

BIG TEN, BIG IMPACT: THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON'S MOVE
TO THE BIG TEN CONFERENCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON
INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING AND RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

by

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As higher education becomes more competitive, universities must adopt innovative strategies beyond academics to appeal to prospective students. Athletic programs reach broad audiences through media coverage, social media engagement, and national sporting events. This visibility plays a significant role in shaping an institution's brand identity and in influencing students' college decisions. This research uses a content analysis of university marketing materials during the transition and semi-structured interviews with professional staff and current students. Focusing on the University of Oregon's transition to the Big Ten Conference, this study explores how the university leveraged the move to broaden perceptions, increase visibility, and reinforce institutional identity. As the landscape of higher education and collegiate athletics continues to evolve, the findings highlight how transitional periods can offer opportunities to enhance institutional branding.

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Terminology

Throughout this thesis, the University of Oregon is referred to interchangeably as “UO,” “Oregon,” and “the university,” depending on the context and tone. Similarly, the Big Ten Conference may appear as “Big Ten,” “Big 10,” “BIG” or “the conference,” reflecting the different styles used across institutional materials. The term “Oregon Brand” is used to describe the university’s overall brand identity as expressed through athletics, marketing content, and institutional narratives. In the context of U.S. collegiate athletics, a conference refers to a group of universities that compete against one another in organized sports and often collaborate in areas like media rights, scheduling, and academic alliances. Conference realignment refers to the process of a collegiate institution moving from one athletic conference to another. These moves are often driven by financial motivations, media considerations, institutional goals, and increased visibility.

Background

The Big Ten Conference, originally named the “Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives,” was founded in 1896, becoming the first collegiate athletic conference (Mandel, 2023). Collegiate athletic conferences were created because there was a need to geographically organize intercollegiate football games to allow teams to travel without disrupting student’s academic pursuits. In modern times, conferences determine: “1) scheduling and tournaments, 2) economy of scale when negotiating television deals and media rights, and 3) member revenue sharing” (Kramer, 2016, p. 342).

The wave of conference realignment that took place in the early 2010s was presumed to have been a result of the Big Ten’s desire to add two members in 2009. The potential for movement in the Big Ten compelled other conferences to consider expansion of their own conferences and retain their current institutions. The Big Ten’s growth was likely spurred by a desire to expand its media market (Tribous, 2011). Recently, there has been another wave of conference realignment. On July 21, 2021, reports broke out that the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma were hoping to leave the Big 12 Conference (Big 12) and join the Southeastern Conference (SEC). This date marks the beginning of another massive change in the intercollegiate athletic landscape. On June 30, 2022, the Big Ten’s Council of Presidents/Chancellors (COP/C) voted to admit the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC). About a year later, on August 4, 2023, the council voted to accept the University of Oregon and the University of Washington effective August 2, 2024. This study focuses on the University of Oregon’s move from the Pac-12 Conference to the Big Ten Conference, offering insights into the larger trends reshaping collegiate brands.

Introduction

On August 2, 2024, the University of Oregon officially joined the Big Ten Conference, not only shifting the university's future athletic opponents, but also impacting the perception of UO as a large, public research institution and as a college option for prospective students. The potential of this athletic realignment to impact university communication, beyond athletics, led me to try and answer the question: How has the University of Oregon's move to the Big Ten Conference influenced its branding strategy and enrollment efforts?

As Rob Mullens, UO's Athletic Director, said in an official press release,

“Today is a landmark day for the University of Oregon, as we officially join the Big Ten Conference with great pride and excitement. This move continues our tremendous upward trajectory as a university and highlights the power of the Oregon brand. The Ducks have always been synonymous with innovation and a relentless pursuit of excellence, and joining the premier athletic conference in the nation is a testament to our unwavering commitment to these values. Our membership in the Big Ten Conference opens a new chapter for Oregon Athletics filled with boundless opportunities and potential. Our student-athletes will now have the chance to compete against the best of the best, and they will be exposed to a broader audience that can create new opportunities for them. Our competitive landscape is enhanced, and the Big Ten Conference enriches the academic and athletic experiences for University of Oregon student-athletes” (University of Oregon, 2024).

Literature Review

The Oregon Brand

The University of Oregon's official brand framework provides insight into how the institution conceptualizes its identity, values, and messaging priorities. According to the University of Oregon's Brand Guide, the Oregon Brand is "one of the most recognizable college brands in the nation." It is more than a logo or font, "it is the stories we tell, the change we make, and commitment to our mission." The University Communications reports,

"This site provides invaluable resources and guidelines for effectively representing and promoting our institution's brand. Whether you are a faculty member, student, staff member or external partner, this website is designed to empower you with the knowledge and tools necessary to maintain consistency, uphold policy, and build our visual identity across all university communications. Amplifying and protecting our brand is a shared responsibility; by adhering to these branding guidelines, we collectively strengthen our brand presence, enhance our reputation, and ensure a unified and compelling representation of our university's mission, values, and achievements."

As a tier-one research university, the UO is guided by a commitment to innovation, collaboration, research, academic excellence, environmental stewardship, and the values of an inclusive community. Communications must be appropriate, applicable, and delivered in timely ways that are meaningful for each key audience. The University's key audiences are students, faculty and staff, alumni, parents and family members, donors, and media.

Branding in Higher Education

For service-sectors such as higher education, crucially require strong branding since, unlike product-based industries, there is no tangible product for consumers to associate with the brand (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). As universities become increasingly competitive,

branding has evolved into a strategic practice, influencing an institution's identity, image, and competitiveness. In this context, branding significantly impacts prospective students' decision-making processes. Despite relatively similar academic offerings, branding allows universities to create a unique identity (Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024).

