High aesthetics bestows an unrecognized benefit on consumer goods, just like good looks of people may give them an unconscious advantage (Townsend & Sood, 2012). Whether this analogy applied to the context of jersey sponsorship in the National Basketball Association (NBA) is worthwhile for exploration when evaluating the effectiveness of this innovative sponsorship strategy. Jersey sponsorship has been adopted as an important marketing tool by numerous professional teams and leagues around the world, especially in Europe and Asia, which has provided an avenue for the team and the league to make more profits (Basalyga, 2016). In recent years, marketers of the U.S. sport leagues have begun to employ jersey sponsorship in an effort to increase economic gains. For example, starting in the 2017-2018 season, the Philadelphia 76ers of the NBA have become the first team and league that commence a program allowing for sponsorship logos to be placed on game uniforms in the four major U.S. professional sports. With this new initiative, to date 13 other NBA teams have developed jersey sponsorship deals. Although it is becoming a more frequently used marketing tool among the U.S. sport leagues (e.g. the Major League Soccer, the Women’s National Basketball Association, and the Women’s Professional Soccer League), jersey sponsorship and jersey sales have yet to be linked in empirical analyses and their mutual impact on each other have rarely been examined in a context of U.S. sports. Specifically, what is not understood is if the unprecedented NBA jersey sponsorship will impact the sport consumer’s purchase intention of team jersey with sponsorship logos and how the NBA teams can evaluate the potential influence on consumer perceptions before placing a sponsor’s logo on team-licensed jersey for merchandise sale. Does it look good after putting sponsor logo on the team jersey and other team-licensed apparels? Whether and how will sport consumer evaluate the appearance of jersey with trademark other than the familiar symbol of their favorite team and make their purchase decision accordingly? This study is designed to investigate the potential mediating effect of perceived aesthetic quality in the relationship between jersey sponsorship and intent to purchase team-licensed apparel.

Most of previous studies on jersey sponsorship have primarily focused on its overall effect on fan’s perceptions of leagues and attitude toward sponsors (Crompton, 2014; Horowitz, 2012; Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003), rather than fan behaviors toward the team’s core and extension product lines, such as attending games in person, watching games on television, follow the team in media, discuss the team with friends, and purchase the team’s merchandise. It is even rare to find any exploration on the effect of jersey sponsorship in the context of an American sport because traditionally the four major North American professional sport leagues have refrained from allowing advertising on their game uniforms. Some researchers speculated with some preliminary evidence that it would be unlikely for a jersey sponsorship to have any positive effects on the consumption behavior of the Major League Soccer (MLS) products (Jensen, Bowman, Wang, & Larson, 2012). However, given the differences between the MLS and the NBA, such as market size, sport history, and cultural heritage, these speculations may not be generalizable to the NBA fans. The void still exists when assessing the potential effect of jersey sponsorship on sport consumers’ intentions to purchase NBA team-licensed apparel with sponsor logo.

Overall sales of licensed sport merchandise have shown a steady growth in decades despite five years of stagnancy between 1997 and 2002 (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007). Looking for an effective way to keep improving sales at the professional levels is crucial. For the factors influencing the purchase of team-licensed products, previous researchers emphasized the importance of sport consumer’s team identification (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Kwon & Trail, 2003). Over time, other factors influencing the relationship between team identification and purchase intentions have also been recognized by researchers, such as impulse buying (Kwon & Armstrong, 2006), expectancy disconfirmation (Lee & Trail, 2011), symbolic meanings (Apostolopoulou, Papadimitriou, Synowka, & Clark, 2012) and perceived value that a consumer has toward a specific piece of merchandise (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007).
Taking into account possible determinants of purchase intentions other than team identification is beneficial for sport marketers to define a more effective way to increase the sale of team-licensed merchandise.

Apparel is a major item of team-licensed merchandises. Based on theoretical perspectives relevant to decision-making for apparel purchase, consumer assessment of an apparel item is an important step before deciding to purchase. The assessing the apparel product is not limited to the functional aspects; it also includes evaluating the aesthetic appeal of the product (Klerk & Lubbe, 2004). Aesthetics has been defined as “the human reaction to the non-instrumental qualities of an object or occurrence” (Klerk & Lubbe, 2004, p.2) and it plays an important role during the purchase decision process of apparel as there is an inherent relationship between aesthetics and the way that consumers clothe their bodies to be appreciated by themselves and others (DeLong, 1998; O’Neal, 1998). Previous studies have failed to examine the role of aesthetics in apparel product when investigating the impact of jersey sponsorship (e.g., Suh, Chung, Scremin, & Martin, 2017). As the functional aspects of apparel are expected to remain the same after the adoption of jersey sponsorship, the major change on the team-licensed apparel is only limited to aesthetics (i.e., its appearance with or without the sponsor logo); apparently, the overlooked role of aesthetics should be investigated.

This study is designed to identify how various levels of perceived aesthetic quality (i.e., high, moderate, low) would influence the purchase intention in terms of jersey sponsorship after adjusting for team identification. The NBA team Golden State Warriors and its jersey sponsor Rakuten will serve as the team of interest given the Warriors’ popularity and the Rakuten’s relative unfamiliarity. Participants will complete a questionnaire to measure the constructs of perceived aesthetic quality, purchase intention after viewing a photo of the Warriors authentic home jersey with or without Rakuten’s logo, and team identification as a covariate. The logo of manufacturer (i.e., Nike swoosh) will be erased in order to prevent confounding effect on purchase intention. The instrument will be developed for this study by adopting previous studies in team-licensed merchandise and aesthetics of apparel (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Klerk & Lubbe, 2004). It is predicted that as consumer perceptions of aesthetic quality in the team jersey with sponsor logo increase, their intentions to purchase would also increase. The findings of this study are expected to have theoretical contributions and practical implications when team marketers select appropriate corporates before adding sponsor logos to team jerseys and evaluate the potential impact of these on-jersey ads.