The Differential Effects of Team Performance on Current and Throwback Team Apparel

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Despite the popularity of throwback apparel in sports, it has received little academic attention (Scola & Gordon, 2018) and little is known about when and why fans prefer throwback apparel. In this study, we apply Social Identity Theory and Power Distance Theory to propose that throwback apparel is resilient to the effects of poor team performance due to its nostalgic nature and these effects are more pronounced for low Power Distance Belief (PDB) fans.

The BIRGing and CORFing literature indicates that poor team performance leads to decreased fan preferences for team merchandise (Kwak et al., 2015). Such reactions are based on individuals’ tendencies to associate with groups that are perceived to benefit their self-concepts and to dissociate with groups that reflect negatively on them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, whereas current merchandise signals a connection to the current team, throwback apparel signals a more temporal connection and is loaded with memories of the team’s past greatness (Andon, 2013). We theorized that throwback apparel conjures nostalgic thoughts of the team’s past greatness, thus, being more resilient to the negative effects of poor team performance. Meanwhile, PDB refers to the degree to which individuals accept hierarchies throughout society (Hofstede, 2001). While high PDB individuals accept being in inferior positions, low PDB individuals actively partake in behaviors intended to enhance their position (Atwater et al., 2009). Therefore, in times of poor performance, low PDB individuals will have higher motivation to restore equality.

The current study utilized a 2 (team standing: positive vs. negative win-loss record) x 2 (PDB: high vs. low) x 2 (product type: throwback vs. current) between-subjects experiment with purchase intentions as the dependent variable (N=401). Participants’ favorite NBA team were measured followed by a photo of the rankings and win-loss records of all teams. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions where a white t-shirt displaying either the current or past logo was presented.

Results indicated that, first, positive win-loss record team fans displayed higher purchase intentions than negative win-loss record team fans [MPositive=5.44 vs. MNegative=5.17; F(1, 393)=4.62, p=.032]. Second, high PDB fans displayed higher purchase intentions than low PDB fans [MHighPDB=5.64 vs. MLowPDB=4.97; F(1,393)=26.69, p<.001]. Third, there is an interaction effect between team standing and product type such that in the positive win-loss record condition, there were no significant difference in purchase intentions between current and throwback apparel [MCurrent=5.51, MThrowback=5.38, F(1,393)=.49, p>.05], while in the negative win-loss record condition, purchase intentions for throwback apparel were higher than current apparel [MCurrent=4.89, MThrowback=5.44, F(1,393)=9.44, p<.002]. Finally, the three-way interaction between product type, team standing, and PDB was significant [F(1,393)=4.51, p=.034], where the interaction effect between team standing and product type was significant only in the low PDB condition.

Theoretically, the current study adds to the sports nostalgic consumption literature and we introduce a novel cultural variable, PDB, that influences fans’ reactions to team performance. Practically, the results indicate that when a team is performing poorly during a season, merchandise sales may benefit by more aggressively promoting nostalgic merchandise.