In modern society, higher education is often viewed as a business where students and institutions engage in a consumer-supplier relationship. While some critics argue that the commercialization of higher education undermines its integrity, many researchers view the marketization of higher education as a strategic effort to gain a competitive advantage (Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024). As Snadrou & Haoucha (2024) note, the concept of brand image goes beyond simple customer perceptions, it combines both rational and emotional factors that influence students' selection of a university. This complex interaction shapes the perceived image of an institution.

Effective university branding requires the answers to questions like “Who are we really? What do we want? Where are we going?” These answers then need to inform all internal and external communications (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). It is important that what a university stands for is closely aligned by how they are perceived.

A strong brand is an essential part of the marketing strategy for colleges and universities, whose survival depends on external stakeholders. University brand managers and marketing directors benefit from understanding how consumers interact with their brand as this knowledge supports the development of more effective recruiting material, advertisements, and other marketing efforts (Watkins & Gozenback, 2013).

A university's brand is typically easily observable; it is expressed using vision statements, visual designs, and core values (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). Alessandri et al. (2006)

highlights the role of visual identity in university branding, emphasizing that a university's identity often combines its academic and athletic characteristics. Watkins & Gozenback (2013) found that when considering brand personality, academic logos are most often associated with competence while athletic logos are most often associated with excitement.

Alessandri (2007) emphasizes that an organization's identity is reflected in its visual presentation, including its name, logo, tagline, and color scheme. A logo is a key differentiator in the marketplace as it allows consumers to recognize the organization's identity. For universities, visual identity includes the perceptions of both internal and external audiences (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2007). A strong, distinctive visual identity can influence stakeholders' perceptions of the university's uniqueness (Alessandri et al., 2007)

Ali-Choudhury et al. (2008) found that marketing and communication directors identified ten main elements of a university brand that prospective students consider when deciding on which institution to attend. These elements include the university's educational identity, location, employability of graduates, visual imagery, and ambience. University marketing directors and managers are considered key to an institution's brand because they decide on an institution's brand identity and maintain the consistency of the brand after it is established (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2008). Jevons (2006) highlights that the more closely aligned a student's values, goals, and attitudes are with an institution, the more likely they will continue at that institution. Jevons (2006) also describes the 'virtuous cycle,' where a university's brand is a crucial factor in supporting applicants self-selecting an institution, meaning they will only apply to organizations with values that align with their own.

Big Ten Branding

Athletic programs serve as a marketing tool for universities because of their ability to increase name exposure, recognition, and number of applicants. Modern students are searching for more than just academics, they are looking for the ‘college experience’ which includes extracurricular activities like big sporting events (Trenkamp, 2009).

The Big Ten Conference exemplifies the power of athletics in university branding. Comprising 18 world-class universities, the Big Ten boasts over 400 teams and more than 12,000 student-athletes across 28 sports. The conference’s brand is built around academic and athletic excellence, diverse talent, and an extensive fan base. The Big Ten’s reach extends nationwide, spanning major media markets and creating unparalleled brand exposure. With 9.4 million alumni and a fan base of over 44.6 million, the Big Ten’s presence is felt across the country, from New York to Southern California. Corporate partnerships offer strategic integrations and creative advertising opportunities that amplify brand visibility, leveraging events like the Football Championship Game and NCAA Basketball Tournaments to further strengthen the conference brand (Big Ten Conference).

Methodology

This thesis uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate how the University of Oregon's move to the Big Ten Conference has influenced institutional branding and recruitment efforts. The research integrates qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the strategic shifts within the university and key stakeholder perceptions. I used a content analysis to analyze the University's branding and marketing materials during the transition to the Big Ten Conference, which involved looking at activations, social media campaigns, official websites, and press releases. The goal of this method was to identify common themes in the messaging and imagery and then determine if those themes align with discussion with UO marketers and students. This will allow for better understanding of how the university's branding strategy has evolved to leverage the new athletic conference.

Interviews with University Communications staff aimed to understand the strategy behind marketing decisions. The interview method went through the IRB exemption process. I recruited interview participants through email. I conducted two semi-structured interviews with professional staff members from University Communications at the University of Oregon, referred to here as Marketer A and Marketer B to maintain anonymity. Both individuals were identified as key contact by multiple staff within the department when I inquired about who could best speak to the university's branding and communication strategy around conference realignment.

Interviews with current University of Oregon students aimed to understand the student perceptions of these changes. I spoke with five current University of Oregon students, referred here as Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, and Student E. With a student population of about 23,000, it is important to acknowledge that the five students I interviewed do not represent

the student population. Additionally, I used a convenience sample for interviewing students which has the potential to be more biased than other sample types.

Despite outreach to Student Services and Enrollment Management, I did not receive a response. Additionally, I did not interview staff within Athletics Communication. Marketer A and Marketer B offer valuable perspectives around brand strategy as the central communications office; however, the limited number of interview participants is a limitation of this study. The absence of input from Athletics and Enrollment Management makes it difficult to fully understand how different areas on campus contribute to, interpret, or leverage the university's brand.

Results

The themes that were prevalent in my discussions and analysis were the strategic separation of athletic and academic messaging, athletics as a gateway to institution identity, the University of Oregon brand as an interconnected ecosystem, and conference realignment as a brand amplifier and recruitment tool.

Strategic Separation of Athletic and Academic Messaging

There are numerous people at the University of Oregon that work in marketing in different capacities and for different departments. Individual units within the institution, like Student Services and Enrollment Management, Schools and Colleges, and the library, focus on departmental goals rather than the entire institution. The role of University Communications is to create the tools and direction that support the institution as a whole and the individual units. According to the University Communications, “We elevate the University of Oregon’s local relevance, national competitiveness, and global recognition by creating and implementing cohesive, integrated, targeted, and proactive marketing, communications, and media relations efforts” (University Communications, 2024).

