Intercollegiate athletics in the United States is a key financial enterprise for universities, generating $10.3 billion in revenue in 2019 (“Finances,” 2019), and no college sport brings in as much revenue and attracts more media attention than football. In fact, football revenue often accounts for more money than the other sports combined. Furthermore, football often generates additional supplemental benefits to universities by highlighting school spirit, evoking pride in the institution, and increasing donations from alumni and other donors. A successful football season can also increase the number of applicants attempting to enroll at the university (Anderson, 2017).

Over the years, scholars (e.g., Simmons et al., 2017) have examined intercollegiate athletics and the marketing of college sports. The majority of the work in this area has focused on the consumer (e.g., behavior, motivations, constraints), but not necessarily on the organizational or practitioner perspective of the marketing exchange. In particular, college football marketing directors and the processes used to market college football have received scant attention. This study sought to address this gap by examining the perceptions and actions of those tasked with marketing college football in one particular conference (i.e., Big Ten). The sport marketing management process (Sutton, 1987), which provided the study’s framework, notes that to market a product effectively an analysis of the organization’s internal status and environmental position needs to be conducted to set marketing goals. Once goals are set, the marketing plan should be developed with key techniques identified to ensure that the goals will be met. In addition to integrating and executing the marketing plan, the organization should record progress and have metrics in order to conduct proper evaluations. While this process has been examined in various ways over the past few decades, the analyses of sport marketing directors have mainly focused on marketers in other leagues, been primarily quantitative studies, evaluated marketing techniques, and overlooked the sport marketers’ rationale for their decision making. Thus, this qualitative study examined the process used in the marketing of college football.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with the primary football marketer from each of the 14 Big Ten universities. An interview guide was created and then confirmed via a six-person expert panel and tested through a pilot study. For the full study, interviews were completed and transcribed for thematic analysis. Data triangulation, a second coder reliability check, member checking, and peer debriefing measures were taken to ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the data and subsequent analysis.

The results revealed several emergent themes pertaining to the marketing approaches and perspectives of the conference’s football marketing directors. The themes included marketing areas of oversight, organization elements, perceived challenges, goals-and- goal development, and marketing evaluation. Each theme contained additional subthemes that helped to provide key contextual information behind the marketing process. The presentation will cover the themes, subthemes, and the theoretical and applied contributions.