Top Student	24	32%	<i>Since the word scholar is first it means that academics is actually a little more important than basketball.</i>
Student-Athlete	17	23%	<i>Student-athlete at the collegiate level particularly referring to men's basketball or football.</i>

Note. *N* = 75. Please keep in mind that participant transcripts ranged from one to three sentences. Each of the transcripts included several key concepts that coincide with the major themes of the study. Very few participant responses exclusively coincided with only one theme.

Amazing scholar and exceptional athlete. The theme *Amazing Scholar & Exceptional Athlete* includes participants who perceived the *Scholar-Baller* term to represent an athlete who excels both athletically and academically. Participants also reported that the term represents an overachiever, as the following participants' quotes illustrate:

It represents the meaning of two concepts that traditionally do not go together. A scholar, a studious individual, is a direct contrast to a baller, who one would think would fit more of a "jock." Merging both would bring together the best of both worlds within educational institutions; an athlete who also has good grades and superior intellect. (Student 63)

It represents the integration of the urban environment within professional and collegiate marketing. The term baller has many meanings and can take on different connotations. This logo seems to be hinting that it is cool to be dedicated to class and sports and those who can do both are "Ballers." (Student 47)

This logo represents people both men and women who excel at the respective sport they participate in, but also in the classroom. They can perform both on and off the field as well in and out of the classroom. They are high achievers and can balance school with sports and do well in both. (Student 13)

Participants endorsed the term to represent the concept of excellence.

This logo represents an organization that represents talented students who wish to excel in their academics. (Student 16)

It represents an athlete that can excel on the field and in the classroom as well. The phrase itself also has a ring to it. Student-athletes that can perform in the classroom are becoming more needed. (Student 20)

This is for college athletes who have above a certain GPA. It's for excellence in the classroom, as well as being an athlete. (Student 35)

Participants ($55/75 = 73\%$) perceived the term to represent a balanced student-athlete who achieves both in academics and athletics (see Table 2).

Top student. The theme *Top Student* involved participants who viewed the *Scholar-Baller* term as being related solely to education. They believed the term depicts an excellent scholar and one who displays great academic performance, as the following participants' quotes illustrate:

The academic all-star, he who does not have limits. The guy who pushed his career every day to be better. (Student 26)

It represents to me a slogan to get athletes to be scholars, to get help with school, and to help with better grades and getting a degree. (Student 17)

The logo says to me that education is the key to success. If you're well educated you will go far in life. (Student 48)

Scholar baller is an athlete that studies and it says to me that they care about learning. (Student 73)

This pretty much is stating that one possess the ability to be great at the books. A great student can really be a baller. Down the road, the individual who works hard in the books, will be ballin so to say. (Student 60)

Participants ($24/75 = 32\%$) perceived the *Scholar-Baller* term to represent a top-notch student (see Table 2).

Student-athlete. The theme of *Student-Athlete* consisted of participants' responses, which acknowledged that the *Scholar-Baller* term is just another term for student-athlete. Participants made no reference to the term student-athlete being perceived as neither good nor bad. Consider the following three comments.

Student-athlete at the collegiate level particularly referring to men's basketball or football. (Student 52)

To me this logo represents a group of student-athletes. However, this logo says to me that this group is casual and laid back by using a slang term like "baller." I would not want to join or be part of this group because I think the casual title would look unprofessional on a resume. (Student 50)

To me it represents a scholar and a baller. Someone who is an athlete as well as a student. (Student 46)

Participants (17/75 = 23%) perceived the term *Scholar-Baller* to represent a student-athlete (see Table 2).

Discussion

The current study made important contributions to the research literature on marketing, sport marketing, and sports studies. First, the current paper answers the call in the literature to use more qualitative methodological approaches when studying brands and logos. Second, the participants in the study unpacked unique perceptions, feelings, and emotions about academic/athletic representations related to student-athlete imagery in American culture. For example, participants in the current study articulated responses that the two academic/athletic logos implicitly or explicitly elicited messages that represent that "school is cool," studying is a positive attribute, and that educational success is part of the representations.

Conversely, the term student-athlete over time does not always convey these messages, and there is research that supports the history of the term student-athlete not being based on the academic success of student-athletes (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005) and can even have a negative impact on identity (Stone, 2012). This key finding from the current study is that academic/athletic logos that are not stereotypical and counter the cultural myths about athletic participants (Beezley, 1985; Harrison, Bukstein, & Lawrence, 2015; Long, 1991) create a broader and even more positive discourse about college athlete perceptions.

Third, the lovemarks theory has not been applied to academic/athletic logos research; this is just the beginning of the analysis in this area. However, as mentioned earlier, there are tenets of this theory that fit the current research and more specifically, the academic/athletic logos elicited in this current paper. Lastly, an important contribution is that college students (several who played high school sports) were allowed a voice. Hence, college students who were business majors were provided an opportunity to respond to the photo-elicitation method by expressing their perceptions and thoughts about the logos in the current study. This is important not only for the growth of knowledge, but also because college students are the peers of student-athletes who influence the

socialization of student-athletes on campus, at games, and within other social contexts. College students' responses have been found to be concurrent with research on student-athletes (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Harrison, Lawrence, & Bukstein, 2011; Lawrence, Harrison, & Stone, 2009).