While University Communications and Athletics Communications often work together, there is a separation between the content that each group produces. The University of Oregon’s official social media accounts, primarily Instagram, served as a launch point for the university, especially when trying to engage current students and alumni. The University Communications department manages accounts @uoregon and @callmeaduck while the Athletic Department controls @goducks and @theoregonduck accounts. Marketer B said that when they started their job, the lanes were not clearly defined:

“I’d noticed our accounts sometimes would post the same content that they would, and it felt like a little kind of dilution of our audience. So, what I discussed with them is really defining lanes of what’s @goducks versus what’s @uoregon again, and where we kind of landed was @goducks is the athletic performance. That’s on the field, those are our student athletes, it’s kind of those incredible moments and great content that you see during various games from all of our different teams. @uoregon’s lane is talking about the environment around that, so it’s the fan experience who are the students, alumni, general community who come, they love our teams and are here to support our student athletes.”

To examine how each department communicated the transition to the Big Ten Conference, I conducted a content analysis of the @goducks and @uoregon Instagram accounts from July to October 24. In total, I examined 17 posts, 10 posts from the @goducks account and 7 posts from the @uoregon account. These posts were selected based on their relevance to the conference realignment and institutional branding. **Appendix D** presents these posts, coded by date, account, visual description, caption, theme, and tone. This analysis shows how the University of Oregon communications teams used digital storytelling, specifically through social media, to frame the transition as a momentous occasion, focusing on institutional pride, identity, and engagement. This side-by-side analysis allows us to see the different strategies that @uoregon and @goducks use to maintain engagement on their respective digital channels. @uoregon emphasizes themes of community, inclusivity, and pride through excited and humorous tones. Comparatively, @goducks emphasizes performance, tradition, and team identity through bold and energetic tones.

Athletics as a Gateway to Institutional Identity

For many American university athletics, specifically football, are a source of pride, recognition, and success. The University of Oregon is no different. In Eugene, OR athletics introduce many students to the university and become a primary reason they choose to attend. Jenny Li Fowler hosts a podcast called “Confessions of a Higher Ed Social Media Manager”

where she sits down with individuals in the higher education social media space to learn about the successes and failures of the complex social media ecosystem. At the American Marketing Association Symposium for Higher Education, Jenny sat down with Jesse Summers, the Director of Social Media and Brand at the University of Oregon, to discuss the university's move to the Big Ten Conference in an episode titled, "Live at AMA: UO Turns Conference Transition into Campus-Wide Momentum." The key takeaways from the conversation according to the episode's description were leveraging athletic milestones for academic storytelling, the power of collaboration in higher ed social media, the value of research and planning, resilience in the face of change, and authenticity in social media management. Summers highlighted the use of research data to inform campaign strategies:

"We've had a few studies over the years, just perception surveys of the institution and other things that have shown when people think about the University of Oregon, typically one of the top things they think of is athletics. Another usually highly associated one is Nike. So, for us, making this transition was really an opportunity. We knew that people already thought this about us so how could we use this milestone to be more than just athletics, and often in some people's minds, just football. So how can we make it about all of our sports teams and also more than just sports? How can we use this as an opportunity to shine a light on our academics and our research?"

At the UO, athletics is the front door of the university, grabbing the attention of audiences and holding them captive. As current UO President Karl Scholz said at a board of trustees meeting in December of 2024, "The success of one part of the university is success for the whole" (Camhi, 2024). Marketer A further emphasized this point during our interview by discussing how one of the biggest goals for the department was to broaden perceptions during the transition:

"I often say, football is the appetizer, but research is the dinner, right? So, we got to find ways to give them dinner and sometimes you've just you feed them the appetizer and you also bake it in...the idea really here is to sort of broaden perceptions. You might know us for this, but did you also know we did that? So that was one goal. I would say the awareness piece that we talked about, sort of

increases that awareness of our strengths. So, it's one thing to have you think about us differently, but it's a whole other thing to make that pile of people that think that bigger. And so, we really did want to kind of increase that awareness, increase the number of people that knew about us, that knew our brand.”

The Oregon Duck’s Big Ten Road Trip was an example of using athletics, specifically The Duck’s connection to athletics, to introduce the world to the University of Oregon. The Oregon Duck’s BIG Road Trip series used humor and storytelling to humanize the transition and build familiarity with the new conference. “Bags packed, mostly. Route instructions printed. Phone at 20 percent. The Oregon Duck is ready for a road trip! Your favorite mascot is headed out on a cross-country road trip to meet all his new friends in the Big Ten. Follow The Duck’s journey as he visits stadiums, learns about traditions, and introduces Duck fans to our new (and a couple of old) competitors” (Oregon Duck’s BIG Road Trip, 2024).

