

11-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Scola, Zach; Gordon, Brian; and Dwyer, Brendan (2022) "Examining Retro Merchandise Consumers in Sport: Who Prefers Throwback Merchandise and Why?," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jasm149q6p>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol14/iss3/3>

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Examining Retro Merchandise Consumers in Sport: Who Prefers Throwback Merchandise and Why?

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Abstract

Retro marketing in sport has been relied upon for years. Sport fans see more teams and leagues implement retro marketing and merchandise into marketing plans. Despite this, there is little understanding behind the success of retro marketing in sport. Therefore, this paper sought to gain a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of retro merchandise consumers and to examine the impact of two psychographic factors. Surveys collected from fans of various professional sport teams in the United States (N = 1,509) demonstrated novel findings. In this study, retro merchandise was preferred overall. Younger fans were more likely to prefer retro merchandise, and household income did not explain much of the preference. Most telling was that nostalgic proneness significantly and positively predicted a retro preference. The implications from this study should guide marketers in their usage of retro merchandise and marketing practices and lead to future practical research on the topic.

Keywords: *branding, consumer behavior, marketing, nostalgia, SOR framework*

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Introduction

To achieve sustained success in marketing, it is crucial to be at the forefront of technology and marketing trends. However, retro marketing, simply defined by Brown et al. (2013) as “brand new, old-fashioned offerings” (p. 201), may oppose this idea as marketers intentionally connect their consumers to the past. Marketers in all sectors have relied heavily on retro marketing to provide unique products and experiences for consumers. For instance, Miller Lite rebranded their canned product to their 1980’s logo and Nintendo reproduced and sold their original console to reconnect with their consumers’ past. Though the use of retro marketing practices may run counter to technological innovation, it’s implementation by marketers has often been lauded as a groundbreaking marketing approach.

Sport marketers have successfully implemented retro across all aspects of the marketing mix (Scola & Gordon, 2019). For instance, in North America, retro marketing has been used in several ways. Some instances involve team logos, such as the National Hockey League (NHL) having all its teams wear reverse-retro jerseys for the 2021 season (Ledra, 2020) and the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) Golden State Warriors rebranding with retro concepts (“Golden State Warriors,” 2010). Other tactics include directly celebrating the past, such as National Football League (NFL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football teams celebrating their 100th and 150th seasons, respectively, in 2019, or the hundreds of ballparks having turn back the clock nights across the country. Regardless of the strategy, retro marketing is commonplace throughout North American sport (Scola & Gordon, 2018; 2019).

Due to these retro trends, it is crucial for practitioners and scholars to understand consumer preference for retro offerings (Banerjee, 2016). Sport appears to be a popular vehicle for retro marketing, yet little is known about why it works so well. When trying to understand an unknown marketing phenomenon, consumer behavior research is an important first step (Malter et al., 2020). In this case, understanding what type of consumer prefers retro offerings will allow sport marketers to utilize retro practices with more accuracy and precision as well as help further the academic literature. Thus, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) gain a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of retro merchandise consumers, specifically examining: age, gender, racial/ethnic identity, and household income and (2) examine how psychographic factors, team identification and nostalgia proneness, may predict retro merchandise preference. The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ₁: To what extent do sport consumers differ demographically based on their preference for retro or modern sport merchandise?

RQ₂: To what extent does team identification and/or nostalgia proneness predict consumer preference for retro or modern sport merchandise?

