

# Making Old Cool: An Examination of Retro Branding in Sport

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## Abstract

*While there has been a “nostalgia boom” in the sport industry from the standpoint of apparel and branding, the interpretation of retro design components by sport consumers has been neglected by sport management scholars. The primary aim of this study was to decipher distinct patterns in retro design specifications and how sport consumers respond to these retro branding elements. Concentrating on specific details of retro branding (e.g., aspects of team logo and uniform design elements), the present study enhances the understanding of retro branding tactics utilized by sport organizations and how retro product offerings are perceived by the consumer. Sixteen sport consumers with thorough knowledge of retro branding practices in sport participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. The results of this study demonstrate there are three distinct themes across the collected data (i.e., general sport retro associations, retro design elements, and impact of retro design details).*

## Introduction

Many sports franchises are reintroducing retro color schemes, uniforms, and even logos in the context of their brand story to capture nascent markets and strengthen bonds with the existing customer base. Retro branding has been defined as the revival of products or services, which comply with contemporary standards of functioning (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003) and this marketing tactic has become commonplace in the sport industry. For example, the long and storied history behind the team prompted the Toronto Maple Leafs to opt for a new logo, the roots of which go back to the 1938 design and incorporate elements of their rich brand heritage and tradition of success within the brand mark (Creamer, 2016). Like the Maple Leafs, the Sacramento Kings recently introduced updated team logos that emphasize the team’s history and convey the story of the franchise, which ultimately appeals to fans’ emotions (Lukas, 2016). While the utilization of retro marketing practices has proliferated the sport industry, little research exists about how the consumer relates to these retro marketing tactics.

While long-standing brands such as Volkswagen’s Beetle remain relevant within mass culture (Brown et al., 2003), there is evidence to suggest that sport retro marketing should be approached differently. In the sport realm, strong consumer identification with the product (i.e., specific teams) is a key driver of consumption (Trail & James, 2001). The fundamental difference between sports and conventional marketing is that consumers of sport have a stronger emotional commitment and psychological connection with the product (teams), which in turn influences their self-identity (Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014; Trail & James, 2001). More importantly, identity salience can have an impact on a person’s motivation and time invested in an activity (Laverie, 1998; Shamir, 1992). Considering evidence regarding nostalgia as an enabler of self-continuity by means of positive perceptions and the sport product’s nostalgic appeal, it is clear that sport organizations are buying into retro branding to foster a sense of identity among the fans (Fairley & Gammon, 2005; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008).

The highly emotional nature of the sport product and strong dependence on social facilitation manifest in consumer identification with brands (e.g., sport retro brands), unlike popular culture offerings in a traditional market space (Mullin et al., 2014). Most importantly, retro branding in sport has become an effective marketing vehicle which focuses heavily on consumers' nostalgic experiences, closely intertwined with a person's self-concept (Brown et al., 2003; Ju, Kim, Chang, & Bluck, 2016; Zhao, Li, Teng, & Lu, 2014). To illustrate, the Miami Heat's "Vice" City edition uniforms not only resonate with a wide range of fans across generations, but also foster a sentimental bond within the local community. In fact, the team managed to sell over 120,000 City edition jerseys since the campaign's start dating back to 2017, thereby topping team jersey sales from the organization's three championship seasons (Chiang, 2020). Evidently, retro brands can evoke specific nostalgia (e.g., fond memories of a favorite team or past era) which is unique to the brand's story and consumers' identity (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Zhao et al., 2014).

While attempting to understand the impact of retro marketing initiatives, prior research has been able to untangle numerous quandaries for marketing practitioners. Brands leveraged and conveyed vivid heritage messages to their advantage (Urde, Greyser, & Balmer, 2007), which allowed them to preserve loyalty and trust, frequently verified to be instrumental in purchasing decisions (Brown et al., 2003). Further, retro marketing practices have been utilized as an instrument to create nostalgic appeals that resonate with the unique perceptions of each individual consumer to influence purchasing behavior (Zhao et al., 2014). Specifically, Keller (1993) noted how consumers tend to associate brands with past events through strong and distinct memories that impact favorability and decision-making. Although retro branding practices have proliferated the sport industry, the elements activating consumer behavioral responses have drawn scant attention from sport management scholars. In fact, Scola and Gordon (2018), who developed a conceptual framework for retro marketing in sport, posited that future scholars should examine specific elements in a sport offering that make it retro as perceived by the consumer.

It is evident that the meaning of "retro" from the perspective of the sport consumer is absent from the current literature and the sport marketing industry, putting researchers and field practitioners at a severe disadvantage. Furthermore, while retro design product attributes continue to saturate the sport market, the attitudinal response that these retro offerings elicit from sport consumers remains unclear. In considering sport organizations' reliance on retro marketing, the paucity of empirical evidence regarding consumer response is of particular concern. Given the ability of retro branded offerings to create symbolic value to sport consumers by leveraging nostalgic feelings and creating a bridge to past eras, and the immense financial impact retro products have made on the sport industry, a deep understanding of the mechanisms that elicit an emotional response is equally important for the academic and practical realms. In an attempt to alleviate these concerns, the following research questions were developed to guide the present study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How do sport consumers construct the meaning of retro in the context of sport?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What specific tangible elements lead a sport product to be perceived as retro?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How do retro branded sport products reinforce consumers' self-identity?