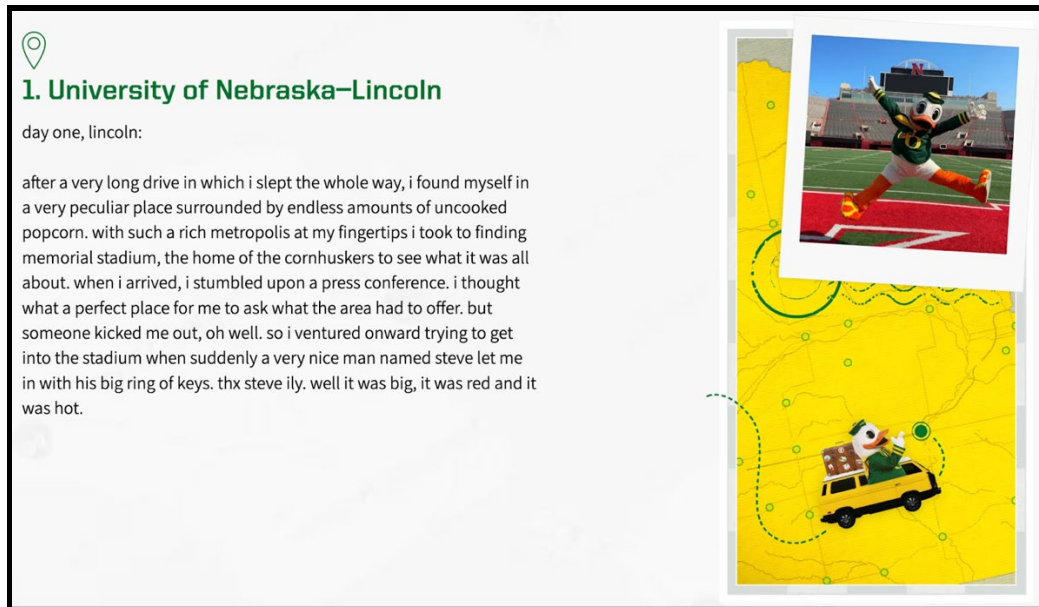


Figure 1: The Duck's Road Trip Journal Entry

This image is taken from the Oregon Duck's BIG Road Trip page on the University of Oregon's website. This page contains a journal entry from each stop of the road trip.

Additional photos and captions were posted on @theoregonduck, the Duck's official Instagram account. User comments show high engagement and emotional investment including, "I wait for these posts everyday. Legendary.," "Oh okay when he said every stadium he meant EVERY," and "Anxiously awaiting your arrival to Penn state!" (Theoregonduck, 2024). This trip allowed for a shared experience within many community groups. The Oregon Duck is a beloved mascot, not only for the University of Oregon community, but also nationally. The NFL (2015) ranked The Duck as the best college mascot in 2015 and the Bleacher Report ranked him number one in 2018 (Kaufmann, 2018).

University Communications leveraged different events throughout the fall to continue introducing the University of Oregon to the world. The top five matchup between Oregon and Ohio State in October that included a visit from ESPN's College Game Day coming to Eugene was one of those events. Marketer B reported,

“The Ohio State game was huge. We partnered with Ohio State to do a reel with mini mike on the street interviews. I had established a relationship with Ohio State several years ago and we had on and off discussions about what are you doing for this? What's the strategies coming up? So, we had a lot of trust built and it felt like a nice way to be part of the Big 10 and highlight the university next to a well-established brand that could elevate both of us and really capitalize on this moment for both of our institutions.”

The video was titled “The start of a BIG friendship: Ohio State and Oregon!” and included University of Oregon and Ohio State students answering questions about the other institution. The questions were: What is Ohio State’s mascot? What is the University of Oregon’s mascot? What’s your favorite thing about living in Columbus? What’s the best part about living in Eugene? Who would you say is the most notable Ohio State alum? Who would you say is the most famous Oregon alum? Who do you think is going to win the game this Saturday, Ohio State or the University of Oregon? (OhioStateUniversity, 2024, Oct. 10).

Brands as Interconnected Ecosystem

While the University of Oregon’s move to the Big 10 Conference is often thought of as a purely athletic decision, there are multiple ways that this transition influences the entire university. The University of Oregon’s move included joining the Big Ten Academic alliance which “opened opportunities in research and education areas as the university hopes to be a leader in academia among other schools in the alliance.” One resource that the UO community has gained since the transition is access to the BIG Collection which holds more than 25% of prints in North America (Fowler, 2024).

Marketer A described the University’s brand as an ecosystem that evolves through changes but maintains its core values:

“I think of a brand as kind of this like living thing, right? Like it's an organism, it's an ecosystem, it's always moving, and brands are really just at their core, the

perceptions and the feelings and the nostalgia people have for the thing or the company of the place and the product. and so those things can move, certainly, as, you know, perceptions change or as people perceive things differently.”

The launch of the UO Connections game was an attempt to illustrate this interconnectedness to the University’s audiences. On August 2, 2024, University Communications launched the UO Connections game to highlight both university tradition and the university's new identity as a Big Ten Institution. The game was based on the New York Times Game, Connections, which is a category-matching puzzle.

According to OregonNews (2024), Duck fans and the UO community were encouraged to test their knowledge “about Oregon athletics, academic programs, the Big Ten, other schools in the conference, the Big Ten Academic Alliance and more.” Throughout the ten weeks of the game, the categories highlighted UO Athletics 13 times, Big Ten Athletics 4 times, Research and Academic Collaboration 4 times, UO specific information 14 times, and general Big Ten information 5 times. The results of coding the game themes can be found in **Appendix C**. The UO Connections Game One can be seen unsolved in **Figure 1** and solved in **Figure 2**. Marketer B described the goals of the UO Connections activation was to “try to help illustrate that there's so many different pieces that go into what the University of Oregon brand is and who we are as an institution.”

Student C hopes that the University of Oregon’s move to the Big Ten conference will allow the university to be recognized for reasons other than football, saying “I feel like our university should be more recognized for academics because I think we’re definitely a sports school.” This hope aligns closely with the goals of University Communications.

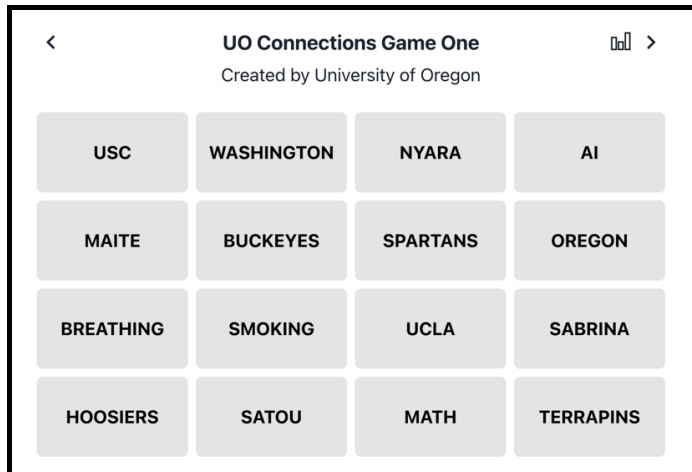


Figure 2: Unsolved UO Connections Game One

This is a UO Connections game before it has been solved. Players categorize 16 words into groups of four based on a common theme or connection.