It should be noted that not all college students in the current study analyzed the academic/athletic photo-elicitations in a positive way and do not parallel the vast evidence that supported the representations of *Thinkman* and *Scholar-Baller*. The specific response that questioned the quality of professionalism with the two images in the study warrants some explanation:

To me this logo represents a group of student' athletes. However, this logo says to me that this group is casual and laid back by using a slang term like "baller." I would not want to join or be part of this group because I think the casual title would look unprofessional on a résumé.

Interestingly, student-athletes with *Scholar-Baller* status have leveraged the term on their résumés and in interviews in a way that is compelling and allows them to differentiate their personal and professional brands. This differentiation is important when considering the history of the "dumb jock" stereotype and other perceived attributes of the athlete. As some scholars have pointed out, "brand personality is an essential construct for a brand's image and can help a brand to differentiate itself in the marketplace" (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013, p. 19). This is also why Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) found, "[i]nterestingly, excitement and competence, two dimensions that emerged in the analysis as defining brand personality dimensions of athletic and academic logos, had the strongest, significant positive correlation among other dimensions in the sample" (p. 29). This is important when considering the current study and future research on academic/athletic logos, which will be articulated in the next section. The reason this is important is that excitement and competence can co-exist within a logo and specific to the current study – school (competence) can go with sports (excitement).

Thus, the current study has in part answered the call by Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) that:

Future research needs to incorporate other elements of the university brand such as tag line, influential university figures, and colors, for more generalizable results. Specific to athletic branding in universities, consideration should be given to the influence of the mascot, coach's reputation, star players, and team success. (p. 30)

Future Research, Limitations, and Recommendations

The current study analyzed student perceptions of two academic/athletic representations related to logos, words, and imagery with the term student-athlete. However, the study was limited to only business majors at one single-institution.

In terms of future research, it may be beneficial to replicate the current study with college students at both private and public institutions, different majors and undergraduate minors, and different geographical locations that extend beyond the southeast United States. Specific to the student-athlete cultures, researching how the two academic/athletic logos in the current study elicit

responses from student-athletes at the youth, high school, community college, university and even the professional athletic domain would give us a greater understanding of identity in the context of branding and marketing.

Furthermore, examining student-athletes themselves in terms of their self-perceptions of logos, words, and representations of the term/imagery of “student-athlete” has the potential to move the needle in terms of understanding concepts of the “self” according to Phau and Lau (2000):

Researchers have been exploring many issues and concepts which the brand personality influences. 1) self-concept, 2) self-congruity and 3) self-expression. These concepts have direct influence between the concept of ‘self’ and the preferred brand personality of consumers. They are the core issues towards reconciling the fact that the brand personality can enhance the identity and equity of a brand. (p. 57)

In terms of moving beyond the traditional marketing and sport marketing frameworks, psycholinguistic theories might also be helpful in terms of unpacking how logos related to student-athletes impact cultural perceptions, both self and those external to the student-athlete identity. With this in mind, it may be informative to build from and link to the literature on advertising and bilingual populations in terms of developing consumer research (Noriega & Blair, 2008). Bilingual and bicultural populations look for cues and nuances that tap into their cultural identity and value systems in macro- and micro-level ways.

The current study informs some recommendations in terms of best practices for athletic departments and sporting programs in American higher education. One major recommendation is to engage coaches in how they present academic and athletic messages (not just those in partnership with *Scholar-Baller* but in general or with other organizations with academic/athletic content and messages). Marian University in Indiana is one example of a college athletics program that integrates the Knight Football program core values with the *Thinkman* logo and the term *Scholar-Baller*. The head coach, Mark Henninger, has been a partner with *Scholar-Baller* since 2013. All players with a 3.0 or higher GPA wear a helmet sticker, which shows the *Thinkman* logo with the term *Scholar-Baller* written across the logo. Coach Henninger emphasizes three core values through his overall mission statement for the team that relate to the two academic/athletic logos elicited in the current study. The first illustrates the privilege to wear the academic/athletic logo; every player must earn this same privilege and status. Additionally, the logo represents pride in the classroom in terms of doing one’s best with academic performance. More research is needed to investigate and document how other coaches, teams, and athletic programs integrate their core values into the language and representation of the *Thinkman* logo and the term *Scholar-Baller*.

In the final analysis, the current study attempted to make strides that parallel this concept in terms of how two logos and all their potential meanings were perceived to be related to academics and athletics. This is a fruitful area for scholars and practitioners across disciplines related to marketing and sport marketing, and this topic deserves more scholarly attention. This study provides a foundational analysis upon which future research can build to better understand perceptions of the *Scholar-Baller* brand within both the student-athlete community and the wider campus community as a whole.

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