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Self-Identity Theory and Nostalgia***

The existing literature asserted that nostalgia fosters self-continuity (i.e., a sense of connection between the past present times) and well-being and allows an individual to cope with

dissatisfaction associated with the present (Sedikides, Wildschut, Cheung, Hepper, Vail, Brackstone, Routledge, Arndt, Zhou, & Vingerhoets, 2016; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015). As it pertains to consumer response to retro branded offerings, the current theoretical framework relies on consumers' longing to travel back to previous time periods as a means for personal continuity (Ju et al., 2016). In Davis's (1979) view, by revisiting our positive past, nostalgia ensures continuity of one's identity, thereby granting us current and future worth. Turning back to the happy past and, as a result, muting the uncertainty of the present, is the essence of continuous identity tied to nostalgia (Davis, 1979). Importantly, this yearning for personal past is activated through consumption of products (e.g., retro brands) and nostalgic marketing messages (Ju et al., 2016). Restated, retro branding fits within the context of self-concept and continuous identity, wherein nostalgia fosters this process.

Termed as "a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation defining what it means to be who one is" identity and formation of the self rest on the idea that individuals claim their roles based on social beliefs and group relations (Burke, 1991, p. 837). Erikson (1968) referred to identity as the internalization of one's "wholeness" which consists of unique goals, plans, and values. Factors such as the environment and group relationships can influence consumers' tendency to claim certain identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). These social factors and interactions in turn help discover coherent and continuous identity, wherein individuals see the connection between their past and present selves (Sokol, Conroy, & Weingartner, 2017). With respect to the framework for the study at hand, nostalgia increases a person's sense of continuous self-identity by reaching back into the positive past and connecting it to the present, thereby maintaining a person's identity (Bluck & Liao, 2013; Ju et al., 2016; Sedikides et al., 2015). To this end, consumers of retro branded products travel into their familiar past to ultimately preserve a continuous sense of self-identity.

Furthermore, nostalgia marketing (e.g., retro branding) serves an important function in the consumer decision making process by reinforcing one's self-identity and creating a distinct frame of reference to define his or her purpose (Belk, 1988; Erikson, 1968; Ju et al., 2016; Waterman, 1984). As indicated by the existing literature, sport consumers internalize nostalgia and reflect on it in terms of personal past and specific memories of sporting events (Summers, Johnson, & McColl-Kennedy, 2001). For example, these experiences can be related to specific social gatherings at a sport site and as it relates to one's social identity, sport facilitates the ultimate social experience for people to form their self-concept and memories that reflect their identification (Fairley & Gammon, 2005). The authors further note that sport marketers leverage nostalgia marketing (e.g., retro branding) by offering merchandise that triggers nostalgia recollections. In all, and as evidenced in the existing scholarly work, consumer nostalgia is not only appropriate for understanding one's early stages of identity development through interactions with brands (e.g., retro brands), but also applicable to an individual's sense of persistent identity.

### ***Retro Branding***

Brand heritage found within the design elements of retro brands is recognized as a valuable asset organizations employ to link the past and present of a brand to maximize its future potential and gain control over consumer demand (Urde et al., 2007). Retro brands are known for being able to withstand the challenges posed by constantly fluctuating market demands characteristic of every historical era. These revitalized brands retain a deep association with the past (e.g., Volkswagen Beetle, Coca-Cola) to remain relevant in their market sphere (Brown et al., 2003). Given that brand revitalization initiatives are usually more affordable, Aaker (1991) recommended relying more on these practices as a low-risk way to re-introduce a brand.

The existing literature is replete with examples of companies taking advantage of their illustrious brand story to remain relevant to the market (e.g., Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 2003). Hallegatte (2014) believed all brands that practice retro branding essentially utilize associations with a significant historical era to uncover emotional benefits to brand consumers. This peace of mind may derive from a palette of sentiments. For instance, the admirers of the New Beetle or Mini relate to their brands “with the idealism and socio-cultural effervescence of the 1960s and 1970s” (Hallegatte, 2014, p. 12). Old-fashioned design and modern functionality are combined in retro brands (Brown et al., 2003). Describing Michael Jordan’s retro shoes, Brown et al. (2003), noted that “these shoes may look like a monument to 1950s hoop dreams, yet their cushioned soles, aerated uppers, and recommended retail prices are state of the marketing art” (p. 20). Similarly, Adidas released the brand’s classic sneaker to signify the past of the company as well as recreate once tarnished perception of durability (Brown, 1999). It is evident that there are a multitude of reasons to believe that retro branding has evolved into a useful tactic in marketing, which has been helping brands to align themselves with the inner nature of consumers.

Further, Scola and Gordon (2018) illustrated how retro branding can be activated in five distinct practical marketing areas including imagery, merchandise, advertising, gameday promotions, and venue. Targeted retro branding strategies entail developing plans to activate nostalgic feelings among predetermined segments of sport consumers. It is important to note that both brands with reputable history (e.g., Toronto Maple Leafs) and newly established brands (e.g., Tampa Bay Rays) have both strategic and creative retro marketing strategies in place. Brown et al. (2003) acknowledged that increased proliferation of retro brands has urged researchers to investigate the requisite attributes that appear to exemplify and execute the foundational principles of marketing that involve processes for delivering offerings that possess qualities of value for consumers.

## **Method**

In order to address the aforementioned exploratory research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sport industry professionals who were also identified as having knowledge of retro branding practices in sport and consumed a variety of retro sport products. These participants were deemed appropriate for the context of this exploratory study for multiple reasons. First, the participants’ expertise in marketing, sport brand promotion, fan engagement, and sport event management allowed for a deep understanding of retro marketing strategies employed by sport organizations. From the discussions with these sport marketing professionals, it was clear that they possessed understanding of how sport organizations leverage nostalgia marketing to ultimately increase customer lifetime value. Furthermore, preliminary discussions with potential study participants resulted in uncovering their team affiliations from a fan perspective and allowed the researchers to provide examples of how relevant retro branding practices have been incorporated into logo design and team uniforms to utilize during the interviews.