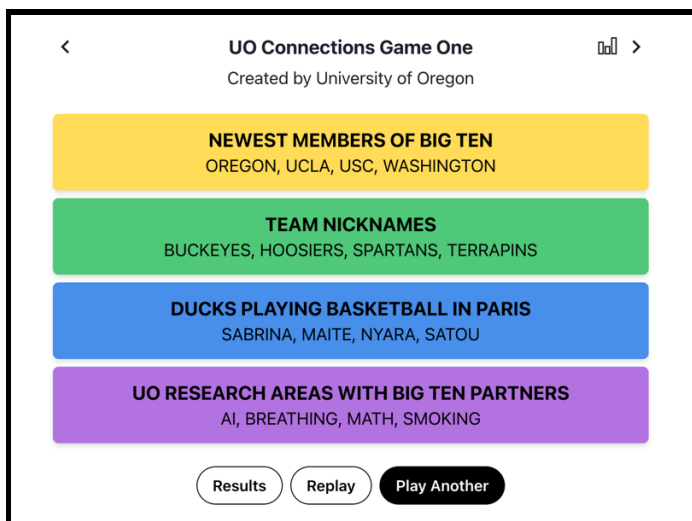


Figure 3: Solved UO Connections Game One

This is a UO Connections game after it has been solved with the revealed categories.

Student A noticed an increase in collaborations beyond academics since the transition compared to the when UO was in the Pac-12:

“I like to say we’ve noticed more collabs with the other schools. Like, I might be a little biased, but like, I really only saw us pairing up with Oregon State, like, we kind of are an archnemesi in Washington, ever really approached that. And then besides that, we’re not really near anyone else to do that, but I think that this year

just the scale of other schools are so far away that we almost have to like remind ourselves that we're with them. And because of that we've partnered with them, like, I know we've done some joint research studies with Ohio State. We actually did some Ohio State cross social media stuff when we played them the first time. So, I think the sheer nature of that we're so far from each other, we like force ourselves to work together versus in the past with the Pac 12. It's like, oh, they're close and it doesn't really matter. So, I think almost like the exaggerated distance forces us to be working together a little more closely."

As Student A said, collaborations with fellow Big Ten universities are transcending athletics.

The Oregon-Ohio State collaboration video shows how the University of Oregon is utilizing co-branding partnerships to strengthen visibility and credibility in the conference. While the University of Oregon has always partnered with other institutions for research, the move to the Big Ten Conference will allow for more opportunities for researchers to collaborate. UO-Big Ten teams are making discoveries to help babies breathe, kids learn, and smokers kick the habit. University of Oregon Neuroscience professor, Elliot Berkman, and Ohio State University Psychology professor, Kentaro Fujita, are working together to find new ways to help smokers quit through the project, "Construal Level as a Novel Pathway for Affect Regulation and Cancer Control" (McDonald, 2024).

Conference Realignment as a Brand Amplifier and Recruitment Tool

Conversations with University of Oregon marketers and current students revealed that the UO's move to the Big Ten was an opportunity to bring the existing university brand to a national level rather than shifting to fit in with a new group of institutions. Marketer A said,

"I think moving to the Big Ten was an interesting thing for the university and I think it grouped us with a set of peers that I would describe as more prestigious, although they have a really long history, and their conference has been around forever. It really was a privilege to kind of be amongst that group and be a part of that group. and I do think there's a part of that that elevates our reputation and maybe how others perceive us. It also exposed us to new audiences that maybe otherwise wouldn't have been thinking about us. I don't know that our core brand

pillars, the things, the stories, the way we think about ourselves, have changed. I think it's more the company we keep now and perhaps how that will evolve as people start to you know build perceptions of our brand and of our institution.”

Marketer B agreed, “No, I don't think anything in terms of the identity really changed. I think how a lot of things that we were doing beforehand are still the things we're doing now. and just had new opportunities to express them in different ways.”

In 2023, the Vice President for Student Services and Enrollment Management, Dr. Roger Thompson, discussed how this move will bring in more international and out-of-state and students, specifically from the Midwest. The same year, Scholz maintained that same belief as the Ducks finished a successful football season, “Athletics has a positive impact on awareness of universities, particularly for prospective students who live outside the state. Right now, people are looking. I feel very good about where we are and where we are headed” (Cyr, 2023). Student B’s thoughts align with these university leaders:

“I think it would. I think, looking at schools that have more of a big presence is something that I looked at, even when I did apply when it was Pac 12, but I think now, it’s like it’s been pushed more, advertised more, and I think it, like, looks like a great place to go, so I would probably apply for sure.”

Discussion

As the University of Oregon transitioned to the Big Ten Conference, the University Communications department was ready to capitalize on the national visibility that was hitting the Ducks and use the momentum to broaden perceptions around the Oregon Brand. The department aimed to highlight all the pieces that make up the University of Oregon in addition to athletics, including academics, research, student life, and community.

While University Communications and Athletics defined clear lanes regarding content prior to the Big Ten transition, these lanes were very important during the transition to make sure unique content was being produced from both groups. This strategic separation allows for both groups to develop unique content that aligns with what the audience is expecting to come from each account, maintaining a cohesive image while maximizing engagement. The content analysis of the @uoregon and @goducks Instagram accounts revealed that while each department leaned into the transition, the themes and tone of the content was unique.

