Retro Marketing and the Consumer: Examining the Sentiment of Retro Brand Merchandise

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Retro marketing in sport has been utilized for decades dating back to the first “Turn Back the Clock” night by the Chicago White Sox in 1990 (Radom, 2015). Scant attention, however, has been paid to the overall effectiveness of retro marketing practices, as the majority of sport marketing literature has explored team history and nostalgia in relation to team brand association (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). The current study tested the impact of retro brand marketing by examining consumer characteristics and preferences through a multi-phase research design.

Guided by the stimulus-organism-response framework, the purpose of phase one was twofold. First, this phase aimed to understand the relationships between the following variables: (a) the exposure to a current or retro brand (stimulus), (b) individual characteristics such as team attachment and time perspective (organism), and (c) individual preference including product liking and purchase intentions (response). Second, this phase explored the impact of these theoretical components on a sports fans preference for retro over current branding.

A total of 1,700 Philadelphia area sport fans were contacted and 292 completed the online survey in spring of 2018. Following a number of control questions and scaled instruments, respondents were offered a hat with either a retro or current Eagles logo at a given price. Multi-group structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to assess the theoretical relationships. In addition, a backward stepwise regression was conducted on the preference for retro logos.

While controlling for perceived value and purchase history, both models provided evidence that individual characteristics (team attachment) positively impacted individual preferences (product liking and purchase intentions). However, differences were also found between the stimuli groups, as positive time perspective positively impacted product liking for those receiving the retro logo but not the current logo. The regression results indicated that product liking positively impacted the preference for retro logos, but age and previous exposure to the retro logo negatively impacted preference for the retro brand over the current brand.

Based on the regression findings, phase two of the study aimed to explore the explicit and implicit value of retro and current logos. An additional sample of Philadelphia sports fans (N=93) completed an online survey with explicit brand questions and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) examining one’s association to retro and current logos. While the explicit results indicated an equal appreciation to both logos, the results of the IAT suggest that sports fans implicitly associate freshness with current team logo and outdatedness with retro team logo.

This study extends the limited research on retro brand marketing in sport and utilized the IAT in a novel manner. The results provide evidence of individual characteristics that impact purchase decisions and evidence of the potential ephemerality of retro brand marketing in sport. That is, sport marketers must sufficiently weigh the fact that consumers explicitly preferred each logo but associated retro brands with outdated adjectives. In addition, the theoretical results of phase one suggest nostalgia may positively impact the purchasing of retro merchandise.