As an illustration of the participants’ expertise concerning the inquiry, one of the participants specialized in sales management of athletic outdoor gear and clothing which included retro product lines. This experience in turn allowed them to develop a better understanding of how certain brands implement retro elements into the product. As indicated by the participants, many sport retro brands utilize an already established reputation to deepen consumers’ emotional connection by emphasizing original, redesigned brand marks and retro color schemes. Additionally, having purchased retro-branded sport merchandise, the participants were able to

offer a consumer-centric perspective on the matter, the aspect of high priority given the research questions under study.

### **Sample**

Through the access to professional team and sporting event professionals, the researchers purposively recruited participants for the present study. Given the poorly understood construct (i.e., retro branding in sport), non-probabilistic purposive sampling, where researchers select knowledgeable informants, was deemed most advantageous (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). Special emphasis was given to the participants' marketing experience in the realm of retro branding to ensure congruity between the aforementioned research questions and the current sample. The researchers' preliminary discussions with prospective participants had confirmed not only their familiarity with retro offerings, but also internalization of these brands by respective consumer segments, thereby ensuring collection of rich data (Patton, 2002; Shenton & Hayter, 2004).

Many of the participants had been associated with the sport brand management sector for several years at the time of data collection, and were screened with preliminary telephone conversations to ensure that they have a consumption history with retro sport products. The use of the current screening criteria verified regularity in consumption of retro branded merchandise, validating the adequacy of the selected participants. The researchers put emphasis on the participants' familiarity with and consistent consumption of retro branded sport products to ensure the interviews would generate in-depth data (Patton, 2002). In determining eligibility of each participant, the researchers inquired about consistent consumption patterns of sport throwback clothing. Each participant was asked to specify their assortment of retro merchandise, their recent consumption tendencies, and overall retro product usage patterns. Table 1 provides the breakdown of participants interviewed for the present study.

**Table 1: Breakdown of Interview Participants**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Residence</i>	<i>Relevant Industry Unit</i>
Participant 1	40-49	White/Caucasian	California	Marketing/Public Relations
Participant 2	30-39	White/Caucasian	New York	Marketing
Participant 3	50-59	White/Caucasian	New York	Marketing/Sales
Participant 4	40-49	White/Caucasian	California	Sales
Participant 5	30-39	White/Caucasian	Maryland	Marketing/Operations
Participant 6	20-29	White/Caucasian	New York	Marketing/Sales
Participant 7	20-29	White/Caucasian	California	Media
Participant 8	20-29	White/Caucasian	New Jersey	Business Development
Participant 9	30-39	White/Caucasian	Washington, D.C.	Sales
Participant 10	50-59	White/Caucasian	Massachusetts	Sales
Participant 11	40-49	White/Caucasian	New York	Marketing/Sales
Participant 12	20-29	African American	Pennsylvania	Marketing/Sales
Participant 13	30-39	White/Caucasian	New York	Sales
Participant 14	50-59	White/Caucasian	California	Business Development/Brand Promotion
Participant 15	20-29	White/Caucasian	New York	Marketing/Sales/Sponsorship
Participant 16	>60	White/Caucasian	California	Sales

Further, the researchers aimed to integrate participants, who represented different generational cohorts into the study. This recruiting technique was deemed advantageous taking into consideration the context of the current study, allowing the researchers to select information-rich cases to uncover their perspectives, while learning a great deal about the intricate connections between retro branded offerings and consumer meaningful sensory experiences (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). Suitable participants were recruited via a personal email and asked if they would be willing to participate in the present study. The final number of participants involved in Skype interviews was 16.

This data collection method was preferred to the face-to-face approach since all participants were geographically dispersed across the United States (i.e., California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.). While the majority of the sample elected to speak about a team based on their original identification with a geographic area (i.e., place of birth), they incorporated both their own “fandom” as well as their professional experiences into their responses to the researchers’ questions.

### ***Interview***

The researchers employed semi-structured interview method by altering the sequence of questions. The interview questions were drawn from a review of the nostalgia and retro branding literature reviewed above. A thorough understanding of the attitudinal response to retro branded components was of critical importance. Therefore, the researchers positioned interview questions to delve further into the nature of nostalgic sentiments evoked by the experience of retro product design elements (e.g., brand mark/logo, fabric, and color scheme) as well as trying to ascertain a foundational understanding of the term “retro.” In order to evoke this response to retro products, specific visuals (i.e., retro logos and uniforms) were utilized that were framed in the context of the respondents’ favorite pre-specified team. Table 2 provides the breakdown of the teams selected by the present participants and related retro marketing campaigns.

In order to elicit in-depth responses from the present participants, the researchers primed them with these visual cues (i.e., logos and uniforms) before the interview itself. Specifically, the utilization of visual cues is a common practice in qualitative research and “can enhance the richness of data by discovering additional layers of meaning, adding validity and depth, and creating knowledge” (Glaw, Inder, Kable, & Hazelton, 2017, p. 1). While once considered controversial in qualitative research, the use of visual data has become a much more accepted practice (Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005). The utilization of visual cues as a tool along with other verbal data (Bagnoli, 2009a) can be a way to construct multiple realities among participants, be an effective icebreaker, prompt certain memories that may be under the surface, and improve the content of an interview by enhancing flow and facilitating shared understanding (Bagnoli, 2009b; Frith et al., 2005; Guillemin, 2004). In all, the goal of “priming” respondents with visual cues was to gain more depth in their responses and uncover additional layers of what retro means and how it is interpreted by respondents. In order to establish a rapport with participants, the researchers asked “warm-up” questions at the beginning of each interview. Interviews ended with 16 participants due to the fact that data saturation was met and further interviews would not yield any new findings or differ from what the researchers already had (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