Through the @uoregon account, University Communications heavily emphasized the Oregon Brand's core attributes of collaboration and inclusive community, building excitement around the transition for students and alumni with humor. The goal was to maintain the student and alumni audiences that they already had and broaden the perceptions of those audiences. The Athletic Department used the @goducks account to solidify the tradition and top performance that the UO teams are known for. They appeared to be using content to prove to audiences that the University of Oregon deserves to be part of such a talented and historic conference. Despite these different goals, the content's consistency between departments, platforms, and accounts was clear. This adherence to consistency aligns with Wæraas & Solbakk's (2008) research that maintaining consistency between institutional values and brand communication creates a

stronger brand identity. Both @uoregon and @goducks reinforce the university's broader attributes of innovation, community, and excellence.

The Duck's BIG Road trip emphasizes national visibility, community, and the integration of athletics into broader institutional messaging. The trip strategically used humor and personality to encourage brand engagement. As The Duck made his way across the country, the photos posed, and captions used showed the aim to capture young audiences through humorous, trendy, and youthful activations. Captions included "i like turtles," "stairs are hard," and "corn emoji," leaning into Gen Z and Gen Alphas casual and quirky communication style. These posts were relatable and served as a sharable, low-stakes entry point to engage with the UO brand. Lastly, the series also lowered the psychological distance between Oregon and new Big Ten rivals. One of the largest complaints over the West Coast schools joining the Big Ten was the distance, as most of the schools in the conference are in the Midwest along with the Big Ten Headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana. The Duck's trip, specifically the speed at which the trip was made, made each institution feel closer to each other.

While this trip appeared fun and simplistic on a surface level, it was clear that it was an intentional branding move, allowing audiences to get used to the transition while using conference realignment as a narrative arc. The story line was more than a simple logistical change, it was a journey, allowing The Duck to pave the way for community while building anticipation for the upcoming athletic seasons. This allowed for University of Oregon fans to start viewing new Big Ten schools as both rivals but also friends. The trip also increased national visibility, which was clear from the comments from the UO community, the larger Big Ten community, and others that just enjoyed the playful nature of the series.

The Ohio State-Oregon video collaboration capitalized on the upcoming football game but highlighted real students at each university and included questions beyond athletics. The video was framed as “the start of a B1G friendship,” emphasizing mutual respect between the universities. Students had the opportunity to share what they loved about the city they were living in and highlight some famous alumni from their respective institutions.

This collaboration also continued with the theme that the University of Oregon is an interconnected ecosystem made up of many pieces. It is easy to think of the Oregon Brand as simply an athletic undertaking, especially as an institution that is well known for its athletic success and its connection to Nike. However, University Communications worked hard during the transition to emphasize all the components that make up the Oregon Brand. This interconnectedness was most obviously seen through the UO Connections game. By gamifying the transition, the University of Oregon invited fans, students, and prospective students to engage with these key institutional narratives. The inclusion of information related to both athletics and the Big Ten Academic Alliance shows the effort by UO to align with both the new athletic and academic community.

Wæraas & Solbakk (2008) describe how effective branding needs to answer the questions: Who are we really? What do we want? Where are we going? All of the campaign components previously mentioned answer these questions clearly and effectively. The University of Oregon is built on the core brand attributes of innovation, collaboration, research, academic excellence, environmental stewardship, and inclusive community. Of those six core values, the only one not mentioned at some point during the transition campaign was environmental stewardship. Clearly, these core values are incredibly important to the university and spotlighting them during the transition was a key strategy in broadening perceptions.

The University of Oregon's move to the Big Ten Conference was used as a tool to amplify the Oregon Brand nationally and internationally. The goal was to be seen throughout the world as a top institution that can hold its own against other Big Ten schools, athletically and academically. While the shift did not impact UO's core brand, it did allow for an opportunity to increase university awareness and broaden the perceptions of those already aware of the university. As the literature on highlighted, brand strategy is increasingly important for attracting and retaining students. While I did not directly speak to professionals that focus on communication strategy related to recruitment and retention, my findings suggest that the University of Oregon as an institution utilized its visual identity and athletic presence to spark an emotional connection between the school and all audiences, including prospective students, current students, and alumni.

This research highlights how the University of Oregon used strategic branding campaigns to increase visibility and marketability in a competitive higher education landscape. While previous research explains why branding matters for universities, this analysis shows how the UO put those ideas into action during a major transitional period. These findings show that when branding is used strategically and in alignment with institutional identity, it can shape how audiences experience and engage with the university. It also offers insights for other institutions going through similar transitional periods. UO's case demonstrates the benefits of consistent but differentiated messaging across departments. Clear separation between Athletics and University Communications allowed group to leverage their strengths while maintaining a strong brand identity. This strategy makes it possible for athletics to serve as a gateway to broader institutional narratives like academics, community, and innovation. Institutions that want to increase visibility

or broaden perceptions should consider how embedding institutional values in content might impact audience engagement and feelings toward the institution.

The key takeaway from this research for similar institutions with strong athletic presences is that major transitions can be leveraged as branding opportunities beyond sports. The University of Oregon was able to use humorous, student-centered storytelling and cross-department collaboration to develop a logistical change into a narrative arc that emotionally engaged students, prospective students, alumni, fans, and more.

