Representing My ‘Peeps’: Race/Ethnicity and the Symbolic Consumption of Sport Merchandise for Consumers of Color

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The contribution of sport team merchandise sales to the successful business of sport is unquestionable (Ozer & Argan, 2006). As such, the body of research seeking to explicate the factors influencing the consumption of sport team merchandise (i.e., Apostolopoulou 2012; Kolah, 2005; Kwak & Kang, 2009; Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005, and others) is ever increasing. Some of the traditional factors posited to influence the consumption of sport team merchandise include: individuals’ level of sport fanship, individuals’ active/direct and passive/indirect sport consumption frequency, consumer income, consumer values, the success of the team, presence of star players, the team logos or colors, consumer the image of the team, and the team’s history and tradition.

Not only have researchers sought to better understand how to stimulate the sale of sport team merchandise to maximize business profits, but there is an increased emphasis on the social psychology of such consumption and the implications for sport consumer behavior (Kwak & Kang, 2009). For example, wearing sport team merchandise: (a) illuminates the consumers’ connections to sport teams (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), (b) communicates a sense of the consumers’ belonging to sport teams (Kolah, 2005), and (c) demonstrates the social identity fostered between consumers and sport teams. Thus, wearing sport team merchandise seems to be a meaningful social psychological and symbolic behavior.

Notwithstanding the growing attention to factors influencing the consumption (i.e., purchase and/or wearing) of sport team merchandise by sport marketing researchers, Lee and Trail (2011) surmised that the aspects that influence people to purchase (and thus to wear) sport team merchandise are still not clearly understood. They contend that the few existing studies that have sought to address this topic only explained minimum amounts of variance. They further contended that there is a lack of research to simultaneously incorporate relevant theories and concepts that influence product consumption. One glaring omission in the social psychological investigations of factors influencing sport team merchandise consumption is race/ethnicity.

Verkuyten (2005) asserted that: “ethnicity can be studied from various perspectives and in different ways (p. 1) …the study of ethnic identity offers the possibility of asking new social psychological questions, considering neglected issues, and filling theoretical and empirical gaps” (p. 2). The salience of race/ethnicity undoubtedly differs based on the cultural penchant of consumers (Armstrong, 2008). For example, due to the dominance of Whiteness in US society - White racial/ethnic identity may operate in a manner such that Caucasian sport consumers may experience a ‘normalized’ privilege (Long & Hylton, 2002) wherein racial/ethnic dynamics are not at the fore of their evoked set. In contrast, as Schrieber (2001) indicated, Consumers of Color (i.e., ethnic Americans of African, Hispanic, Native/Indian, and Asian-Pacific ancestry) have developed preferences and behaviors in response to and as a cause of their historical and sociodemographic status of being minorities in America that often makes racial/ethnic identity more operative in their lives. Moreover, the sport experiences of Consumers of Color are often ‘tainted’ by social, cultural, and structural marginalization rooted in race/ethnicity (Smith, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to ask new social psychological questions, as Verkuyten (2005) suggested. Primarily, it asked: To what extent does the race/ethnicity of athletes representing sport teams predict the frequency in which consumers wear sport team merchandise?

Sample

Data for this exploratory investigation were collected by disseminating a self-report questionnaire using a convenience sampling technique throughout a large metropolitan statistical area on the west coast of the United States. No incentives were provided. This procedure resulted in a sample size of 479 (51% Caucasians, 49%
Consumers of Color; 59% male, 41% female; 69% aged 18-34; and 41% 4-year college graduates, 16% post-graduates).

Methods

In addition to the race of athletes, other variables (i.e., salient factors influencing sport consumption) posited to influence the frequency in which consumers may wear sport team merchandise included: (a) composite level of sport fanship, (b) direct and indirect sport consumption frequencies, (c) the teams’ colors or logos, (d) the overall image of the team, and (e) the history and traditions of the teams. Items were rated on 5-point Likert scales.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for each variable. To examine the extent to which the independent variables predicted the frequency in which the participants wore sport team merchandise, two multiple regression analyses were performed (one for the Caucasians and one for the Consumers of Color). The assumptions (normality, multicollinearity, etc.) for regression analyses were checked and the diagnostics revealed that the assumptions were not violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) and the data were acceptable for the analyses.

Results

The predictors in the models explained 53% of the variance in the frequency in which the participants of Color wore sport team merchandise, F(8, 196) = 30.11, p<.001; they explained 41% of the variance for the Caucasians, F(8, 213) =19.94, p<.001. Differences were revealed at the univariate level. Direct and indirect sport consumption influenced the frequency in which both groups wore sport team merchandise; however, while the race of the athletes was a salient predictor for the participants of Color, it was insignificant for the Caucasians. Additionally, income was a significant and inverse predictor for the frequency in which the Caucasians wore sport team merchandise; yet, it was an insignificant predictor for the participants of Color.

Discussion

The results demonstrated the symbolic role racial/ethnic representation played as a predictor of the frequency in which the participants of Color wore sport team merchandise. The results will be discussed and framed through the paradigm of Standpoint Theory (e.g., Whiteness Theory and Critical Race Theory). The practical implications for sport marketers (notably branding) will be addressed.