**Table 2: Breakdown of selected teams and related retro marketing campaigns**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>Team retro marketing campaigns</i>
Participant 1	Golden State Warriors	Team primary logo, primary dark logo, alternate logo, and uniform redesign
Participant 2	University of North Carolina	Team primary logo redesign
Participant 3	Boston Celtics	Team alternate logo redesign
Participant 4	San Francisco 49ers	Team anniversary logo redesign
Participant 5	Washington Football Team	Team primary logo and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 6	Oakland Athletics	Team alternate logo, jersey logo, and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 7	Golden State Warriors	Team primary logo, primary dark logo, alternate logo, and uniform redesign
Participant 8	New York Knicks	Team road uniforms and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 9	Washington Football Team	Team primary logo and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 10	Boston Bruins	Team jersey logo, wordmark, and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 11	New York Rangers	Team anniversary logo redesign
Participant 12	Cleveland Cavaliers	Team alternate logo, home and road uniforms redesign
Participant 13	New York Mets	Team jersey logo and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 14	Toronto Maple Leafs	Team primary logo, alternate logo, jersey, alternate logo, jersey logo, dark uniforms, light uniforms, and alternate uniforms redesign
Participant 15	Houston Astros	Team jersey logo and anniversary logo redesign
Participant 16	Oakland Athletics	Team alternate logo, jersey logo, and anniversary logo redesign

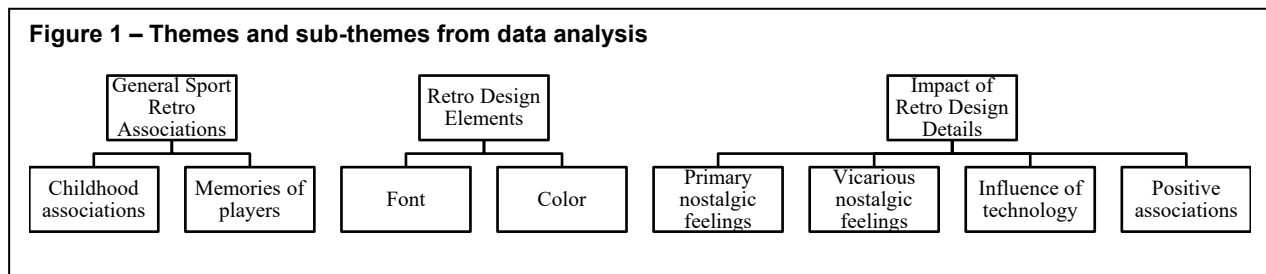
### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed and subsequently presented verbatim and the raw data was shared between the researchers. Following careful line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts, the researchers labeled specific concepts and higher-order categories and compared them across all interviews, the process referred to as open coding (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Deductive (analysis guided by established theory) and inductive (taking direction from the data) analyses were implemented. Data were coded independently with guidance from a priori themes that were developed in order to generate the interview guide. As previously indicated, the researchers' goal was to determine specific features in a brand that make it retro according to the consumer. To that end, the researchers were guided by distinct design elements (e.g., a font) as one of the pre-set themes. After a series of discussions, the intercoder agreement was reached, indicating sufficient consistency of the current coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Walther, Sochacka, & Kellam, 2013).

Further, for any emergent patterns within the data that were not present in the past literature, the researchers collectively identified these new themes and discussed how they would be implemented in the results section moving forward. For both the deductively and inductively-grouped themes, the researchers compared the independent analyses and discussed any differences until consensus was reached (Hambrick & Kang, 2014). The researchers incorporated two approaches to presenting the results below: in some instances, the responses are collectively summarized and presented while at other points, the researchers present the results verbatim from the participants themselves.

## Results

Three main themes emerged from data analysis: (1) general sport retro associations, (2) retro design elements, and (3) impact of retro design details. Each main theme breaks down into sub-themes. Themes and subsequent sub-themes are illustrated below with quotes that represented each category.



### **General Sport Retro Associations**

Although responses varied in complexity and specificity, the general sport retro associations theme centered on a positive connection to the past. When asked to define the term “retro,” several participants used analogous terms with positive connotations found in the larger cultural lexicon such as vintage, throwback, and authentic. To illustrate, Participant 15 expressed:

Retro, I associate with something throwback, from the past, vintage, and I think there is also a connotation that it's stylish, because it's not old, retro it's sort of a euphemism for something good from the past that we want to rekindle.

Perhaps the ubiquity of this term led to elicitation of similar responses from the majority of participants. Evidently, the term “retro” transcends sports marketing as demonstrated by the stock of similarly powerful and memorable synonyms. The participants' comments indicated a strong sentimentality for bygone eras by revealing personal and vicarious experiences and thereby reinforcing their self-image. From the interviews, it became clear participants had a distinct connection to the old idea which ultimately indicated the power of a retro-branded tactics.

It was evident that some participants connected the term “retro” to a specific epoch. As an illustration, the 1970s had strong retro associations for participants who had lived during that time as well as some who did not. For example, Participant 4 reported, “retro I think of vintage I guess if there was like a particular decade I don't know why, but I have like the 70s. The 70s actually stand out the most as far as retro for me.” Participant 1 explained, “throwback I think of 70s and I know retro could be perceived as the old days you know or anything from the past, but for whatever reason my mind goes to kind of that 70s [era].” The majority of responses alluded to the idea that the term “retro” is capable of evoking images of distinct historical periods such as the 1970s.

Representative of the sport retro associations theme, the participants alluded to memories of their sports teams' past years. In response to questions about retro in the sport context, participants provided responses that indicated their desire to go back and relive moments associated with the glory years of their teams. To illustrate, Participant 5 reminisced:



For example, I'm a huge [Washington Football Team] fan, which is an NFL team. When I grew up, when I was able to appreciate the sport in the 80s and early 90s is when they were winning actual Super Bowl. So, they won three Super Bowls in my time and as soon as Jack Kent Cooke the original owner died in 1997 and this guy name Dan Snyder bought the team and essentially from 1997 till now the year 2016 basically has sunk the franchise into mediocrity. I look back at that time in the 80s and early 90s when I was old enough to remember how awesome it was to follow a Super Bowl winning team...that time to me was a time I can look back very fondly, I remember every player, I remember very specific games.