The interview data in this project is limited due to time constraints and lack of responses from potential participants. This led to limited information on the University of Oregon's move impacting recruitment efforts as I did not interview anyone from the department of Student Services and Enrollment Management as originally planned. The leadership within Student Services and Enrollment Management has shifted significantly in the last year. Dr. Roger Thompson left his position as the Vice President for Student Services and Enrollment management in July of 2024 after 14 years at the University of Oregon. Jim Brooks took over as Interim Vice President for about seven months before also leaving the UO. Jamie Moffitt then stepped in to serve as the Interim Vice President in addition to her role as the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer. Lastly, Zeel Patel started serving as the Associate Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing in July of 2024. These disruptions might be impacting the direction of the department. Additionally, it has only been about ten months since the University of Oregon officially moved to the Big Ten Conference which means it is too early to understand the long-term impacts of this transition on the brand and recruitment efforts.

While this thesis touches on recruitment efforts, it does not deeply explore the impact of conference realignment on recruitment strategy and enrollment efforts. Future research efforts could examine the impact of changing conferences on a university's recruitment strategy and how that strategy impacts enrollment. At this point, it is too early to determine how the transition will impact enrollment but that could be investigated in the future after a few enrollments' cycles pass. Additionally, further research uses more quantitative data analysis methods, followership gain, engagements, and impressions to understand how the transition and subsequent campaign's impacted awareness.

Conclusion

This thesis highlights how the University of Oregon treated its move to the Big Ten Conference not only as an athletic transition but also as a leveraging point to expand awareness around all components of the Oregon Brand. UO transformed a logistical change into a storytelling opportunity that amplified the institutional brand through strategic content development and an intentional alignment with institutional values. The university's campaigns were successful in deepening perceptions of the Oregon Brand beyond athletics to include community, academic excellence, and innovation.

While the full impact on recruitment and enrollment remains to be seen, this case shows that thoughtful brand management can proactively shape public perception and engagement during transitional periods. Future research should explore the long-term effects of conference realignment on student decision making and institutional reputation. As more universities face increased pressure to differentiate themselves and conference realignment becomes increasingly more common, the University of Oregon's approach offers a blueprint for how branding can be used to do more than simply react to change.

Appendix A

Questions for University Staff

1. How would you describe the University of Oregon's branding strategy before the move to the Big Ten Conference?
2. What role does athletics play in the university's overall branding strategy?
3. Has the visibility of the university's athletic brand changed since the conference shift? How so?
4. To what extent does athletics impact University communications?
5. How did the university's recruitment messaging or materials change after announcing the move to the Big Ten?
6. What challenges, if any, have you faced in integrating the Big Ten affiliation into the university's brand?
7. What would you consider to be measurable success in branding or recruitment since the move?
8. How do you plan to continue leveraging the Big Ten membership in future marketing and recruitment efforts?
9. What long-term impacts do anticipate from the Big Ten association?

Appendix B

Questions for University Students

1. How aware were you of the University of Oregon's move to the Big Ten when it was announced?
2. Did this move influence your perceptions of the university's athletic or academic reputation?
3. Have you noticed any changes in how the university is branded or presented since the move?
4. Do you feel that the university's branding aligns with its athletic and academic strengths?
5. If you were applying to colleges today, would the university's affiliation with the Big Ten influence your decision to attend?
6. Do you think the university's new conference affiliation will attract more students? Why or why not?
7. Do you think the Big Ten membership will provide new opportunities for students (e.g., networking, visibility, resources)?
8. What do you hope the university will gain from this conference change?

Appendix C

UO Connections Content Analysis

Themes	Answers
UO Athletics (13)	<p>Topic: <u>Ducks playing basketball in Paris</u> Words: Sabrina, Maite, Nyara, Satou</p> <p>Topic: <u>Ducks picked on third day of 2024 MLB draft</u> Words: Gordon, Thompson, Boettcher, Ayon</p> <p>Topic: Ducks wearing #10 Words: Person, Uiagalelei, Swarthout, Gould</p> <p>Topic: Beginnings of stadium names Words: Jane, PK, Hayward, Matthew</p> <p>Topic: <u>Colors to Wear to Oregon Volleyball Games</u> Words: White, Green, Yellow, Pink</p> <p>Topic: <u>Colors to Wear to Oregon Football Games</u> Words: Green, Yellow, Black, White</p> <p>Topic: <u>Spring Sports at UO</u> Words: Baseball, Golf, Softball, Track & Field</p> <p>Topic: <u>Women’s Golf 2024 Fall Competitions</u> Words: Annika, Windy, Stephens, Lake</p> <p>Topic: _____ ball (Oregon Sports) Words: Base, Basket, Volley, Soft</p> <p>Topic: Game Day Traditions in Autzen Stadium Words: Shout, Coming Home, Motorcycle Ride, Push-ups</p> <p>Topic: <u>First 4 Stops on the Duck’s Road Trip</u> Words: Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin</p> <p>Topic: <u>Stops on the Men’s Golf 2024 Fall Schedule</u> Words: Sahalee, Aldarra, Colonial, Preserve</p> <p>Topic: <u>Names of Oregon Quarterbacks Who Went Pro</u> Words: Mariota, Nix, Herbert, Fouts</p>
UO & Big Ten Athletics (4)	<p>Topic: <u>Teams Oregon football has 2-1 all-time record against</u> Words: Illini, Hoosiers, Boilermakers, Hawkeyes</p> <p>Topic: <u>First 4 Big Ten and Oregon Volleyball Matchups</u> Words: Illinois, Indiana, Ohio State, Penn State</p> <p>Topic: <u>First 4 Big Ten and Oregon Soccer Matchups</u></p>