Literature Review

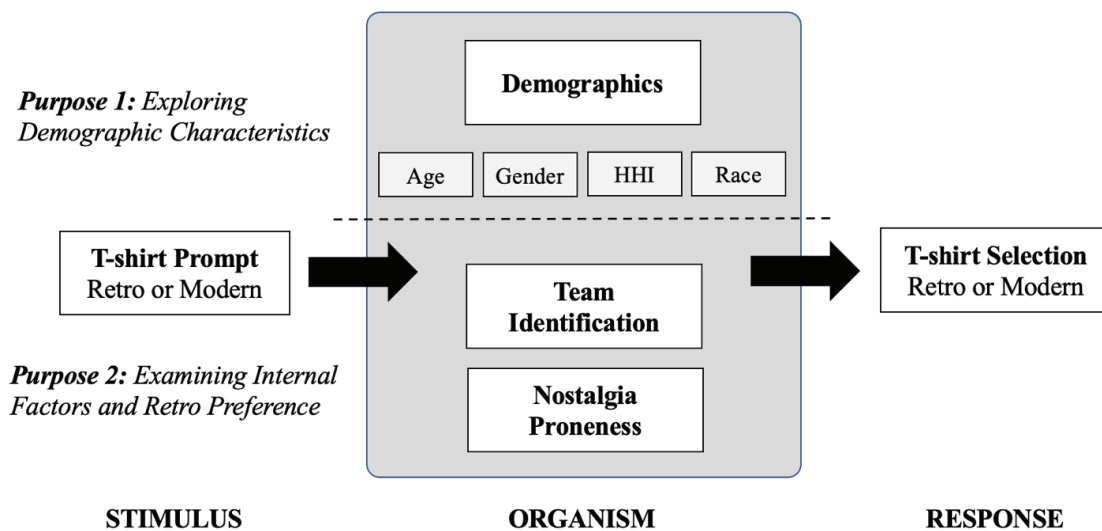
Theoretical Framework

This study was developed around the well-established Stimulus-Organism-Response framework (S-O-R). This framework has been used in multiple retro marketing in sport studies, including Scola and

Gordon (2018) and Dwyer et al. (2020). The S-O-R framework includes: the *stimulus*, as the aspect marketers can influence (i.e., logo on merchandise), the *organism*, as the characteristics that make up the individual (i.e., demographics, team identification, etc.), and the *response*, as the specific attitude or behavior which occurs (i.e., purchase intention, actual selection of product) (Vieira, 2013).

For this study, the authors manipulated the stimulus (retro/modern logoed t-shirt), measured various aspects of the sport fan participants (demographics, nostalgic proneness, team identification), and grouped them based on their response (selecting a retro/modern logoed t-shirt for a raffle). This is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1
S-O-R Framework Application



Retro Marketing and the Role of Nostalgia

Retro marketing, while paying homage to the past, must be updated to meet consumer's expectations (Brown, 2013). Retro marketing has been utilized through all aspects of the marketing mix and may hold a competitive advantage by tapping into the trust and loyalty which consumers may have towards the "old" brand (Brown et al., 2003). Companies often change their imagery using retro marketing, such as Pepsi using throwback cans for their product lines or Burger King changing their logo to a retro mark. Additionally, locations may be created with retro in mind. There are revitalized "budget theaters" that show older movies that are priced as if they are from the past as well as a brand like "Retro Fitness," a 1980s inspired national gym chain. Retro marketing has been influential in all aspects of marketing and its impact is regularly examined along with consumers' feelings of nostalgia.

Brown (2013) distinguished nostalgia from the term, retro. Nostalgia represents the primary feeling elicited from retro marketing practices. Although these terms are not synonymous, they often work in tandem. Nostalgia has evolved from its original definition in the 1600's where it was considered a sickness often diagnosed to overseas soldiers, to a more positive concept of a "longing for the past" (Batcho, 2013). Nostalgia has been found to positively impact attitudes towards a brand, elicit positive feelings toward the

brand through advertising, and lead to increased purchase intention (Phau & Marchegiani, 2011).

Retro Marketing and Nostalgia in Sport

Nostalgia is cemented as a strong aspect of a team's brand because it has been found to be a primary brand association (Ross et al., 2006). Walsh et al. (2018) found that nostalgia was one of the most prevalent reasons behind a team rebranding. Beyond this, nostalgia has been found to play a role in sport tourism among sport consumers and leagues. Indeed, it was found that consumers' understanding of a brand's heritage is heavily impacted by nostalgia (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005), and the statues around stadia connect fans with the history of their favorite teams (Stride et al., 2013).

With sport marketing, scholars have categorized retro marketing into five distinct areas: imagery, merchandising, venue, gameday promotions, and advertising (Scola & Gordon, 2018). Additionally, it was discovered that sport marketers found retro marketing to not only be successful, but also important to their brands (Scola & Gordon, 2019). Dwyer et al. (2020) reported a negative correlation with age and preference for a retro logo, potentially suggesting that younger fans may prefer retro. Importantly, much of the research to date on retro marketing revolves around logos on merchandise.

Sport Imagery and Merchandise

A brand's imagery is often the key aspect that influences a consumer's perspective of the overall brand (Park et al., 2013). Not only does the brand need to convey its benefits, but also its visual appeal because visual elements, such as shape, can impact consumer judgements (Jiang et al., 2015). This importance is clear in sport marketing research as imagery has been considered a valuable brand association (Ross et al., 2006), and its importance might even be amplified when considering retro marketing, specifically regarding imagery and merchandise (Scola & Gordon, 2018). Further, despite a clear understanding of the financial importance of merchandise to teams, sport scholars do not have a good understanding of what drives consumer to purchase licensed sport merchandise (Kwon & Kwak, 2014).