It was clear that the participants looked with fond memory upon their teams' winning years. Restated, the comments provided by the participants led the researchers to believe that the term "retro" can make the consumer recall their teams' glory years. Furthermore, and as cited by the participants, the term "retro" made them reflect on their early childhood events. As evidenced throughout the following sub-theme, these nostalgia-invoked childhood memories played an important role in the current sample's forming of retro perceptions.

**Childhood associations.** In the responses, participants admitted that retro associations took them back to their childhood. Participant 9, for example, stated, "retro goes back to I think the time when I was growing up." Participant 5 was able to describe in detail a sequence of events during their childhood years:

My youth, because I am not the "Rock the Red" Alex Ovechkin fan; I am a fan of the Capitals going back to when I was 10 years old or younger...There is an ice rink across the street from my mom's house and that used to be their primary practice facility so I used to walk over there and actually watch them practice and not only that I would see the players like Rod Langway, Mike Gartner, Dino Ciccarelli, and a few others actually shop at the shopping center where my mom lives, they would actually hang out there.

The following representative response came from Participant 7 who admitted the idea meaningfulness associated with one's childhood: "reliving 20 years ago their childhood maybe when times made more sense, when things were less complicated the golden age that kind of stuff, the golden era those type of things." The comments above highlight colorful memories of childhood events triggered by the term "retro." Vivid memories formed during childhood can be retrieved later in life when given a definite cue. For one participant, past times were simpler which is characteristic of positivity bias. Past eras were labeled as periods in history associated with significant achievements that ultimately impacted the society. In addition, these perspectives reveal that positive experiences are more likely to be remembered during later stages of life.

**Memories of players.** When the researchers asked participants to share their associations of the term "retro" in the sport context, some participants recalled the names of certain players. Participant 6, for example, noted, "I also think kind of like Mark McGwire, Jose Conseco, Rickey Henderson." Participant 15 reported how they remembered some of the iconic athletes and shared memories related to the occasion:

My experience was going to games with my dad...there was one year where we had mini season tickets and we went to 20 games and I saw Michael Jordan, I saw Karl Malone score 65 points, I saw Kobe, Shaq when he was on the Magic and Penny and all Gary Payton, Shawn Kemp...I saw all of the big names.

Participant 7 acknowledged that the names of players made them think of the first time they were introduced to a sport:

It's just what I remember, Tim Hardaway and Mitch Richmond and Chris Webber and Chris Mullin wearing when I was a little kid when I first came into consciousness my first memories of basketball are those players.

The comments above illustrate specific memories the participants had while they were growing up. Witnessing some of the most recognizable names in sports history as a child made the participants develop strong associations. Evidently, iconic figures in a sport elicited strong memories and these recollections were consequently retrieved when the participants were prompted by a trigger cue.

### ***Retro Design Elements***

With respect to retro style, the results indicated that the participants were able to discern specific design details of their team logos and uniforms that evoked retro associations. The design elements of font and color triggered retro associations.

**Font.** Several participants had similar reactions about logo fonts. For example, Participant 14 answered, "I'd say the type of font. The shape of the letters" when the researchers asked them to identify the main retro element in their team's logo. When asked to identify the primary retro element, Participant 15 responded, "I think it's the font that stands out first as being sort of a retro font. So the first thing I see is the font." Others held similar opinions:

The font is definitely compared to what the modern day Athletics looks like. It's a lot more risqué, it's a lot less formal, and it's kind of like a twist on it so it definitely does look different the way they did it. There is an apostrophe there that wouldn't happen in a modern day logo so there's definitely a difference.

Participant 12 commented regarding the shape of their team's logo:

It's the font itself and I guess it's the shape in which they are written. So, if you look at the S in the Cavaliers, if you look at the very top of the S where it kind of comes down like a handle you know people just don't write S like that anymore. Quick curl, it even goes down into the middle of the S you know small things like that and even the way when you start the C quick up and down shape as well so those small things make it seem like the font that's not used anymore and it may not be old, but not used as much.

These examples demonstrate how the font resonated with the participants as the primary design element, based on which sports fans are able to make a distinction between the retro and modern logos. Specifically, the shape of the letters gives an inclination to whether or not the logo is retro. This overarching theme that font is perceived as a powerful design tool shows how retro brands differentiate themselves in a crowded sports marketplace.

**Color.** Color scheme was one of the most salient sub-themes from an analysis of participant responses. Participants were able to recognize specific colors as well as combinations of colors as retro. For example, to confirm his favorite team's jersey's retro element, Participant 1 said, "The color. That color yellow, it's kind of old-fashioned you know it's not vibrant again it's very understated." When asked to describe a color scheme, Participant 9 stated, "Very simple,

nondescript, kind of boring.” Participant 2 explained, “I think the yellow on the blue is definitely not something you see every day.” The statement below illustrates a similar reaction:

I think it's the colors that bring back the old days...when you look at the Boston Bruins, I remember the old jerseys, that kind it's almost funny, it almost has the Smokey Bear look you know which is retro obviously and the color also provides a more of an old style the way we used to decorate our homes back in the 70s all this furniture and carpets the gold and the brown were very popular back then.

In this example, the participant not only compared the color scheme to their sports team, but also associated the colors with 1970s decor. Interestingly, these comments characterized the colors and aesthetic popular during the 1970s at large.

### ***Impact of Retro Design Details***

The researchers' analysis indicated that the retro era triggered fond memories and evoked feelings and images of childhood and simpler times. Responses confirmed that retro components in a brand serve as stimuli for nostalgic reflections. In particular, a recurrent theme reflected in the responses highlights primary and vicarious nostalgic feelings, influence of technological advances, and positive associations.

