A brand is a name, sign, symbol, or a combination of these used to identify and distinguish a brand from its competitors (Keller, 2003). Hence, creating a logo is one of the earliest steps for transforming an organization into a brand. A logo offers various benefits for an organization. It allows consumers to identify and differentiate the brand (Park et al., 2013) and helps brands to create positive brand associations and attitudes (Henderson & Cote, 1998). It also acts as a symbolic icon delivering an organization’s identity visually (Urde, 2003). Thus, Aaker (1991) has claimed that a logo is “the central element of brand equity, the key differentiating characteristic of a brand” (p.197).

Acknowledging its importance, logo modification has become one of the most utilized rebranding strategies in modern sport business. In fact, rebranding has been ubiquitous throughout the history of professional sport. For instance, in 1927, one of the first marketing operations of Toronto Maple Leafs under the new ownership was to redesign its logo (Hardy et al., 2012). Even with its long history, an investigation on logo redesign in the professional sport context is still limited. Considering logo change as a significant indicator of rebranding, the purpose of this study was to document all the rebranding cases accompanying logo changes in the Big Four leagues. More specifically, a content analysis was utilized to (1) identify all the rebranding cases accompanying logo redesign, (2) classify the logo redesign strategies utilized, (3) report the visual characteristics of logo redesign executed, and (4) determine design trends over time. We also examined the graphic characteristics and typology of the team logos currently being used.

Utilizing the website sportslogos.net, a database exhibiting the logo changes of sport franchises (Chu, 2015; Hedlund et al., 2018; Turner, 2015; Walsh et al., 2018), all the sport rebranding cases involving logo changes (n=726) and current logos (n=123) were analyzed. Each change was coded for redesign strategies (van Grisvan & Das, 2015), changes in design characteristics (Adir et al., 2012), logo typology (Buttle & Westoby, 2006), and sport rebranding strategies (modernization, nostalgia, regional pride, rebirth; Walsh et al., 2018). Followed by a pilot study, four coders analyzed independently through a blind coding approach (Neuendorf, 2016) after several training sessions. An external audit was performed by an independent scholar to ensure validity. Reliability for each coded variable was checked with KALPHA (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007), indicating the mean interrater reliability for each variable was higher than .80.

The result showed that most logo changes occurred during the 1990s (15%). Evolutionary rebranding (53%) was more common than revolutionary rebranding (47%), while the most popular redesign strategy was changing both symbol and color (50%). Most cases showed no change in logotype (79%) and typeface (65%). Interestingly, preferred logotypes and typefaces differed between the leagues. Regarding the rebranding strategy, rebirth (26%) was the most popular strategy utilized. For the current team logos, design characteristics also differed by the leagues. Further findings (e.g., the emergence of an emblem logo) and future study directions will be presented.