Methods

Sample Recruitment and Procedure

The targeted population was fans of six professional sports teams. These teams included: Denver Broncos, Houston Rockets, New England Patriots, Cleveland Cavaliers, Milwaukee Bucks, and Milwaukee Brewers. These teams were selected based on their regular use of retro marks that differed from their current logos. Based on the selection of these teams, participants were geographically targeted using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). This approach was utilized to reach a population representative of the fans of these teams and was enhanced with the appropriate member checks. MTurk is viewed as more convenient because of the large database and quick access. Goodman et al. (2013) also found when compared to student samples, it is more representative of the sport fan population. Despite its benefits, MTurk is not without limitations.

Bots and professional survey takers are two potential limitations when using MTurk (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2019). To combat this, entry questions asking the participants to identify their preferred team

fandom and to identify the current and a past logo for the respective team were included. Additionally, two attention check questions were embedded to enhance validity. Respondents who self-reported as a fan of one of the six the teams, identified the correct current and a retro logo for the team, and answered the attention check questions correctly had their responses recorded and were compensated \$0.50 for their participation. Participants who failed any of the member checks or attention checks were removed from the sample. After evaluating completed surveys, 1,509 were usable (<1% were removed). See the results section for the demographics of the sample.

Materials

The 21-item survey asked demographic and descriptive questions such as age, race, gender, length of time as fan, and average amount spent on sport-related merchandise. The following psychographic scales were included to measure the impact on merchandise preference: team identification (Trail & James, 2001; 3 items) and nostalgic proneness (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; 8 items). Lastly, to examine if a consumer preferred retro or modern merchandise, all participants were entered into a hypothetical raffle to win a t-shirt and were given an option of two nearly identical shirts, one with a retro logo and one with a modern logo. This behavior was utilized to indicate their merchandise preference as opposed to using a conative or intention-based measure as an outcome as most other studies in consumer behavior utilize.

Analysis

To answer RQ_1 and to examine the demographic characteristics of consumers that preferred retro merchandise, cross-tabulations were calculated via IBM SPSS 26. To answer RQ_2 and assess the impact of team identification and nostalgia proneness on merchandise preference, a binary logistic regression (BLR) was conducted. The dependent variable in the model was the preference to select either the retro logoed t-shirt (1) or the modern logoed shirt (0). Both variables were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale.

Results

Overall, participant demographics varied based on their interest in the retro offering. Please see Table 1 for the results of RQ_1 and the breakdown of the sample's demographics and retro or modern t-shirt selection. Both scaled instruments provided a reliable score as the Cronbach's alphas were greater than .80 (Nostalgia Proneness = .818; Team Identification = .854). For RQ_2 , the BLR model was statistically significant $X^2(2) = 17.059$ ($p < .01$), and the McFadden (1974) $R^2 = .31$, as the model explained 31% of the participants' selection. Nostalgia proneness significantly and positively predicted the selection of the retro t-shirt ($\beta = .192$, $p < .01$). In fact, through interpreting the expected beta ($exp[b]$) results, for every additional point a participant scored on the nostalgia proneness scale, the likelihood they selected the retro t-shirt increased 21%. Team identification, however, was not a statistically significant predictor of retro t-shirt preference.

Table 1*Cross-tabulations – Descriptive Statistics*

	Sample	Retro T-shirt Choice	Modern T-shirt choice
Gender			
Male	801(53.1%)	427 (53.3%)	374
Female	702	365 (52.0%)	337
Race			
White	1276 (84.6%)	698 (54.7%)	578
Black	103	38 (36.9%)	65
Asian	72	29 (40.3%)	43
Household Income			
<25,000	180	83 (46.1%)	97
25-39,000	237	137 (57.8%)	100
40-59,000	295 (19.5%)	148 (50.2%)	147
60-79,000	243	127 (52.2%)	116
80-99,000	223	107 (48.0%)	116
100-199,000	251(16.6%)	148 (59.1%)	103
Age			
18-29	555 (36.8%)	276 (49.7%)	279
30-39	553	333 (60.2%)	220
40-49	240	133 (55.4%)	107
50-59	105	37 (35.2%)	68
60+	56	15 (26.8%)	41

Table 2*Binary Logistic Regression – Retro T-Shirt Choice*

	α	B	S.E.	Wald	p	Exp(B)
Team Identification	.854	.073	.047	2.394	.122	1.076
Nostalgia Proneness	.818	.192	.056	11.780	.001	1.211

Note: McFadden $R^2 = .31$

Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

Examining age led to interesting results. Individuals 30-39 were most likely to select the retro merchandise, as 60% of these respondents did so. Surprisingly, 67% of participants who were 50+ selected the modern t-shirt. Age is often considered an important aspect when marketing retro materials, as individuals may need to have experienced this past era to appreciate the practice. However, the study participants who

preferred retro skewed younger, with an average age of 37 years old. This result runs counter to that suggestion. The current sample aligns with Merchant and Rose (2013); they found that age was not influential on the preference towards retro brands.