**Primary nostalgic feelings.** Some participants admitted that thinking about past times made them feel nostalgic. For example, Participant 7 said, “I do find myself going through periods of listening to music I had growing up, watching movies I watched growing up, I can become extremely nostalgic sometimes, yes.” Participant 15 had the following opinion:

Absolutely, I think that's a very common sentiment with our generation and you see it displayed in all sorts of media outside of sports if you look at the show Stranger Things that's very popular, it's set in the 80s, it has 80s music, and then it has an 80s intro. If you look at our generation, there is a fondness for the 90s and it's that same idea of simpler time; it wasn't necessarily a simpler time, it's just that we were children pre-internet playing with you know hungry hippos and slap bracelets so I think there is definitely this yearning to connect with the past; there is a very strong nostalgia and I think everyone feels it, I don't know why exactly you feel it now, but there is something larger than sports in terms of the power of nostalgia.

Responses were similar in the sense that the participants were able to connect retro to warm memories of old times. These descriptions communicate a longing for the past and a desire to immerse in past experiences.

**Vicarious nostalgic feelings.** Some participants admitted feeling nostalgic about events they did not personally experience. In other words, these nostalgic feelings derived from a time period outside of an individual's memory. Furthermore, it was evident from the interviews that these sentiments were evoked by secondary sources. For example, Participant 6 said the following:

For me personally, this particular logo reminds me of the A's of the 70s back-to-back-to-back winners and I wasn't born yet; I was born 14 years after 74 World Series so it's not like I personally have memories of being there. What it does kind of irk in me is nostalgia for what the stadium used to be because you see videos of that world of like 70, 73, 74 A's and the way the stadium was back then so you can like see the Oakland Hills in the

background so that's like something that people always talk about it's like so cool about seeing the A's at that time or just the stadium. The stadium was a lot more classic I guess and still love the Coliseum for today for the space that it is, but I heard really good things about being able to play with the back opened up like that so.

Here, the participant reported that they envisioned old architectural building designs and exhibited bittersweet yearning for the team's venue style. While participants had no direct experience of a particular event, they still reconstructed associations from past time periods.

**Influence of technology.** Several participants admitted that technology made life more complicated. According to Participant 2, "People worked harder I think. People had different appreciations for things and I just think sometimes less is more." Participant 3 explained it this way:

I think there was more freedom back then what you call retro. There were less restrictions and there was also probably less policing in a way. We didn't have social media so we didn't have public shaming. When something went wrong, you didn't have a big eye on you. If you did something that wasn't socially acceptable, it was kept fairly private so in that way it was simpler. There were less rules.

This participant viewed technological advances in a negative light. Despite the evident positive impact that technology has on our society's achievements, there are certain side-effects that are associated with these advancements. This observation was indicative of how the term "retro" referred to the period of time in the past when societal norms welcomed constructive criticism and judgment.

**Positive associations.** With respect to the feelings that retro logos and uniforms evoked, the participants shared a variety of positive viewpoints. Seeing their favorite team's retro logo made Participant 7 say, "I like this logo very much. It makes me very happy." Participant 3 reflected on their team's past success:

Well, it makes me feel good because we won a lot back then. I really like it. When I look at that and I was kind of young for Russell, but when I see that I see that Havlicek, Collins, Jo Jo White kind of into Larry Bird era which was great, which was a great time to watch basketball.

It was clear that other participants alluded to this idea that retro stirred up the heart-warming memories associated with their teams' success.

## Discussion

Focusing on particular elements of retro branding (e.g., aspects of logo and uniforms), the primary objective of this study was to investigate the meaning of "retro" from the perspective of the sport consumer as well as determine how different sport consumptive vehicles activate nostalgic feelings and in turn foster self-identity among sport consumers. There is no available research on how characteristics of retro branding evoke nostalgic memories, feelings, and associations for sport consumers despite numerous studies about retro branding in the general marketing context (Brown et al., 2003; Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Urde et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2014). This study illustrates that sport consumers have multifaceted connections between branding components and meaningful recollections from their pasts. The findings demonstrate that the participants had a strong sentimental connection to certain retro

branded elements in a sport product, which in turn solidified their identity. It was evident throughout the responses that sport consumers rely on retro brands to connect their past and present lives to ultimately ensure continuity of self-concept.

Turning back to the happy past and, as a result, muting the uncertainty of the present, is the essence of continuous identity tied to nostalgia (Davis, 1979). Importantly, this yearning for personal past is activated through consumption of products (e.g., retro brands) and nostalgic marketing messages (Ju et al., 2016). The current findings extended the understanding of how nostalgia marketing activates personal connections and builds persistent identity with sport consumers. Further, these results have significant implications for sport business practitioners as they illuminate fans' desire to travel back in time to secure congruent identity. It was clear that retro brands became ingrained into the participants' being. In the participants' view, retro brands served as symbols of self-expression that can be relied on to maintain their persistent identity. Furthermore, these findings will aid industry practitioners in reaching consumers across several generations, the tactic instrumental in sport marketing given varying degree of consumer demand. Specifically, sport marketing managers can utilize the present findings to offer retro products that are congruent with consumers' past and present times, thereby preserving the perception of their consistent self-identity.

With respect to sport consumers' interpretation of retro (i.e., RQ<sub>1</sub>), some participants connected this concept to a particular time period in history (e.g., eras with distinct personality and style) as well as personal connections to their childhood and lived experiences. It is important to note that these findings serve as evidence of retro brands' power to counteract uncertainties of the present. Furthermore, the present data have significant implications for sport consumers' self-continuity. To that end, and as Davis (1979) commented on the power of nostalgia to connect early phases of life to the present, it was clear that the participants sought out continuous identity by means of retro offerings and young adulthood memories. Illustrative of this, recall comments provided by Participant 5 who reflected on their youth when prompted by the term "retro." These comments suggest that the connotation of the term "retro" in the sport context evokes sentimentality and interconnects one's past with the present. Importantly, this finding will aid practitioners in constructing effective retro marketing campaigns, thereby ensuring sport businesses' long-term profitability. The comments regarding childhood memories and specific players provided by Participant 7 serve as evidence of sports' distinct nostalgic appeal. In a similar manner, other participants' comments show that certain retro branded elements and related experiences had an influence on their identity formation.