	<p>Words: UCLA, Rutgers, Maryland, Indiana</p> <p>Topic: <u>_____ State vs Oregon Football</u> Words: Boise, Ohio, Michigan, Oregon</p>
<p>Academic Collaboration (4)</p>	<p>Topic: <u>UO Research Areas with Big Ten Partners</u> Words: AI, Breathing, Math, Smoking</p> <p>Topic: <u>Big Ten Research Partners</u> Words: Leve, Neiderhiser, Lowd, Bhat</p> <p>Topic: <u>Languages taught through Big Ten CourseShare</u> Words: Swahili, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean</p> <p>Topic: <u>Student opportunities through Academic Alliance</u> Words: Online courses, research, mentorship, networking</p>
<p>UO Specific (14)</p>	<p>Topic: <u>_____ Ducks</u> Words: Go, Sco, Pro, Law</p> <p>Topic: <u>UO CAREER Award Recipients</u> Words: Ruef, Mazzucato, Erickson, Widom</p> <p>Topic: <u>Things ducks do</u> Words: Waddle, Quack, Fly, Swim</p> <p>Topic: <u>Conductors at 2024 Oregon Bach Festival</u> Words: Whitacre, Van Veldhoven, Ioffe, Johnson</p> <p>Topic: <u>_____ Science - Degrees offered at UO</u> Words: Computer, Data, Multidisciplinary, Earth</p> <p>Topic: <u>School of Journalism and Communication Undergrad Programs</u> Words: Advertising, Journalism, Public Relations, Media Studies</p> <p>Topic: <u>Clinics at Oregon Law</u> Words: NIL, Nonprofit, USPTO, Environmental</p> <p>Topic: <u>Names of Buildings on the UO's Eugene Campus</u> Words: Gerlinger, Esslinger, Columbia, Straub</p> <p>Topic: <u>Lundquist College of Business Expertise Areas</u> Words: Entrepreneurship, Finance/Securities, Sustainable Business, Sports Business</p> <p>Topic: <u>Majors in UO School of Global Studies and Languages</u> Words: Chinese, German, Portuguese, Spanish</p> <p>Topic: <u>Names of UO Residence Halls</u> Words: Unthank, Barnhart, Carson, Justice Bean</p> <p>Topic: <u>Knight Campus Research Focus Areas</u> Words: Neural Engineering, Biomedical A.I., Medical Sensors, Biomaterials</p> <p>Topic: <u>Types of Trees on UO's Campus</u> Words: Yellow Buckeye, Coast Redwood, Grand Fir, Ponderosa Pine</p>

	<p>Topic: <u>Start of UO Libraries' Location Names</u> Words: Knight, Design, John, Mathematics</p>
<p>General Big Ten (5)</p>	<p>Topic: Newest Members of Big Ten Words: Oregon, UCLA, USC, Washington</p> <p>Topic: Team Nicknames Words: Buckeyes, Hoosiers, Spartans, Terrapins</p> <p>Topic: Big Ten schools starting with a vowel Words: Oregon, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa</p> <p>Topic: Members of Big Ten Words: Iowa, Northwestern, Rutgers, Wisconsin</p> <p>Topic: Names of Mascots in the Big Ten Words: Brutus, Sparty, Bucky, Harry</p>

Appendix D

Social Media Content Analysis: @goduck vs @uoregon

Date	Account	Description	Caption	Theme	Tone
7/22/24	goducks	The Duck sitting on grass looking out to the Indianapolis skyline	Something B1G is coming...#GoDucks	Teasing conference transition	Playful, mysterious
7/23/24	goducks	Montage of Oregon athletic history	10 days from a new era. #GoDucks	Athletic legacy meets new change	Reflective, optimistic
7/24/25	uoregon	Large inflatable duck in river	B1G-er than life. #GoDucks	Brand identity, building community	humorous
7/25/25	goducks	Video of the duck inflatable in river	Home sweet home. #GoDucks	Building community	Warm, anticipatory
7/28/24	uoregon	Video of The Duck packing for a roadtrip	Routing. Destination: new friends	Building community	Adventurous, humorous
8/2/24	goducks	Montage of Oregon athletic history	We are the Oregon Ducks. #GoDucks x @bigten	Brand identity	Bold, prideful
8/2/24	uoregon	The Oregon part of the B1G map graphic	We're on the map.	Visibility, belonging	excitement
8/2/24	uoregon	Posed photo of two students in Autzen	It's a B1G day to be a Duck.	Community, fan identity	Inclusive, excitement
8/9/24	uoregon	Posed photo of student in Autzen	B1G vibes #DuckFriday	Community, fan identity	casual, traditional
8/15/24	goducks	Photo of 3 Oregon soccer players during a game	Starting B1G @oregonsoccer picks up the W in their first game of the season	Conference debut	Competitive, celebratory
8/27/24	goducks	Video of The Duck riding a motorcycle through an agricultural landscape	Coming soon to the B1G. #GoDucks	New conference debut	Cinematic, adventurous, anticipatory
8/28/24	goducks	A close-up video of The Duck on a motorcycle	B1G, we see you. #GoDucks	New conference debut	Cinematic, adventurous, anticipatory
8/30/24	goducks	A video of a man painstakingly taking care of a football field, painting	B1G, nobody holds onto tradition like you. #MightyDifferent	Challenging tradition	Bold, humorous

		on the yard markers and trimming the grass with scissors. The Duck then comes in on the motorcycle and messes up the field, drawing an O.			
9/27/24	goducks	Posed photo of an Oregon basketball player	Let's go B1G @oregonmbb season loading... #GoDucks	Teasing conference transition	Anticipatory, confident
9/28/24	goducks	Picture of Dillon Gabriel	Might Victory. @oregonfootball claims their first ever Big Ten Conference win, defeating UCLA 34-13. #GoDucks	Athletic success	Successful
10/11/24	uoregon	Collab video asking UO and OSU students questions	The start of a B1G friendship: Oregon & Ohio State	Big Ten Collaboration	Collaborative, friendly
10/12/24	uoregon	Video of the inflatable duck on the walk to Autzen Stadium	Something B1G is here. #GoDucks	Community Building	Bold, humorous

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