Along with age, another interesting finding regarding who selected retro had to do with household income. For participants making over \$100,000 dollars, 59% selected the retro merchandise. However, a similar split was found in the group who made \$25,000-39,00 dollars. Therefore, household income did not provide insight into who may prefer the retro t-shirt. Retro merchandise is often offered at a price premium when compared to similar modern merchandise. For example, on the NFL Shop webpage, the top selling men's jerseys are priced between \$99.99 and \$169.99, and their Mitchell & Ness (retro jerseys) top selling men's jerseys are priced between \$169.99 and \$299.99. Despite this, retro was preferred by various income segments, which may suggest that the appearance of being more expensive does not matter.

Factors that Influence Retro Preference

When examining internal factors that influenced the likelihood to select the retro merchandise, only nostalgia proneness proved significant. For every one-point increase in level of nostalgia proneness, participants were 21% more likely to select the retro t-shirt. These findings are important because they confirm past research results as well as highlight the importance of nostalgia proneness. Nostalgia proneness has been found to increase preference towards retro marketing practices (Merchant & Rose, 2013; Phau & Marchegiani, 2011). Further, if nostalgia is a key rationale behind re-branding for sport teams (Walsh, 2018), it's important to examine the impact of nostalgia proneness on retro preference. Nostalgia proneness influencing retro preference is not surprising; however, in the sample that skewed younger, it is telling that nostalgic feelings of consumers who may never have experienced the retro logo impacted their preference. This suggests that vicarious nostalgia, where one feels nostalgia toward a time they did not experience, may be at play (Merchant & Rose, 2013). This finding is salient to the potential success of retro marketing in sport.

Considering the widespread significance of team identification in the sport marketing literature, it was somewhat surprising to find that there was not a significant, positive correlation between team identification and retro selection. More identified fans did not prefer one logo over the other logo. Scola and Gordon (2019) suggested that team identification along with the lived history of one's favorite team may play a role in the success of retro marketing. The idea that wearing retro merchandise may make fans feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves was apparent in their study. However, in this study, there was no connection between level of team identification and selection of a retro or modern t-shirt.

Implications

This study should help marketers feel confident in their usage of retro marketing practices, particularly with sport merchandise. The findings from this study showed an overall preference towards the retro branded t-shirts across many demographics. Younger fans and both men and women seemed more prone to select the retro t-shirt. What is more, household income did not seem to play a large role. Thus, retro merchandise may be relied upon with little reservation.

Also important for marketers was how those more prone to nostalgia preferred the retro t-shirt. Finding ways to increase nostalgic feelings towards the team could be beneficial for retro sales. Tapping into nostalgic feelings may prove beneficial at any age, which adds more credence to the continued success of retro merchandise. If nostalgia not only can be felt by younger fans, but influence their decision making, developing and relying on marketing and merchandise that brings feelings of nostalgia to consumers may be crucial.

Theoretically, it was important to discover that nostalgia proneness led to a retro preference because little is known about why retro marketing in sport is successful. Additionally, it appeared nostalgia was influential across age groups. This result should encourage further investigations about the concept of vicarious nostalgia in sport.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the findings of this study, it is not without limitations. First, sampling was only conducted in specific geographic locations to target fans of the teams in question. Second, these surveys were conducted online through MTurk, where monitoring the participants was limited. The authors attempted to combat this with member and attention check questions. Additionally, the sample skewed younger than the average age of fans for these leagues, which may hurt its overall generalizability. Lastly, each team's unique past was not considered or examined. This was due to the nature of the big picture examination the topic. This should be addressed in future studies.

Scholars should continue to examine retro marketing and merchandise and consumer's preferences or feelings towards it. Future studies should compare teams with various histories, such as teams who have a long-standing brand versus those who have less but have changed their logo regularly. The many anniversaries that leagues celebrate should be compared as well, as leagues seem to promote these differently. Additionally, future research should examine other measures and types of nostalgia and explore their impact on retro merchandise and marketing. The current sample also demonstrated differences in retro and modern merchandise selection based on age and race. Future research should examine how age and race, along with other demographic characteristics, may play a role in preference towards retro sport merchandise. Finally, scholars should examine if there may be a threshold of retro marketing because it has been noted that there may be a potential for "too much" reliance on retro (Dwyer et al., 2020).

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