The findings emerged from the present study hint at the link and inclination for sentimental reflection which is not only related to past feelings of warmth but also, as Brown et al. (2003) suggested, by the increasingly unstable and uncertain nature of modern society which makes people seek memories of a utopian past. Specifically, the scholars explained that, "it might be expected that in times of threat or of sociocultural and economic turbulence, nostalgia would provide a sense of comfort and close-knit community, a safe haven in an unsafe world" (Brown et al., 2003, p. 20). While it appears that our findings corroborate those of Brown and colleagues (2003), it is still encouraging to observe how retro brands evoke positive nostalgic emotions in the sport setting and make consumers relive childhood moments, thereby fusing the past and present life and maintaining their self-concept. Moreover, the findings at hand point to retro brands' ability to conjure up nostalgic memories, the consumer benefit highlighted in the previous literature (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Specifically, as revealed by the participants when primed by retro-themed sport brand elements, they felt nostalgic and wistful. Recall that the response provided by Participant 6 illustrated how a retro logo can trigger sentimentality for past times. On the whole, and as acknowledged by the present sample, these findings have

significant implications for understanding how retro brand elements help build strong memories of consumers' glorified moments and in turn sustain their consistent self-image.

To complement budding research line on sports retro branding, the present data further benefits sport marketing industry practitioners and throwback clothing companies such as Mitchell & Ness. The current study offers a more detailed understanding of the sport consumer's experience with retro brands and their role in the sense of continuous identity. Specifically, the findings at hand will contribute to sport marketers' expertise in discerning retro consumer perceptions related to carefree childhood, appreciation of their favorite teams at later stages of life, or memorable performances of retired athletes and associated events. Vintage throwback jerseys have proliferated the sports marketing sphere, which shows that fans pay homage to memorable performances of star athletes. This demonstrates that the findings presented in this study offer a new perspective on how retro brands can link the consumer and the athlete brands from bygone eras which extends the current knowledge concerning this construct (i.e., athletes as brands) (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2016; 2018). Further, the findings suggest that by utilizing retro marketing, sport entities can enhance perceived interactions between the consumers and athlete brands from the past, ultimately appealing to consumers' self-identity (Arai et al., 2014; Thomson, 2006). Importantly, it is now evident that retro merchandise companies should align the design of their offerings with sentimental memories characteristic of certain eras and meaningful moments related to target audiences' lives.

The results of this study also demonstrate the multiplicity of retro associations when applied to the sport context, and more importantly, how these reflections define who one is as a person. Many participants responded with affection for their teams' retro logos and uniforms. Specifically, targeted design elements including font and color not only triggered these associations with the past but also positively impacted the feelings participants felt toward their favorite team. Past literature confirms the power of sport team emblems and their capability to affect team or athlete brand associations (Ahn, Suh, Lee, & Pedersen, 2012; Biehal & Sheinin, 1998; Brautigan, 2016). Therefore, the present findings are particularly important considering the prolific rebranding trends present within the realm of sport. Even though the redesign of logos may be perceived as an opportunity to drive incremental revenue by increasing the value of sales, these efforts could backfire if the logo or uniform changes are not properly implemented (Ahn et al., 2012; Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010). Furthermore, it is now evident that careful branding redesign and activation are of great importance given retro brands' connection to consumers' continuous identity.

As it relates to distinct product elements (i.e., RQ<sub>2</sub>), the participants' ability to point out the role of specific retro details in a brand is significant on multiple levels considering their effect on brand associations and fan loyalty. While participants focused specifically on color and the characteristics of the font utilized in regards to retro design elements, it was significant to witness how these design elements generated positive associations among participants who had direct experience with the team brand's history as well as vicariously by participants that were not alive during the time period being utilized. It is important to note that while past literature examined purchasing intentions in terms of logo changes, specific design with incorporated retro elements has received limited attention (Ahn et al., 2012). For example, given the lack of history and throwback jerseys, the Tampa Bay Rays were forced to incorporate retro color scheme into the overall design to make their uniforms more appealing to fans (Berg, 2014). The study at hand provided a more thorough understanding of how certain retro color schemes and design features influence consumer nostalgic feelings. This in turn will provide

further guidelines to retro marketing industry practitioners for the design and product positioning tactics.

With respect to deepening the understanding of how certain retro design details affect brand perception and self-identity among sport consumers (i.e., RQ<sub>3</sub>), the present study provides new insights that add to the existing body of knowledge. Specifically, the evidence suggests that design elements of retro fonts and colors elicit sentimental emotions for past times. For example, the design features conjured up happy memories and made Participant 3 reflect fondly of the past. It was clear that these components (i.e., font and color) carry emotional benefits as was evidenced by many participants' responses. Established brand perceptions caused by retro brand-related associations bring memories of better days both personal and communal, and in turn foster consumers' continuous identity (Brown et al., 2003). This finding is especially important considering retro branding elements could allow sport marketers to leverage this differentiation tactic in communication of distinct value proposition arguments focused on consumers' self-image. As evidenced by Scola and Gordon (2018), numerous sport organizations have utilized retro marketing when redesigning their brand-related marks. In addition to incorporating retro designs into uniforms, the trend of teams relying on retro to reshape their logos and jerseys has been persisting as well (Scola & Gordon, 2018). As it relates to the practical application of the current study in furthering brand differentiation tactics, the participants' responses, which included descriptions of fonts and colors as the primary retro elements, serve as an ideal example of what Buttle and Westoby (2006) referred to as the product identity which is instrumental in the way consumers perceive the brand. In addition, Scola and Gordon (2018) positing that sport organizations (e.g., teams) should consider their history and past decisions when mapping out retro branding strategies further reflects the significance of the present study.

