The Peoples’ Team: A Critical Analysis of NBA City Edition Jerseys

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The 2019-2020 NBA season will be the third consecutive collaboration between NBA franchises and Nike in the creation of City Edition jerseys. Nike and the NBA describe the purpose of City Edition jerseys to “honor the fans – those who, 41 times a year, take pilgrimage at their local arena, and whose passions help define each respective team’s identity” (Nike, 2017).

NBA City Edition jerseys present a segmented marketing approach that directly connects to a fan group within the geographic location of the team (Ross, 2007). Furthermore, given the current social and political climate across the United States, multiple teams have released designs that are inspired and/or dedicated to noteworthy social, political, and cultural elements of the area where the team is located. For example, the Memphis Grizzlies and Oklahoma City Thunder showcased jerseys that paid homage to the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers Protest and the Indigenous American population of Oklahoma, respectively. The jerseys are intended to have a positive impact on the fans in the communities in which they are housed, yet we lack any empirical investigation regarding the meanings or motivations behind the themed jerseys and the larger implications of prominent sport organizations reflecting their communities. The purpose of this study is to address this lack of empirical investigation with the goal to highlight the social and cultural benefits of community reflection through sport.

Heere and James (2007) introduced the concept of sport organizations reflecting community identities. Applying a more critical approach, Holt’s (2004) cultural branding theory highlights how organizations can use their brands to transition from being noteworthy to cultural institutions. Burton (2002) explains how a critical multicultural marketing approach aids in creating alliances between organizations and various communities through accurate representation of identities, noting social struggles, transformation, and understanding the current context of consumer experiences. This critical marketing approach rooted in social and cultural elements is also reiterated by Warren et al (2019).

This study utilizes a directed content analysis of team social media posts for the three years of NBA city edition jerseys, along with thematic analyses of secondary literature regarding the themes/motivations for the jersey designs (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Social media captions and press releases for each teams’ jersey will be coded through a unit-by-unit analysis grounded in Holt’s (2004) cultural branding and Burton’s (2002) multicultural marketing theories. Upon determining the motivating element(s) of the jersey design, a thematic analysis of secondary literature will highlight the social and cultural meanings of those motivating elements.

This study highlights the role sport organizations hold in reflecting identities and values of their communities. By framing sport organizations as social institutions, and tools for social influence/change, thoughtful consideration and reflection of community identities is integral in strengthening team identity and subsequent team loyalty from those communities (Martin, 1968). Focusing on the criticality of these reflections notes the importance of sport organizations being privy to the current social and political climate within their communities, which can lead to high-impact opportunities for community engagement by players, the team, and franchise.