The present participants indicated that not only did retro logos and uniforms evoke memories and feelings of nostalgia, these elements also stimulated a longing for the past time periods associated with continuous sense of self. More importantly however, it is now clear that nostalgic feelings triggered by retro brands reassure one's knowledge about the self which ultimately fosters continuous identity highlighted previously. It was hypothesized that consumers are prone to sentimental feelings in today's unstable society (Unger, McConocha, & Faier, 1991), which allows sport marketing practitioners to exploit this proneness by re-creating brands with positive images from the past (Stern, 1992). Evidently, feelings of joy, pleasure, and security elicited by images that relate to historic events or times can act as a catalyst for desired consumer responses (Unger et al., 1991). In addition, the findings at hand have an important practical implication for retro brand managers striving to craft a unique brand story that will resurrect warm memories and resonate with sport consumers on a deep level.

Specifically, brand managers utilize particular design elements to paint a picture of the brand's story. Consumers relying on brands (e.g., retro brands) to develop their own image and identity through association with a team's eras of glory (Zhao et al., 2014) will in turn contribute to preeminence of retro marketing. As a result of the inclination to associate with a team's or athlete's success through retro branded products, sport markets will have the leverage to reach consumers in a personalized manner. Furthermore, the findings support the importance of creating and delivering retro branded content to retain a defined audience of sport consumers. Sport retro content encompasses the memories and experiences, which in turn communicate the brand's distinct narrative. More importantly, from a practical point of view, retro branded content will be leveraged to build trust with target audiences. To illustrate, the Toronto Maple Leafs' rebranding campaign to pay homage to the team's glory days is an example of retro marketers utilizing this unique content to share the franchise's history. It is clear that nostalgia-

centric retro branded content will be instrumental in building trust with target markets and more importantly communicating brand identity going forward.

Hallegatte (2014) claimed that, “retro branding is only applicable to certain brands and is based on a current social trend” (p. 14). In other words, through the findings of the current study, the researchers were able to conclude that specific retro components in a sport brand can serve as a potent promotional tactic for brand managers. Specifically, sport marketers can leverage retro branded features to communicate a point of differentiation from competing brands. To illustrate, by looking back to a certain era (e.g., 1970s), consumers may have direct or vicarious sentimental feelings about their childhood or a better time in the past associated with pleasant memories of their respective sports teams. Furthermore, the findings of the current investigation illuminate Davis’s (1979) assertion, according to which, “It [nostalgic reaction] reassures us of past happiness and accomplishment and, since these still remain on deposit, as it were, in the bank of memory, it simultaneously bestows upon us a certain current worth” (p. 34). Using this claim, the researchers believe that the findings emerged from this study are vital to sport marketers in their efforts of crafting effective brand propositions. In all, the results of this study provide a clearer understanding of how sport marketing practitioners can segment large markets and ultimately reach the target market in an appealing fashion.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

The present study was not without limitations. Considering purposeful sampling was used in this investigation, the findings may not be generalizable. It should also be noted that this investigation is limited by the information the participants chose to share. While describing the characteristics of the qualitative research, Creswell (2014) admitted, “in the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue” (p. 186). As such, the present results should not be extrapolated to the larger consumer population. Also, this study is limited by the fact that the history and tradition of each team is different. For example, no other National Basketball Association (NBA) team has won more championships than the 17-time champion Boston Celtics (NBA, 2017). This winning tradition has led to the team’s unwillingness to change their uniform colors and design.

In spite of the limitations, the present findings provide a number of valuable suggestions for future research. First, because this study is first to qualitatively investigate perceptions of retro branding in sport, future studies should quantitatively examine the salient retro design components. Further, this line of research may benefit from scholars elucidating the intricacies of retro marketing from the perspective of more diverse samples of sport consumers. Additionally, considering that brand equity comprises an abundance of perceptions about a brand and that managing retro brands is a complex task, it is worth analyzing how retro design details, as a group or individually, impact consumer perceptions (Brown et al., 2003; Keller, 1993). Also, it may be helpful to gain a broader understanding of whether similar retro design elements ignite nostalgic sentiments among a wide variety of consumers. Next, future research needs to investigate why sport consumers are more prone to nostalgic feelings as it has been hypothesized that transitional phases in one’s life cycle, which activate demands for identity changes, could manipulate the degree of nostalgic proneness (Davis, 1979). Another direction that future researchers may take is to analyze how a team brand’s narrative, as communicated by the marketers, influences perceptions of retro details. To illustrate, the impact of a team’s history and traditions may influence the strength of sentimental feelings. In conclusion, despite limitations, the present study provided encouraging implications for the evolving line of research concerning retro marketing in sport and relevant industry practices.



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## Appendix A.

### Interview Guide

Ask participants some “warm-up” questions to build a rapport (e.g., name, where from, etc.)

The following are examples of possible questions:

1. Generally speaking, what do you think of when you hear the word “retro”?
2. What makes something “retro” to you?
3. What do you think of when you hear the word “retro” when it is applied to the sport context?
4. [Prompt with showing a [insert team name] “retro” logo] Is this logo “retro” to you?
5. What is the one element that makes this logo “retro” to you? Follow up, anything else make it retro? Please elaborate.
6. What does seeing this logo make you think of? How does seeing this logo make you feel? Do you feel connected with your past?
7. [Prompt with showing a [insert team here] “retro” merchandise] Is this jersey (showing the retro one) retro? What about it makes it retro?
8. Is it one particular element that makes it retro? Or a combination of multiple elements? Please elaborate.
9. What does it make you think of? How does it make you feel? Do you feel connected with your past?

